



the strix chronicle anthology

*Curated by
Rose Bailey and Jess Hartley*



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Watching

By Orrin Loria

Doing my rounds, after my meeting with Edith, I resolve to have an early night following my routine security sweeps. Intrigues are ongoing, but only to the extent that's become my background noise. Almost dull. There's the usual Carthian grumbling and so forth, but this is an Invictus town because it works. Edith makes it work.

I just make sure any rough patches get filed down. I prefer to keep things orderly.

I stop by several bars and clubs each night. No one's ever managed to figure out my schedule, because I draw the names from a hat I keep in my bedroom. Keeps them on their toes. Prevents most from showing off, with the exceptions of the very young, very foolish, and very arrogant.

That still leaves more than enough to keep me busy.

Since things are far from hot at the moment, I make my presence known in only seven haunts tonight, and I include one of ours so I can catch a bite to eat. A couple of turf violations—poachers—nothing serious. Remand the offenders to the offended for justice this time.

Catch a few complaints and rumors. An alleged breakthrough in research from the Ordo Dracul should be worth investigating—something about birds, but they're awfully excited about it. The rumor of an alliance between them and the Carthians merits both a raised eyebrow and a definite follow-up. This is the first whisper I've heard, so it can't be past its infancy, but it certainly deserves a personal touch. There are always more Carthians around than I'd like. Edith only allows individual bans.

I subdue one guy who's out of his head, talking about crows or something. Probably just a bad trip, but I drop him off in the holding cells for observation anyway. Panic is dangerous, and contagious.

It's also likely the reason I notice more birds than usual on my way home. Ratchets up my paranoia just a bit.

I turn in early, but I must have a restless day. I feel... off somehow when I wake at sunset. I have a memory I can't place, of hissing and clicking sounds that ring in my ears.

I could have sworn I laid out my clothes last night, but I can't find the oatmeal cable-knit sweater. I settle on a plaid flannel shirt instead. Less subtle, but the effect still

gets across. I always dress to underwhelm. In my line of work, it's always useful to be underestimated. Makes your enemies careless.

My first meeting is with Edith's PA.

"There are troubling whispers about VII," she says.

"There are always whispers about VII, Marlene."

She sniffs at me. She knows I'll look into it anyway. I know she wouldn't have brought it up if it wasn't something beyond the ordinary.

"Someone spotted a new tag in the meat market last night, too." She makes a show of shuffling papers before handing me a line drawing, though she knows exactly where everything is. Always.

"This is it?" It's two arches, joined by a center point, and two dots, one centered below each arch. No challenge for a tagger. It's vaguely reminiscent of something, though I can't put my finger on what.

"Forty-seven reported occurrences, and no one'd seen it before last night," she confirms.

That is a high number. "Someone must be going for volume, I suppose."

She hmms in response. "Formal thanks came in acknowledgment for the two poachers you caught last night. Your headcase was released this evening. He wasn't far gone enough for a technical violation, and he was completely lucid on waking. He did claim to have blacked out last night, though."

I scowl. "That was sloppy work, Marlene. Who's been sacked?"

"No one, yet. Both guards are being held in separate facilities for questioning."

"We'll let them sweat a few nights then." I nod. "What else?"

"Meeting with the Ordo tonight. And you need to check up on Lilah, the club's been getting too much attention. Edith, of course. I believe she's requested—" She consults her lists again. "—yes, she's asked that you hunt with her tonight."

After everything else, that's almost enough to make me smile.

I head to The Emerald Curtain to have words with Lilah, something which happens at least once a week. Having a damn butterfly run your club seems like a good idea up front, but when it comes down to it, managing your manager is not exactly a picnic in the moonlight. Usually it's nothing too serious.

This week there's a body out back.

I follow Lilah into her office. Shutting the door behind me, I fold my arms across my chest and wait.

"It's the damndest thing," she grins at me, all twinkling and teeth. "It was actually just a mugging gone bad."

"It's the wrong kind of attention."

"You know what they say about publicity, sweetheart." She winks at me.

"That it gets you killed."

"You're such a spoilsport. In the long run, this is a win: the 'bad neighborhood' notoriety. Being the place where they keep all the crime."

“Bullshit. If it happens two doors down, maybe. But the club where they found a dead guy in the alley, the one that all the cops are watching? That’s not the club even the most drunken of idiot college boys picks out.”

“Oh, come on, they’ll be daring each other to come in here before the week is out.”

“Cops, Lilah. They’re often reluctant to ignore terrible things happening right in front of them. This place is no good to us if it’s not safe to eat here.”

“Now, honey, I provide many valuable services.”

“Sure you do. You’re going to provide another one. Increase your security. You have three nights to work it out.” She starts to protest. “I’m counting tonight, because you’d better have already started on your own.”

She looks at me sideways for a moment before she backs down. Appearances. “You know I have. I’ve got everyone on staff donating a doll for extra eyes. We put up a new camera back there—footage to be scrubbed nightly—and a couple of motion-sensor lights. I can’t leave someone out back all night, but I’m putting in a directional mike that’ll feed to one of my security guys, and I’ve got rotating duty assigned for spot checks every hour and half hour, cleared eyes only.”

“Randomize that spot-check schedule. Otherwise, I suppose that’s acceptable. Of course you have someone on ID duty?”

“Even when the cops weren’t watching, hon. This ain’t the minor leagues. I got a guy who does my taxes, too.”

I award her a single harrumph.

She blows me a kiss when I turn my back.



The meeting with Neville proceeds as usual. The book they swore had been stolen last week has mysteriously reappeared. The important research I’d heard about turns out to be a lengthy report about the habits of birds in the context of historical disasters. Evidently, Smithson claims there is a “directly-correlated increase in avian presence” pretty much any time something bad happens. I’m not sure what methods the man is using to gather his data, but I don’t feel the need to hide my skepticism on this one.

“We’ve been observing a greater number of birds in the city the past few nights, actually. Nocturnal activity, even. Smithson is positively giddy.”

“About the possibility of imminent disaster?”

“No, about the chance to bear out his research, of course. There’s certainly no guarantee of a disaster, but if he can track one directly by monitoring bird activity, he’s found an exceedingly practical application for his efforts.”

“Hmm. Has he been talking this up a lot recently? Spooked anyone?”

“Well, he’s talked to anyone who’ll listen for the last twenty years or so. Lately, even that’s been optional. I’ve not heard of him ‘spooking’ anyone to date.”

“Was the fellow we had in the tank last night one of yours? Going on about crows fit to eat a street preacher.”

Neville pulls a brown, leather-bound notebook from his jacket pocket. “Not something I’ve been notified of, no, but I’ll make a note to have someone look into it.”

I nod. “Will that be all for tonight, then?”

“Yes, I’ll have someone bring by a copy of Smithson’s report for you.”

Marlene opens the door to have him shown out with flawless timing. It’s a gift.

“She’s waiting for you,” Marlene says. “She said you’d know where.”

This time I do smile, and my step is fast and light.



Edith. When I first saw her, her hair was outlandishly short, and she wore a suit. She stood in the center of the room, head held high, and the people avoiding her seemed to be orbiting her instead. The empty space around her was filled with the radiance of her strength. It was not a void; the crackling sharpness of her power sparked through that space. It would be the height of foolishness to enter that perimeter.

I couldn’t help myself. From the moment I first caught her eye, I was hers. My approach was slow, but I felt out of time and space entirely. Sound receded, her sheer presence overwhelming everything else in the room.

In all my days before, and in all my nights since, I’ve never encountered another soul with such pure magnetism.

I can’t remember what we talked about, though I remember it seemed effortless. Finally, I had found someone who was not put off by my demeanor, my oddly stuffy gawkiness. I made her laugh, and I thought she was a miracle.

Before the night ended, I was hers three times over.

When I see her tonight, I nearly feel my heart beat again. Every time I see her, I wonder if it will be the first time her captivation dwindles; but every time, she makes me breathe again, the feel of my heart in my throat like that first night so long ago. The sharp edge of her hair brushing at the clean line of her jaw, the softly straight lines of her aquiline face, the penetrating dark of her eyes; all are as perfect as they have always been.

I am too small to contain what I feel for her. She makes me wish I had some other art, to drain off and contain some of these surges of feeling she raises in me.

She laughed when I first told her that, decades ago, and said my artlessness was much more valuable to her: my devotion, my faith in her. Having someone by her she could truly trust—she still sees it as a novelty.

I tell her I’d rather provide her with something more tangible, and she squeezes my hand and presses it to where her heart doesn’t beat.

When we hunt now, we move with barely a need for a word between us. We fall into step with each other immediately: a look, a touch, a gesture, each comes with the weight of decades of meaning, as clear as if it were spoken aloud. We have used our rhythm to flank prey; to play cat and mouse; to fade one of us into obscurity while the other plays the lure, until the hunted realizes too late it is not the hunter after all.

That last is her favorite, and it is the game we play tonight. It is the one that best fits the city now. And her joy at the expression of the prey, the dawning of his understanding as she changes her face from frightened victim to competent hunter—that joy is unfeigned, and I see it all too rarely.

We hold each other close before we part in silence.

I walk home alone, but renewed.



In the last hours of the night, when I arrive home and enter my office, I find a photo on my desk I don't remember leaving there last night. It's surprisingly poor quality; grainy surveillance-cam black-and-white. Maybe a still captured from video. Did my secretary drop it by? She wouldn't usually be so forward, not unless it was important. She's only allowed in during the day in emergencies. She may be a ghoul, but I prefer to err on the side of caution.

Better take a closer look. Is that Marshall? The Carthian second?

When I open up my email and find the same image attached to the last message received last night, I start getting really concerned. It appears I sent it to myself. I check all my exits every night before sleep and on waking, no sign of compromise. I do another perimeter check. My video feed for last night is missing. This is rapidly reaching unacceptable levels.

Cleaning up the image doesn't help much. That is the Carthian, but I recognize him more by the old-fashioned biker's jacket and long hair than by any ability to make out his features, of course. Could have been faked fairly easily with a body double. Motive for forgery uncertain. The person facing him is shorter, probably about my height. Light-colored bulky top, nondescript jeans, and work boots. Is someone trying to set me up?

I am the Prince's Sheriff, and though few know it, her Hound as well. An attack on me is an attack on her, and I will not allow it to go unchallenged.

Whoever is behind this will die at my hand.

There is nothing I can do before nightfall, so I resign myself to another restless day. I strip abruptly, flinging my clothes to the floor, and throw myself into bed just as the sun comes up.

I feel myself waking as the sun sets, and I am impeded. Something weighs on my chest: two heavy, sharp-clawed feet, digging points into my ribcage; the sensation of ruffled air. I open my eyes to an alien countenance, a flat face with black staring eyes, a clacking sharp beak. It cocks its head, sidles. Spreads its wings and hisses, arching its head down closer to my face.

I close my eyes, and I hear two heavy flaps of wings as the weight lifts from my chest, another flap as it flies off—when I open my eyes again, it's gone and I can move.

I put the pieces of what I saw together and realize it was an owl. I leap up and run after it, but the damned thing is gone. How in blazes did an owl get in here? All my entry points are still secure. I am not so young as to try to write it off as a dream.

Even if I hadn't found a large, barred feather by my bed.

There must be a connection. I break my schedule and head first to my office, to discover the picture from last night has been placed back on top of the desk, and beneath it is another, clearer shot. The man I assume is Marshall again, another man in a fussy suit—Neville?—and me, clear as day.

My face is angled over my shoulder toward the camera, and there's no forgiving blur this time. That is unquestionably me, meeting clandestinely with the heads of two rival groups.

And I have no knowledge of it.

Am I losing my mind?

I suppose that would be the simplest explanation, but I'll need to rule out everything else. I can't prematurely declare myself mad when there could be someone out there deliberately working to do us harm.

If all the other avenues are blind, then the betrayal must be from within myself. If that is the case, I will determine what steps I must take to prevent myself from doing any further damage.

I look down to tuck the photos into my pocket, and find I have neglected to dress myself yet this evening. Madness is looking more and more likely. I sigh, and make my way back to my room, wondering if there is any sort of history of our kind losing their minds without provocation. How do I find a reference for such a thing without casting suspicion on myself?

I enter my room, and look down when my feet catch unexpectedly on cloth. I gather the pieces of clothing I petulantly strewn across the floor last night, carrying them to my hamper.

When I open it, I drop the clothes on the floor again.

At the top of the pile inside the hamper is the oatmeal sweater I couldn't find last night. The jeans are underneath it.

That's a perfect match for the outfit in the first, blurry photo.

My haven has been invaded, or I have gone mad.

I spin around, certain I just heard an owl hooting.

I ask Marlene to cancel my meetings for the evening. I begin my investigation at my home, searching outwards in a grid pattern for any scent out of place, anything to suggest the involvement of someone working through mundane means. Finding no natural indications, I consult with the expert magician Edith keeps on staff, but she turns up no signs of worked magic, and that's all she can rule out.

My hand keeps straying to the photos in my pocket. It's the kind of unschooled, easily-readable behavior I haven't displayed in decades. I need to do something to calm myself, but all I can think is to keep searching for a lead.

I can't figure out how to interrogate Marshall or Neville without making things worse. We must have had at least one conversation I don't have any memory of, maybe more. To ask about it directly would be suicide. I can't bluff without some indication as to what I'm bluffing about. They aren't amateurs; with no hint I'll be made in moments. Perhaps I can follow up on the meeting with Neville that I do remember having last night? It's a start, at least.

I wouldn't usually approach Neville without an arranged meeting, on his own turf, but it's not completely outside the pale. I go through the courtesies, front door entrance, waiting while I'm announced, exchanging pleasantries.

"I thought I'd pick up Smithson's manuscript myself. I'd like to take a look at some of his source material while I'm here, if I may." They're cagey over here, but turning down such a direct request is not the kind of gamble Neville makes. It could be seen as a direct challenge to the Prince.

And if I'm his co-conspirator, he has no reason to turn me down anyway.

"I'll have a librarian show you there." Sure, he has a bell-pull. Why wouldn't he? "Of course, certain volumes are restricted to those who have attained a certain rank within our order, you understand," he adds, delicately.

I nod, clearly making no promises. I'm sure my guide won't be taking me to *that* library anyway.

"Ah, Giselle, very good. Please show our guest to the research library, and provide assistance in finding any materials that may be required."

I follow the initiate to the predictably grand library. She provides me with the promised copy of Smithson's research, and then begins assembling a stack of his reference materials on the table next to me. She moves at normal speed, carrying no more than two books at once. I don't know if it's order policy or simple obstruction, but I'm not particularly amused.

The references available are nothing new: history texts mostly based in myth, collections of myths, secondary sources for myths, and the like. Birds gather after battles, sometimes they warn of one approaching. Birds foretell a coming death in the household, with degrees of specificity that seem tied to the origin of the variant myth. Corpse birds. The tower of London. Ancient divination practices. Crows, ravens, owls.

Owls are always bad omens.

This isn't helping. I shove the books away and turn to the papers. Smithson mentions the literature, but his take is a scientific one (for a paper that's essentially about fortune telling). There's a lot of technical information: data about migratory patterns, diurnal rhythms, preferred food sources, predation, changes in climate. A lot of charts and tables. The upshot is that he seems to be ruling out every possible logical reason that birds would suddenly gather in a place off of their usual route.

And in those places, he says, disaster is about to happen. And he has worked backwards from a number of examples.

He mentions a number of incidents that appear to match his pattern, but he can't go back all that far, considering the amount of data that his method requires. Eyewitness accounts and other historical documents might point to a pattern in the days before a tragedy, but it's rare to find the sheer scope of data he needs. Exclusion of all other reasons is not an elegant means of proving something, though it is a distinctly immortal approach to the sciences.

It's also never truly conclusive.

This is not useful. I push back from the table. "I can show myself out."

Maybe Marlene can get me an aboveboard meeting with the damn troublemaker. The official summons might make him nervous enough to get something off of him, and that's more than I've found here.

Marlene is a treasure. She not only arranges the meeting, she arranges for it to happen at a tremendously stuffy French restaurant, Le Corbeau Gris, favored by exactly the kind of people Marshall most enjoys hating. And she makes sure he gets there first.

He's had long enough to stew by the time I get there. Marshall likes to be on the move. He requires the appearance of action.

"What's this about?" he asks, barely waiting for me to sit down. There are two coffees already on the table. "I have better things to do with my time. This eight-dollar coffee shit is not my scene, man." Marshall's idea of himself extends to his twitchy body language, and I always wonder if even those details are as manufactured as the rest.

I take a moment, just to annoy him, selecting three sugar cubes with the tongs, placing them gently into the cup, stirring with great care. "It's just a regular check-in, Mar-

shall.” I raise the cup and inhale the heavy, scented steam. “I haven’t spoken with you in over a week, and I had a bit of free time, so I asked Marlene to set up a quick meeting for us.” I am watching him, over the brim of the cup, unblinking. Give me something.

Does he startle when I say I haven’t seen him in a week? Would he? However much he pretends to naive idealism, Marshall has been around the block a few times. Lately, he and his merry band have been doing quite well, feeding off political unrest. He hardly needs to buck the system at the moment, but that is, as he said, his “scene”.

“I got nothing to report, man.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, you know, sometimes you get a quiet week. Look, I’ll see you around, okay? I got my own business to take care of.”

And he’s gone. Abrupt, even for Marshall. Something is definitely up, but I’m out of leads. I need a next step.

Daylight is only a few hours away, and I feel no closer to the truth than I was at sunset. Tomorrow night cannot come quickly enough, but I fear what I will discover with it.

I do not dare to sleep again. I am under attack, and I can trust no one else to guard me from myself.



I wake in my bed with no memory of putting myself in it.

I race immediately to my office. The photos are on top of the desk again, with what appears to be a web address written on the back of the second in my own hand.

I enter the URL, and I am prompted for a password to view a video site. With a sinking feeling, I type my own name, then stare at the password prompt. Is it something to do with the photo? I try typing SWEATER, but it doesn’t work.

And then I notice that my phone is flashing. I have a message.

I dial into voice mail, and I find I am holding my breath in spite of myself. My own voice sounds in my ear. “You should know the password,” I hear it tell me. It’s flat and taunting at the same time. “Who’s in the greatest danger here?”

Holding the phone with my shoulder, I type MYSELF. No luck. There’s a laugh on the recording, and I say, through the phone, from a time I can’t remember: “You should have thought of her first.”

The phone drops. With shaking hands, I type EDITH.

The video plays. It’s me, clearly visible once again, with Marshall and Neville.

“It’s time for a change,” I say coldly, nonchalant. Unlike myself, because I wasn’t there. They nod. From the way he moves his head, Marshall says something, but the audio doesn’t pick it up. And the video cuts out.

Still, it’s damning enough. If I turn in the other two, I’m bound to go down with them, and there’ll be no one left to keep her safe.

I’d still do it, but I’m afraid of what will happen if I let myself go near her. And I must keep my death from even the appearance of disloyalty. Betrayal by someone so close to her would be damaging, might put her in more danger. Lend strength to those who seek to act against her.

No, I must not let this taint her.

I don't know how much time I have left before it takes me again.



I have written Edith a letter. There's not much more I can do to put things in order.

I am the Sheriff and I am the Hound.

This threat may attack with my body, but I will not allow that to protect it. I will not shirk my duty, my responsibility. I will not betray my Sire.

There is no one else to call, so I will call the Hunt upon myself.

When it opens my eyes, it will see fire.

I made the best choice I could.

But tonight, it doesn't come back.



Notes From The Dead Girl

By Chuck Wendig

You want the setup? Here's the setup. That apartment was a prison of sensation, of goddamn desire. The blood all over the walls was dry, but that didn't stop me from wanting to tear the place apart looking for a beating heart to suckle. Like a fucking orange or an apple. My body aches just thinking about it. But I kept my shit together, don't worry. My thirst doesn't rule me, I rule it. I'm no embarrassment. Hardaiken was there, was the one pointed me to the place because he knows I'm... collecting things here and there. I don't know how he knows. But he's us, he's better than me, so I didn't say no.

Right, right, the setup: rat-trap apartment, not quite tenement, but damn sure not a penthouse. Brownstone, third-floor walkup. I don't know who lived there. I don't know whose blood and bits are all over the walls. I do know that whoever did this left a note, written in (what else?) blood on a piece of crummy yellow notebook paper.

Hardaiken swears this is relevant. Swears you'll want to see it.
So, go ahead. See it.

Attached: A Note in erratic handwriting

Cassius knows. He knows what lurks in the blood of his people. We, the Banu Qasi! We, the little girls of Valencia! We face it again: conversion or exile! Submit, or wake to the sun! I love you, Daddy. I miss you.

This was written on the wall above the note. Not in blood, but in what Hardaiken assures me is shit. That's why he's the big, bad Sheriff of Nottingham, right?

Attached: A Polaroid of letters written in blood on the wall

The Seventh is dead. Long live the Seventh!

Yeah, I don't know what this shit means. Literally. But Hardaiken handed me the camera, told me to include it with the note. Enjoy.



Notes From The Dead Girl: Things I've Learned

Not making much sense, yet. But this is what I've found:

- *Banu Qasi*, actually *Banú Qasí*. Sons, heirs, or childer of Cassius. (Heirs, there's that word again.) Patrilineal. Islamic Basque dynasty, 9th century or so.

- *Cassius*, or *Count Cassius*: founder of that dynasty. Was he one of us? Clan records are not stingy with mentions of various Cassius figures throughout our time. As it is with us, some are probably different, some are probably the same even when appearing different, some probably call themselves that to appear the same as or similar to another Cassius who has come before. The name, of course, means "vanity." Bloody appropriate. What's maybe interesting about the Basque Cassius is that he converted to Islam not out of faith but so he wouldn't be slaughtered, so his lands and power wasn't stolen out from under him. The story goes that he went to the Caliph by himself and personally knelt to kiss the hand of the ruling Muslim. That's a kiss-ass move if ever there was one.

- *Emilianus*, or *Saint Emilianus*: Eremite monk. One of the patron saints of Spain. Sometimes portrayed as a black-cowled monk on a black horse. Charitable, excessively so (which means he definitely wasn't one of us). Foretold the destruction of a Basque duchy, claimed that a massacre was coming because of that duchy's egregious sins. The sin, perhaps, of kneeling to another faith? The treachery against one god whose balls are bigger than another?

No idea what any of this means. Just the ranting of the mad, way I see it. Maybe you'll think differently. I'm not going to mention any of this to Hardaiken. Let him do his own legwork.



Notes From The Dead Girl: More Research

More information, pulled from all that blood-scrrawl and crazy-talk:

- *Witches' Hammer* and *Malleus Maleficarum*: The 15th century treatise on witches, as I'm sure we all know. Heavily misogynistic. Maybe that's upset the "daughter" leaving these notes?

- The writing talks of witches in other ways, too: *strega*, *bruja*, the *Tableaus de [...] Demons* — another witch-hunting text, written by the Pierre de Lancre, who was a French judge who helped instigate witch hunts in the 1600s. Though some say his father wrote or at least helped him write the Tableau? Who knows? Interestingly enough, de Lancre was said to have a Basque heritage, but he was... I guess you could call him a self-hating Basque? Thought them all idolaters, drunkards, womanizers. Sinners, ultimately. Is the "daughter" writing our notes a self-hating Lord? I get that feeling. I catch a whiff of treachery. She thinks us cockroaches, does she not?

- *Infernuko erreka*: "Hell's ditch." Witches were said to gather at such places, supping at the infernal irrigation.

- *Logroño*: Basque witch trials held here; the elicited confessions were said to mass over 10,000 pages of signed admissions of witchcraft, taken from thousands of women. Some were said to be able to turn to flies or goats, others gathered in "black" meadows to sacrifice children or animals to dark powers. Others claimed they could steal bodies, wearing them like suits of clothing or armor. Our note-writer seems to reference this last part, a bit. Don't know why. And I really don't care to know why.

Do with this as you will.



I don't know who the *Perfecti* are or were — I looked on-line and found some reference to Catharism, Manichaeism, Gnostic bullshit. Kind of a pseudo-Christian perfected state, the ability to forestall reincarnation by achieving... I don't know, enlightenment? Perfection? Sounds Buddhist to me, but what do I know? I have a Masters in Business Administration.

Looking up the identities of the dead families wasn't difficult, but it wasn't very illuminating. No common themes that I can discern. Girls are all of varying ages. Families are all white except for the last one, who (as it turns out) were light-skinned blacks. Varying economic brackets. No real commonality to the killings...

Jesus, I hesitate to mention this, but I feel like I have to. It's ridiculous, I get that. You'll think it's crazy, but even though we've never met in person and I don't really know anything about you (except what Hardaiken tells me), this seems important.

I don't dream. I don't know if others of our kind do. But when morning comes, I die again. That's just how it feels. The blood that seems alive in my body goes inert; it's like, I don't know, slipping underneath the surface of a cold lake and giving in to the chill and the water and the endless black.

But lately, after the darkness takes me...

I dream. I see a light, and I dream. And I feel pale hands reaching for me. I can see them, sometimes, and I can see through them, too. Sometimes they're barely arms at all, other times just wisps of living mist or like the ghostly arms of a fucking squid or something.

They reach for me again and again and I can't move — I feel a tremendous weight sitting on my chest, like the pressures of Death Himself — but just as they're almost upon me, there's this laugh. A girl's laugh, a little girl's laugh. That kind of twinkling titter, half-human, half the sound of wind chimes.

And then I see her: a little girl in a plain brown dress with a black ribbon in her hair. Her hands are red with blood. Bits of... something dangle from beneath her fingernails.

When she shows, the hands flee. They recoil into the shadows once more.



Fuck you, Hardaiken! He's going to pay for this shit. He seems to know you — do you know him? I beg of you, tell me where he is. Tell me how to find him, how to lay waste to his gutter-fuck haven. I want to cut out his tongue and feed it back to him and ...

Goddamnit. I'm usually much better than this. Everybody says I have a nice demeanor, mild. But sometimes, sometimes I get angry. And I feel that Thing inside me just clawing at my innards to climb out and get free.

Hardaiken, he knew what he was doing when he sent me to that water tower, didn't he? "The next murder scene," he said. Over the phone, too; I haven't heard from him in months, and now I get a call direct? Of course I'm going to listen. He's the fucking Man with the Plan, the goddamn Shire Reeve. But he had to know what I'd find, had to know that the scene was already in-play, that I'd hurry over there and see it as it was unfolding.

It was her. The little girl from my dreams. Brown dress — made brown by so much blood, all dry and discolored — and the black velvet bow in her matted hair. She was... doing something with the corpse of another little girl, a girl of the same height and age,

but this one was blonde, fat-cheeked. She was propping her up in the lap of her faceless mother when I showed up.

It... it happened so fast. She hissed. Leapt atop me. Whispered things in words that were words but meant so much more. It was in her eyes. She is old. Maybe not ancient, but I can believe she was there for those witch trials, for the rise of the heirs of Cassius, for all of it. Her tongue got into my head, wormed around in my brain... I can still feel her there, like a bug crawling about or a vine wrapped tight around my spine.

No note, this time.

Now: I'm the note.

She told me to give it to you. To give it to the "compiler." That you'd want to know the skin-thieves were back and that she was almost complete, that she had nearly finished protecting herself and that you ought to do the same.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

This is what she told me to tell you:

"They are the ghosts of vengeance. They are the dead clans come to haunt us! Once more they want us to perish, and once more we must rally to end them before they end us. The Perfecti were to destroy us, not them, but we are masters of lies, the kings of the false. Spiders and spinners, emperors of beasts and bugs made to believe we are so much more, and maybe we are. The seventh wants us dead for what we did to the sixth, and so they hope to wriggle into our dead veins and sup on our souls. Once more, we must gird our ways and summon our cruelty and sell the lie we told: we are Lords.

All part of the cycle. All part of the way. It will come again in a hundred years, maybe a thousand, but for now, let us let our funeral dirges play on. You've seen what I've done. It shall soon be done with one last ritual."

Then she threw me off the tower. I landed on a rooftop below. Shattered my back. My leg bones came up through the muscle and skin. I was able to heal myself enough to crawl into a doorway to hide from the sun. I slept and I dreamed and I don't really think I'm the same, anymore. Who the hell are we? What the hell are you? Do you know this little girl?

Is something terrible coming this way? Is it coming for us?



It's done, all that you requested. The author, Bryce, is in my keeping, now. He's hidden away under tight lock and key. His encounter with the daughter of Cassius left him... addled. As expected. It was wise to keep me out of it; as much as I wanted to pursue her and find out the information you needed, it seems that she is as potent a figure as you suggested. Invading his dreams. Recording her own voice within his.

She performed the last ritual on the empty moon, last night. As suspected, this time it was three generations of daughters: a grandmother, a mother, and the granddaughter. Stripped of clothing, then stripped of skin.

This is, I presume, the ritual you were hoping to see? Is it a ritual of the Crone? You mentioned it might be a way to refine the blood, that there exist ways to appease the eldest powers so that they might allow one of us the will and authority over her own Vitae?

Fascinating. I hope it's useful for your records. I assume it's not something you wish to replicate? I'm having enough trouble cleaning up after what Cassius's brood did to this city. But you are, of course, free to do as you choose.

The daughter did leave one last note. This one, tucked away in an envelope, sealed not with wax but with a gobbet of ear pressed to the paper with blood.

I include it here for your archives.

Best in service,

L. Hardaiken

Bruja, striga, screech owl, lilitu, lamia, strigoaică...

The Strix have returned

but I am safe.



Playing House

By Audrey Whitman

“Baby, you know we have one rule.” I could hear a wet crunching under her pretty skin, and I let her arm fall back to her side. A tiny sliver of bone had worked its way through, just under the cluster of freckles on the back of her hand. She whimpered a little. I was trying not to cry.

It should be raining. It’s always raining in the movies when the girl catches her lying slut of a girlfriend cheating on her. She was denying it. She would.

“You stay inside. And you don’t answer the fucking door during the day. You stay inside, and...”

I am extravagantly patient, but not when she’s sulking. I wiped some of the blood off her lip and moved her chin up and down. If there was a bit of a hiss in my voice, well, I knew what that blood tasted like, spread over those freckles.

“And I don’t answer the door, Veronica,” I mimicked her voice as I made her mouth move. “I swear, it’s like you’re not even listening.”

“But I didn’t, Roni.”

“Veronica. You don’t get to call me Roni right now. And if you didn’t answer the door, why are there fucking pictures of you on my desk. How could you do this to me?”

She finally looked a little scared. Maybe this was sinking in.

“But,” she swallowed a snuffle, “...Veronica. No one’s even come to the door in days. I saw someone walking around outside a few nights ago, and he waited by the streetlight for nearly an hour, but he never knocked. I assumed he was waiting for you...and that, that, that was why you hadn’t been home.”

“Beth, baby. Do you remember what happened the last time you lied to me?”

She shrunk back against the kitchen wall. I can’t remember when the first blow fell. Maybe she tried to push me away, maybe I pushed her back. She was sobbing, soon enough. Big fat tears sticking her matted blonde hair to her face. I paused, and brushed the hair out of her eyes. “This is what happens to liars, Beth. Do you understand that liars need to be punished?”

She nodded, painfully. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, oh god Roni Veronica please I’m so sorry, I’ll never do it again, please.”

I sighed, and gently pulled her over, and cradled her against me. She always looked so small after we'd argued; like a sharp word might snap her in two. "Now start over. And don't leave anything out this time."

"Okay. Okay. No one ever knocked on the door... but I think once maybe someone broke in. I hid, mainly." She looked a little embarrassed. "He... touched things, caressed them, maybe. Mostly my, our, pictures. He sat on the bed for a while, looking at pictures of the time we took that train to DC."

She coughed a little, and I wiped away the trail of blood coming from her lips. "I guess he was bound to find me eventually, but he didn't... do anything then, either. He just looked at me like I was the lowest thing in the world; like he'd found the shit a dog had wallowed in."

With her face turned to my chest, she couldn't see my heart breaking. How stupid did she think I was?

"And then he was gone. When I woke up, it was dark out, and there was someone waiting by the lamppost, like I said. But nothing was missing, and the door wasn't even unlocked. It seemed too stupid to be real, like I must have dreamed it."

"So we were visited by a dream intruder. Who steals nothing and looks at pictures of us on vacation." So many lies; all to conceal a picture of her in bed with some man who wore his skin like a rented suit. How could I ever trust her again? How dare she look betrayed when I pushed her off my lap? She was begging, but there was nothing but blurry vision and the howling of animals where my heart should be. My fists were red when I stood up and walked out.

Honestly, it never rains when you need it to.



After a while, none of it really held together. Beth's story was idiotic, but she doesn't even especially like men; and she knows how dangerous it is for her to let people into our apartment. And how had Tommy even gotten those photos? No, this was some stupid power-play on his part; get me distracted enough to fuck up, maybe try to out me for having a girl on the side. (Like he's any better. His girl even lives in the city, practically down the block from my office. I at least have the common sense to keep Beth out of the way.)

You have to be careful coming home. Can't be gone too long, can't come back too soon.

I'd been walking for an hour maybe. Long enough to wipe my hands off in the hair of a woman who tasted like stale Colt. (Just enough to take the edge off, I don't like to go home smelling like strangers.) Long enough to get angry with Tommy for making me fight with Beth. We'll see how he feels about me swinging by his girlfriend's place to have a few words. Long enough to really start to miss Beth. Was she setting that wrist okay? Would she need my help this time? Beth's funny; sometimes she likes to fix everything herself; sometimes she gets all theatrical and makes me kiss her better. Maybe I'll come home to a clean kitchen and her minty shampoo smell. Maybe she'll still be lying there, and I'll carry her to the bathroom to clean her off. We'll both cry a little, and I'll fix everything.

But too soon, and I might interrupt her pulling herself together for me. She won't have had a chance to think about what she's done, or really take my advice to heart. And then we just start up all over again. We can't go to the hospital anymore, but we learned that I need to give her some time.

Too late, and she might get scared. She needs me to be strong for her; especially now, when we've fought. She knows she's my girl, and that I'll always come back to her. But if I'm gone too long, she'll worry. I hate making her worry.

To the highway overpass and back, then; scare a few late night joggers, polish my apology, then come home to pick up the pieces.

I'll feel cleaner once it rains.



Deep breaths.

I knocked first, to be respectful. No answer. Good girl, for remembering. But she didn't answer my knock either; and the door was still unlocked. (Don't be stupid, Beth. Here I was all set to forgive you; and you've left the door open.)

It was dark inside, when I opened the door, and the streetlight cast a long, narrow shadow in the doorway.

"Baby?"

The kitchen light was buzzing, but I could hear her soft breathing; jagged and wet. She was lying on the floor still, just pulling herself up as I walked in, looking so lost and confused that I didn't have the heart to chastise her for not locking the door behind me.

"Don't worry about the blood, baby. I'll clean that up later." I scooped her into my arms, limp and silent, and turned her face to mine. In the light, her hazel eyes were almost yellow. It was alien and lovely, and I told her so. She kissed me back, after a moment; melting against me like always. And everything was alright again. She remembered about not letting anyone in again, and promised to be more careful in the future. I forgave her. She stayed quiet while I set her wrist, but flinched when I kissed her hands and said the words I'm supposed to say. It's our little ritual when I clean her up; kisses and gentle words and reminders not to forget what I had to show her. I apologize, to make her feel respected; but she looked almost bored when I explained how stressful work had been, and how Tommy was out to get me. She needed to be reminded that he works for me; that the little shithhead had been insinuating that he wanted my job. We didn't talk about the pictures. (I'll break Tommy's face tomorrow night for making me hurt her.)

I had to push her head on my chest to pet her hair; and she lay there, so quiet, when I brushed the dried blood off of her face. But when I took her to bed, she helped me take off her clothes. It took her a little while to warm up to me, but Beth is a smart girl, and she knows how to open her legs. In the shower later, I washed her hair, and told her the story of our first date. She had invited me to a Take Back The Night rally, before she knew anything about anything. She was so good at keeping secrets that I moved her in with me the next night. This time she laughed in all the right spots, and didn't try to correct me once. She looked at me so carefully, and if the smile in her eyes had been sweeter before, the sharpness was beautiful too.



It took awhile to find the right moment.

Being responsible is usually incredibly fucking tedious; ten long nights of texting Beth and watching Netflix from the office for every hour spent doing anything. But we'd been having something of a busy week. And, unfortunately, any night sufficiently interesting to require my attention was by necessity a night where I didn't have time to get into extracurricular fights.

In the course of night-to-night operations, I have to put out the odd cigarette in maybe a single stupid face. A strategically placed boot in the throat of someone fresh out of the ground will keep him well in line for at least a month or two, supplement it with a few coincidental social encounters, and he'll be discreet as you please; hell, he might join up (if he doesn't get religion first). And Jenny's got a flock of bouncers working at any club worth going to in 50 miles; I can accidentally run into a lot of people on a Saturday night.

In the last three nights, I had to put the fear of sun into six formerly-upstanding members of the community, and personally crucify two more. Jenny got her wrists torn off last night by a Haunt who had been painting the town red, which left me with my third-string team, and the only senior personnel who had seen my girlfriend in her underwear. I wanted to tear out his eyes and make him eat them; I was currently stamping out the fire on his clothes.

We'd been more careful than we needed to be, really. When we pulled up to the blood bank—a lean-to storefront in an abandoned strip mall—no one was waiting for us. When we broke down the door, the kids who reeked of three-day old meth blood didn't even have the presence of mind to run away. Which is about when we realized that more of their blood was on the floor than in them. Fortunately, whatever used to be the brain of the haggard old bitch who clawed through them had forgotten how to be afraid of bullets. We torched the place for good measure, and waited until the roof caught; which is when Tommy swears up and down that he saw someone trying to escape. Now, I've seen a monster or two who fought until they fell apart, but no one survives ten pounds of bullets and a gasoline shower. So, of course he runs straight back at what is about to stop being a building anyway, and drops right into the flames.

Professional disagreements aside, killing him is my present for getting through this week. So I follow him into a collapsing husk that still smells impossibly like rotten blood, past the melting plastic chairs and broken refrigerators. He's screaming, and I'm clawing at the inside of my skull trying not to. So I grab him and run blindly, stumbling over the bones of the recently re-departed, as we crash through a blacked-up window and roll smoking onto the pavement. And I proceed to stomp the stupid out of him.

The ride back to the office was long and awkward. Only Tommy really got anything like hurt, and it was practically self-inflicted; but we were all a little on edge. Another night we would be laughing by now, collaborating on our war stories, bragging, maybe bitching a little that it was over too soon. But this time there was nothing to cut the tension, just a rotting storefront filled with the mostly and already dead. And I didn't want to be the first to point out that we were doing an awful lot of that, lately. There was some idle speculation. That the witches were back, or had never really left; that we can be eaten by ghosts; that anything at all might have caused this but us. Tommy suggested demons. That actually got a laugh. Nothing solid enough to pursue, though. Maybe the nights were just weighing heavier on some of us than others.

One more chore, and I could go home to Beth with a clear and happy heart.



He didn't even have the decency to remember making me get mad at Beth. But I jogged his memory a little with a lighter and he turned into a regular chatty Cathy. The pictures had come in a mailing envelope; addressed to me, but not postmarked (asshole had been going through my mail). He thought "it was suspicious". Clearly. Hadn't known what to make of them, and made a mess of my desk instead of trying to figure it out.

“So you don’t know who she is?”

“No. Jesus, you’ve got a one-track mind. I don’t care who she is, I care who she’s with.” He paused pointedly. “Who she’s with in the pictures.”

I rolled my eyes “Yes, I got that. Thank you.”

“...You, you really don’t recognize him.” He looked oddly concerned. “V, you were the one that put the last fist through his face. He’s supposed to be dead. Well; more dead. Like, really dead. Half a handful of dust and some cigarette butts. But here he is, in some chick’s apartment. What the hell?”

That was close enough to a good question. We hadn’t (obviously) stuck around post-staking; dawn had been too close for comfort, and we were nowhere near a safe haven. And the nights since had been just packed; no time to detour downtown and piss on his ashes.

“Well, the fucker could have had an unusually stupid friend or a pet chew toy hanging around to pull him inside. It’s more or less plausible.” That’s the thing we threaten people into telling us, though. I don’t like someone else threatening hard enough that there are no fingers left for me to break when I make it around town. “You were the one to pull the trigger there, killer. Maybe you didn’t quite manage it.”

I let that hang in the air long enough to make him uncomfortable. “Doesn’t explain the pictures, though. Our mystery dead guy couldn’t have taken them himself.”

“Well... in the unlikely event that he did survive, there would had to have been someone else with him. So, someone else knew he was still alive. Undead. Whatever.”

I nodded slowly. “Someone who would have later had access to the pictures, and a motive not to tell me... us... about him directly.”

Tommy looked thoughtful. It didn’t suit him.

“Which makes this what... a threat? A warning? V, do you know her?” That was probably as close to an admission as I was going to get.

I made a face. “Don’t fuck the meat, Tommy. It’s disgusting. Look, the rest of my evening is pretty clear. I’ll ask around.”

“Wait!”

I raised an eyebrow and slowly ground my cigarette butt out on the table. “For... what, exactly?”

“I mean, not that I don’t think you could handle it, V. But maybe I should come too? It’s... not just that he’s supposed to be dead.”

“What, has he been hanging out in more breather bedrooms?” I ground my teeth thinking about how long he had Beth’s pictures. So help me God, Tommy will beg to be staked before I’m done with him. “Did his near-death experience turn him into a pervert?” He flushed unpleasantly.

“Uh, not exactly. He’s not the only one.”

“Not the only one to hang out in bedrooms? Yeah, I’ve read the literature.”

“No. Not the first guy we’ve put down who got back up again.” He swallowed uncomfortably. “Look, it didn’t seem like a big deal at the time. A rookie fails biology, stakes someone’s appendix, and I need to go clean up after him. Stupid, sure; but not really the sort of thing I need to climb up in your cunt and have you fix for me. We put him down again, and move on.”

I nodded. “Except it keeps happening, and not just with the kids. The really crazy fucks aren’t staying down; and they’re coming back twice as mean.”

“Yeah. And... Jesus, this is going to sound stupid. Okay. I think there’s something going wrong with the bodies, maybe even any dead body.” Not for the first time since I started burning off his fingertips, Tommy looked like he wished he could still sweat. “Not everyone we put down these past couple of weeks used to be a problem. People... people like us, at least, are going feral. Just completely gone. It’s like they’re possessed.”

“What? Okay, so your response to ‘what’s with the pictures?’ is ‘demons did it’? Have I got that right?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. What the hell is a demon anyway? This week I’ve seen things done to warm and cold bodies that would turn my shit green. Maybe those are demons. Maybe it’s some freaky pathogen, and we’re spreading it by touching all those crazy fucks. I know I want to take a shower for a week after that last one. But they all had yellow eyes.”

“Do me a favor and don’t gaze longingly into the eyes of the next one you have to knife, okay?”

“Ha ha. Seriously. They all had creepy yellow eyes, that sort of... dissipated when they died. Died for good, I mean. No getting back up again and trying to reach my spine through my ass.”

“Charming. But, okay. That’s weird. What does this have to do with fucking anything?”

“I get the feeling that whatever it is, it was the same thing in all of them. And it’s been learning. Did you notice that?”

I had, and was not at all pleased by it. “Yeah, it was like that Haunt knew our playbook by heart. He really fucked Jenny up, night before last. No get-up-and-go, though; what was left of his body practically melted.” I don’t know if the city’s ever going to get that stain out of the sidewalk.

“So what if that’s what’s in our photo friend? This same thing could have been body hopping all week.”

“And what? It can take pictures of itself using magical demon powers? This is bullshit, Tommy. I’m going to go see if photo-guy has any friends who are willing to admit it. And while I am a delicate fucking princess, I promise I will try to take care of myself.”



Surprise, surprise. No one remembers seeing photo guy peel his oily ass off of the pavement, or anyone help him do it. Marjorie saw a plume of black smoke before she had to run for her own cellar. Amit saw birds picking at his bones. Cici asked after Jenny (sweet girl, shame about her neck), but only heard our voices from the sewer. Smoke and birds and wind and voices; which is to say “the city”. On the other hand, everyone sure remembers Tommy coming by and getting everyone spooked about yellow-eyed monsters and fucking owls. (I found a dead one on Marjorie’s porch; nailed to the door, flaking dried blood and covered in flies. Superstitious bitch.) The next night, nothing.

His theory (as expressed to me through equal application of honey and cracked ribs) is that we’ve got some sort of predator on the loose; a boogeyman from the Old World who dresses up in our bodies and fucks with us because it can. So naturally, he took it upon

himself to walk the streets, hat in hand, telling everyone that he was so scared of spooks he could piss himself.

Obviously, I can't just let that stand. We keep the peace by being the meanest motherfuckers on the block. Tommy whimpering in the streets does not bolster faith in the local constabulary, and leaves the rank and file (i.e. my little band of malcontents and shit-kickers) doubtful of their position in the natural order, which in turn distracts them from the honest work of keeping the meat at arm's length.

He gets scared, and classy ladies nail owls to their doors and cower underground. He gets scared, and I start getting evangelized at by those dour lancers, when they roll up to pick at our bones and take my city.

I'll wipe his blood from my lips while singing a campfire tune before I let him run my city back into the damn ground. I've got to get him gone. That'll be chore two, after I take what he made me to do Beth out on him. Make sure my city knows that we're unified.



Beth had always been clever; too quick on the uptake, and too stupid to back down when I was right; but not like this. She sat in my lap, picking at the gray skin on her wrist, and I marveled at the woman I had made of her.

"So, give them a monster." She grinned, cracked lips stretching across her face like we were sharing a dirty joke. "The little prick's even done the heavy lifting for you. Told all your little chickens that a fox was coming in the night, then set the stage and wrapped himself up in a pretty package. It'd be a sin to let a scapegoat like that go to waste." She leaned into my kiss with open, hungry eyes. "And you can get his bit on the side while you're at it; a little collateral vengeance for my hero." Her breath was dry and cool against my neck as she whispered, "Just bring me along. I can help."

Knock. Knock. Crack. The door splintered around my hands, and fell away. One more reason Tommy was an embarrassment; I was keeping Beth much safer than this.

She crept in with me, shaking with laughter. It felt so right, having her here beside me; a high and driving peace that burned in my veins. My precious voice of wrath.

"Oh sweetie, that's a cute thought, but you're useless. What could you possibly do to help?"

Rather than get quiet and sullen, Beth just laughed and pulled in close. "Your monster needs victims, right? Let me help you make some." Her eyes were the color of sun. How could I say no?

Tommy's girl was tall, with round glasses she almost finished pulling over sleepy black eyes. Bless her heart, she tried to fight back.

And when I was finished, Beth had kept her promise. A string of pristine blood bags followed her meekly into the apartment, drunk on her scent of deep woods and broken earth. We kissed, lingering over the whimpering remains of Tommy's perversion. She tasted like my cigarettes; smoke and sulfur and bitter metal dust.

But tonight wasn't going to last forever. I picked up his girl's phone, and texted a familiar number. Tommy, Tommy, please come home.

Beth winked at me, and leaned down.

The screams were wet and strange, and as awful as the beast that emerged. It writhed to its feet, bone grinding against bone as she shook Beth's body off like a rag, and stag-

gered toward her packed lunch. She was disgusting. A shrieking mess that hissed as she tore through the first; staining her face, and leaving the floor so slick she could barely keep up when the rest tried to run. Past me, through the hallway, down the stairs, out into the street. Body after body, ripped apart and rancid at her touch.

She whispered her name when I asked it; a sound like spiders, that would have turned my stomach if it could still hold anything. And I kept saying yes.

It was her plan, you see. I was proud of Beth for that. Once upon a time, she needed a bit of a heavy hand to keep her obedient, but this Beth was so eager to smooth away any problems in my plans. Her body had been in the photos, so it needed to be at the scene; linking the creation of this monster to that one. So I picked her up, carried her outside.

There was an animal wrapped in Beth's skin, and I loved it. So pure and hungry and beautiful. And inside it all felt the same; I felt the same.

I propped her up; and together we waited for the cavalry. His texts were sweet by turns, then afraid; and when he came, Tommy was alone. And on the lawn of their cheap apartment complex, his pet was gorging herself on a rapidly cooling body, fat with its rotten blood.

We leaned over the metal balcony far above, and I held Beth tight against the night air; watching Tommy struggle to control her, laughing when he failed. And when he fell, desperate and panting, onto the monster Beth and I had made, he staked her so gently.

He may have seen us, walking down the stairs. He may have understood what he'd done to me, to Beth. But in the end, I don't know if he even felt the stake go in. He just shivered for a moment, and went limp against me.

Thoughtful, if only in retrospect, Tommy had brought his own kerosene. I tipped it over, and lit the lighter Beth had lent me on the curb outside my least favorite club, three winters ago.

I kissed her face lightly, as I laid her in the green grass. "Remember when we first met, Beth?" The yellow had faded from her plain hazel eyes, and ash was settling on her cheeks. "Mhmm. Your hair was curled, your eye shadow was green; and when we snuck out into the night together, your coat was too short to keep out the cold."

There were sirens in the distance, but I couldn't help a lingering look. "You were such a pretty girl, Beth. I don't know if I could be as nice to the next girl, when she can't be you."

Fading Away

By Matthew McFarland

By the time I noticed my heart had stopped, I didn't care anymore. It wasn't the strangest thing that happened to me that week, after all.

I bought a mirror at an estate sale. It was this huge, full-length thing with a gilded frame. I couldn't see the frame real well from where I was sitting, but the mirror itself looked impressive. I needed something to dress up my room, and I had been planning on buying a piece of art or something. I'd heard that the deceased left behind nothing but debts and that all of his stuff was going cheap. I bid on a few paintings and such, but the mirror was really struck me.

Now that I think about it, nobody bid on it more than once, except me. They'd bid, and I'd outbid them, and they'd squint at the mirror as though asking themselves if it was worth the money. In the end, I paid just over a grand for it, but when I had it appraised, the guy said it was worth almost ten times that. When I had it appraised...shit. That was Tuesday. The estate sale was on Saturday. By Tuesday I was starting to get an idea of what was going on.

Back up, Jon.

Saturday

I brought the mirror home and I was struck by how light it seemed. I thought the gilding must be fake, and that's why I got it cheap. I set up it up in my room, facing my bed, on what used to be the big empty part of my wall. I stood there for a few minutes, staring at myself, telling myself I like it. You know how it is when you spend a lot of money on something; even if you don't *really* think it's all that hot, you have to tell yourself it's cool. Otherwise you wasted the money, and you look like a chump, and who wants that? So I stood there and stared at myself, and told myself how great the mirror looked.

I guess nothing really happened Saturday. I set up the mirror and I went clubbing. I met a really hot guy and we went back to his apartment. His roommate was some pudgy het who kept his music up loud so he wouldn't hear us, even though I thought we were quiet.

Sunday

I went home the next morning. I left before the guy woke up. I don't like seeing people the morning after. They never look as good, and then I start questioning why I

went to bed with them in the first place. I'd rather duck out. So I got home, still sticky with club- and sex-sweat, still smelling like smoke and reefer and that guy's cologne, and I stopped in front of the mirror on my way to the shower. I had marks up and down my arms and my chest—the guy liked to bite, and that's OK.

But I couldn't see the marks in my reflection. I looked at my arms and my chest, saw the red and purple bruises already turning yellow. I looked up at the mirror...nothing but smooth, white skin. I must have stood there 20 minutes, looking back and forth. I couldn't get my mind to figure it. I kept thinking, *I must have seen something about this on TV or somewhere, some reason for this, some trick of the light, some treatment on the mirror that doesn't pick up the colors.* It sounded like bullshit in my head, too. I showered, and in the bathroom mirror I saw the marks clear as day.

I blamed it on the hangover and lack of sleep. I showered, shaved, and went to get breakfast. I opened my shirt a bit at the café and asked the busboy if he could see the marks. He said he could and he gave me a little smirk. He knows I like to get bitten. I felt better. Trick of the light. Hangover. Nothing to worry about.

Monday

Monday's when I really started to get scared. I woke up early, before the sun rose. That happens in winter, though, so I just thought I was having a good day—you know, one of those days when you wake up before the alarm and just feel great. I got breakfast at the café before I headed to the office. The busboy—Alec—was working, but when he came over to my table he frowned. He leaned in and asked if I was feeling OK.

"Fine," I said. I meant it. He nodded as though I'd said "fine" when what I meant was "I feel like Hell." He told me I should get some rest. I didn't ask what he meant. He's a busboy, what the hell. I went to work and I got there an hour early. I have no idea how that happened. I left the café with plenty of time, but there's no way I could have walked all that way and still have been that early. I was sitting in my office going through emails, and my secretary leaned in. He kind of jumped, like he was surprised to see me, and I realized I was sitting in the dark. He asked if I was OK.

"Fine," I said. I probably wasn't as polite that time, but he gave me the same look. It occurred me that everybody's "fine"; we say that no matter how we're feeling. And I couldn't figure out if that's because we don't want to tell people the truth or because we know they don't care. I mean, I ask people how they are all the time, but with rare exceptions I couldn't give a shit. So, it's good that they answer "fine."

Except I really *was* doing fine, and people were looking at me like I was bleeding from the ears. I told my secretary to get me some tea and went back to work.

I walked into our department meeting a few minutes early. My boss was already there. She took me aside and asked—of course—if I was OK.

Now, I don't like my boss much. She's OK when she does her job, but she gets drunk at Christmas parties and pinches guy's asses. I don't need my ass touched by anyone with breasts. So when she asked me if I was OK, I kind of snapped.

"Yes," I said, "I'm *fine*. I don't know what they hell I look like today..." And as soon as I said that, I realized I really *didn't* know what I looked like. I hadn't looked in a mirror, even when I'd brushed my teeth. And that's weird, because I spend a good long time in front of the mirror most mornings. I paused and touched my cheek. It was

smooth, so I'd shaved. Had I shaved in the shower this morning? How could I not have looked in the mirror?

She didn't notice, of course. She'd just been waiting for her turn to talk. "You look like hell, frankly," she said.

I was still thinking about mirrors, so I didn't answer.

"Are you sure you're OK?"

I didn't answer. I just looked at her. She wears big, wide-rimmed glasses, and I was looking for my reflection. I couldn't see it. "Well, I think you need to get home and take a sick day, OK? You don't look so good. Take the day and get some rest."

Patronizing bitch, my brain said, but it was just reflex. What I was really thinking was *where the hell am I?*

I went home, and I sat on my bed for three hours staring at my reflection in that big mirror. It was there. *I* was there, in that mirror, and I couldn't pull myself away from it for a long time. I couldn't figure out why at the time, but it was just comforting to see myself.

That night, I went to bed early. I didn't get to sleep until almost 4AM, though. Every 10 minutes I'd wake up and turn on the light, like I'd heard something in the other room. And every time, I'd catch a glimpse of my reflection and I'd gasp, like I wasn't expecting to see me.

Tuesday

Like Monday, only I woke up a little earlier, which is nuts considering how little sleep I got. I stood in front of my bathroom mirror for almost a half-hour. I flossed three times. I moisturized my face, did my hair perfectly and put on my favorite shirt, the one that always gets me laid. I went down to the café and I decided that if Alec was working, I was going to hit on him.

Alec was working. I sat down at my table, and he came over and sat down. At first I thought he was on break, but then I saw the look in his eyes. He looked like he was a doctor about to tell someone their mother had died. He said, "Jesus, Jon. What's going on?"

I almost broke down into tears. I was sitting at this café wearing an outfit that cost me over a thousand dollars (counting the shoes). I spend hundreds every month on my hair and skin. I look *good*, and normally this guy is so smitten he can't walk straight when I'm around. Now he looked like he was only talking to me out of pity. I looked around at the other customers, but no one was looking at me.

Someone's always looking at me. Even if it's not someone looking to pick me up, it's just someone who catches my eye. I watch people all the time. You have to avoid looking at someone, you have to decide to ignore them, right? But everyone in that café was looking somewhere else, and if they looked in my direction they were looking at Alec, or the painting behind me, or the counter with the cream and sugar next to me.

I got up and ran back home. I scuffed the hell out of my shoes and I brushed against the doorframe and stained my shirt. I ran upstairs and slammed my bedroom door and sat on my bed shaking, staring at myself. And the whole time I'm thinking *I exist I exist I exist*.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke up, it was dark. It wasn't late, though. It wasn't even 5PM. I stood up and walked over to the mirror and looked closely

at the frame for the first time. I'd never noticed before, but there were human figures carved into it. They were...embracing. I couldn't tell if they were meant to be men or women, and it didn't look like they were fucking. But they were embracing each other, and in each pair it looked like one of their mouths was wide open.

Not really knowing what else to do, I called up a guy I know who works at an auction house. I asked if he'd come over and look at this mirror I'd bought. He said it was late, but he'd stop by on the way home. Always figured he had a thing for men, even though he's married. He's not my type—too hairy, too Greek—but at this point I just wanted someone to notice me. I put on a clean shirt and waited, and a while later he knocked and I buzzed him up.

When I opened the door, his face fell. It was subtle. It wasn't even in his face, if that makes any sense. It was in his body language, hell, even his *scent*. He'd been excited, now he was repulsed. But I invited him in and showed him the mirror.

He stood there for a few minutes examining the frame, muttering stuff I didn't understand about how it was made and where it might have come from. Then he said, "I figure it's worth about 10 grand, maybe more if you find somebody who really—" Then he stopped short.

"What?" I was standing by the edge of the bed, looking over his shoulder at my reflection.

"Jesus," he said. "Is that some kind of trick?" He turned around and looked at me, and then at the mirror. "How are you doing that?"

"Doing what?" I took a step toward him. Our reflections looked weird. Mine seemed to be in different color tones than his, as though the light reflecting me was tinged yellow somehow. I noticed a vein on his neck was throbbing and I felt myself get hard. I didn't even think about how weird that was.

"Where's your reflection?" He took a step away from the mirror. His reflection disappeared. So did mine.

I stood there for what felt like a full minute, staring at a mirror that didn't reflect me anymore. I moved, and thought I saw something in the mirror out of the corner of my eye, but I still couldn't see me. I guess the look on my face must have tipped the guy that I wasn't fucking around with him, because he started to panic. He ran for the door. I beat him there. I'm actually not sure what happened after that.

Wednesday

I slept all day Wednesday. I didn't wake up until about 5PM. Same time I woke up the day before. I stared at the mirror, but I couldn't see my reflection. I was afraid to go into the bathroom and look there. I kept trying to tell myself that I needed a shave, but when I touched my face it still felt smooth. My hair still felt freshly washed. I still smelled good. Something smelled foul, though, coming from my hall closet. There was a big red-brown stain in front of that closet door. I didn't open it.

I called work, but my secretary didn't answer. Neither did my boss. My number just shunted me to voice mail, but instead of my normal away message it gave me the generic "this employee is away from his or her desk at the moment" shit. I sent my secretary an email, but it bounced back. I didn't bother trying after that.

I didn't leave the apartment all night. I swear I didn't. I have no idea how Alec's apron wound up on my floor.

Thursday

I woke up a little later, about 5:30 PM. The smell from the closet was worse and I could smell some funk from the bathroom. I thought I'd want a shower, but I felt clean. My mouth had a funny taste to it, though, and I picked up Alec's apron and stared at it.

As I stared, I saw things. I saw Alec under me, face pressed into my mattress, writhing. I saw him turning over and felt how warm his body was. I felt us embracing.

I dropped the apron. I picked it up with a pair of tongs and put it in a metal wastebasket. I doused it in lighter fluid and tried to light it on fire, but I couldn't get the lighter to catch. Rather, I couldn't get my fingers to work the lighter. Every time I tried, I got scared and the lighter fell out of my hands.

The nights are long during the winter and I don't know what happened during most of that night. I remember standing at my door, my hand on the knob, trying to decide where to go. I remember standing in front of the fridge and feeling ill at all the moldy food, and reasoning maybe that was where the foul smells were really coming from. But mostly I stood in front of that mirror, looking for myself. I could see blurs, now, streaks of color like sidewalk chalk in the rain. That was me, melting, running, fading away.

Friday

My heart stopped on Friday. I guess it did, anyway. I woke up after dark, again, and the smells had gotten worse. I looked in the mirror and really strained, and suddenly I saw myself, clear as day. But I didn't have a beard, despite not shaving since Monday. My hair was still combed. My body was pale and smooth and those marks that guy gave me had faded, even though I usually hold onto bruises much longer. I stood close to the mirror and stared at my eyes, trying to remember if they'd always been that shade of green, almost gold—didn't I have *brown* eyes?—and that's when I noticed my breath wasn't fogging the mirror.

I took my pulse and felt nothing. I put a hand to my chest—nothing. I got a knife from the kitchen and dragged it across my throat, standing in front of the mirror, waiting for jet of blood to cover my reflection. Nothing. Just a little pain and a little cut, and it faded away as though it was never there.

"It won't work, anyway."

I turned around, and I saw a guy in my room. Maybe 30 years old. Chiseled, tight chest, slight hint of a beard. My type...and yet, I didn't feel turned on. I just stared at him, and then back at the mirror. He wasn't there, just a few blurry streaks, just like I had been. And as I watched, my face ran, my clothes melted, my body soften and I was just color, just a blur, disappearing into the glass.

"What's happening?" I whispered.

He walked toward me and put a hand on my chest. "You bought my mirror," he said. He reached past me and ran his other hand down the frame, caressing the embracing couples. "You bought my mirror, and it stole your reflection." He pointed to one of the figures on the very bottom of frame. It had my face. The figuring was embracing a man that looked a lot like Alec. The man pointed at a figure about halfway up the frame. That one had his face.

“It stole mine, too,” he said. “I used to be at the bottom. You have to work your way up.” He nodded toward the bathroom, where the stink had worsened. “You’ve already started.”

“What if I don’t keep going?” I said. I was starting to figure it out. “What if I stop?”

He pointed to the bottom of the frame. The underside of the mirror was just hands, gripping onto the edge of the glass. “That.” I stepped back, suddenly dizzy. “Jesus,” I whispered.

“It’s OK.” He put his hand back on my chest and smiled. His teeth were clean and white, and just a little too sharp. “You’ll be fine.”



Breaking The Surface

By Chuck Wendig

What We Remember, What is Real

“He is awake.”

Father Mayhew, so tall and so thin that his dark suit hung limply on his gaunt frame, said those words but did not move deeper into the room. The priest simply stood in the doorway, staring into the penthouse at his gathered flock.

Mary sighed, the Bowie knife stuck halfway into a makeshift stake, a curl of wood coiled up above the blade. She looked to Hiram and Finch, small dark men who looked to be cut from the same cloth.

“You’re sure?” she asked.

Mayhew dipped his handkerchief into the silver dish of holy water by the door, wetted his lips, then nodded. In his small voice, raspy and quiet (its ministerial power was not contained in its volume) he confirmed:

“Most certain.”

Hiram idly thumbed the slide on the tarnished .45 lying on a purple cloth in his lap. The metal was etched with a dozen tiny crosses, and in each, rust had flourished.

“Where you are,” Hiram started, “death will find you, even in towers built up strong and tall.”

Finch rolled his eyes. “Still reading the Quran, yeah?”

“Some good shit in all the Father’s works.”

“Fifty years dead, now you decide to broaden your horizons?”

“Quiet,” Mary said. She shot them a look. Her dark eyes bespoke volumes, and in those volumes were the pages of pain she’d caused others. She turned back to Father Mayhew, who maintained the empty gaze and pursed lips that were so often his trademark during sermons. “The Liar Bishop hath returned. No kidding. We have a plan?”

Mayhew reached into his coat, and pulled out a slip of paper torn from a notebook.

Upon it was a name written in red: “Renatus.”

The priest smiled — an unusual occasion, a *rara avis* on par with sighting Bigfoot — and tucked the paper back into his coat.

“We leave in one hour.”



“He’s awake.”

Up on the rooftop, the crows in the pigeon coop danced back and forth. Nathalie tilted her head, listening to their complaints. She popped the latch on the door, reached in, and selected a bird. The crow in her hand was fat and oily, with round dark eyes that captured the light of the slivered moon above.

She showed her people the bird that twisted in her grip, waving it beneath their heads and urging them to listen. Mouse looked frightened: she always did in the presence of the divine. Horatio appeared smug: a persistent mask so that he didn’t look like Mouse when confronting the sublime. But it was Vitellus’s reaction she most wished to gauge. His hands, gentle beneath her own, urged the bird up toward his face. Pressing his ear to its breast, he nodded.

“Very good,” he said, his eyes smiling even if his mouth was not. “You discerned this from the sounds they make?”

“*Oscines*,” she said.

“One day soon I shall show you *alites*, the omens seen in flight. But for now . . .”

As his voice trailed off, he took his pinky nail — longer and sharper than any of the others — and eased it into the bird’s breast as if he were sliding it into fresh mud. Dragging his finger downward, he opened the crow’s chest and nudged the ribs aside. The red heart, no bigger than a thumbnail, twitched and pulsed. Nathalie didn’t know what it was that Vitellus saw in the crimson cavity of the crow’s breast, but he seemed satisfied enough. Pitching the bird off the roof, Vitellus wiped his hands on his coat.

“And now we know where he is. Shall we?”



“He’s ancient? That true?” Finch asked.

When Mayhew did little more than stare at Finch, he continued: “He doesn’t claim to be that old, right? Is he just batshit? Franco, my sire’s sire, he was old. Couldn’t get his head together. Couldn’t remember names. Couldn’t remember places. I remember one night, he went ahead and had his people bring him a van full of, I don’t know, stray dogs or cats or something. No nourishment there, but his people didn’t want to tell him that because not only was he losing it, but he had a powder-keg temper. They should’ve told him. Because when he tried to quench that thirst on a goddamn herd of strays and found that it didn’t do shit for shit, that only enraged him. Though, I guess you could say it allowed him to get back to his food source because, you know, he ate every last one of his dumbfuck people.”

“You ever shut up?” Hiram asked.

Mary countered: “*Both* of you, shut up.”

As the lights of the city passed — strobe flashes, bars of white in the dark car — Mayhew adjusted his awkward frame and seemed to snap out of whatever reverie that regularly consumed him.

“It is accurate,” the priest said. “Renatus is nearly two millennia old. We have pages of the letters he’s been writing. Journal entries written to childer that he put to dust a hundred or more years ago. Our mole has done his job.”

“Amazing,” Hiram said. “This guy’s gone to ground more times than we thought.”

“We’re going to make out good,” Finch said, white teeth flashing in a fox’s grin. “Fucker’s probably got a metric ton of old shit in that penthouse. Gold and bronze and old swords and pieces of art. All for the coffers of the Sanctified, of course.”

Mary put her big knife to Finch’s tight throat — an empty gesture devoid of physical harm, but a gesture nevertheless.

“It’s not about that,” she corrected. “This is about treachery. Not just about heresy, but about putting down a liar. Renatus was never one of us. He played at being Bishop. Pretended to be *pious*. And then when he — ”

She jerked the knife away and curled her hand so hard around the handle that she nearly cracked the rosewood hilt. Her muscles tightened. Mary didn’t need to say what she was going to say. Everybody in that car knew. That night, Midnight Mass some 50 years back, so-called *Bishop* Renatus had heard of the plan to purge the city of its heathen contingent — either by running them out on a rail or by feeding them to the wolves that lurked in the woods around the city — and he had gone mad. He didn’t move fast, but he didn’t have to. The room, afterward? All that blood, sprayed on copies of the Catechism, soaked through the holy raiment. Swatches of clothing clinging to splintered pews. The aspergillum stuck awkwardly in a pile of oily ash that once was one of their own. Those who had survived did not survive well. They were few, anyhow.



“He’s a god, isn’t he?”

It was Mouse who said it; strange, given that he didn’t speak most times. But as they made their way on foot through the tangle of back alleys and one-way side streets, he seemed awfully chatty.

“He may be,” Horatio said, still smirking.

“I don’t know that he’s a god, not exactly,” Nathalie said, hoisting herself up over a chain-link fence with one hand. “But an emissary to them? A link between us and the divine? That I believe. He was *there*. He dwelled among the old gods. Minerva. Vulcan. Venus! I can hardly fathom. He’s living history. Well. So to speak.”

Vitellus reached over and pulled her head sharply toward him, then pressed his dry dead lips to her temple. “You make me so proud, Nathalie.”

They emerged out of this last alley, leaving behind the squealing rats and moldering boxes and the Dumpsters that stank of curry and garlic. They emerged into light: the towers of steel and glass, of silver light garnished with hints of neon and fluorescence. The tallest of those towers was straight across from them, a spire of Byzantine modernity whose tip seemed to puncture the very sky.

“I just want to meet the one who saved our collective ass,” Horatio said. “Those foul God-junkies wanted to get rid of us so many years back — you weren’t made yet, Mouse, so don’t sweat it — but this one, he stepped up, he balanced the equation. Took out half of his congregation. A perfect treachery. We’re sure it’s safe, though, right? Nobody else knows that he’s here? Awake again?”

Vitellus shook his head. “We’re alone in this knowledge. Only we knew what signs to look for. The appearance of new altars beneath the city. Cruets of blood hidden in the

subway tunnels. Old coins pressed into the stone floor, wreathed in garlands of fresh laurel. The signs were clear. And the augury confirmed it.”

Mouse stared up at the tower with wonder.

“The gods,” he whispered.

They moved to cross the avenue.



“He’s going to kill me,” Anthony blubbered.

Mayhew, two nights before, sat with Anthony on the steps of the cathedral. The fool was worried. Not that he didn’t have a right to be, of course. If Renatus discovered the human’s treachery, Anthony’s life would surely come to a gory, greasy halt.

“Let me ask you a question,” Mayhew said. “The first of many. Do you believe in God? The Lord, our Father?”

“I, I . . .” Anthony stammered. Buried his face in his palms. Rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands so hard that it seemed he was trying to push them back into his skull. (*No surprise*, Mayhew thought, *given what grotesque blasphemies Renatus probably played out before him.*) Finally, he blurted, “Yes! Yes. Of course.”

“Then you believe in salvation. And in Heaven.”

“Yes.”

“Good. Because what I ask is not a favor for me, it is the command of God Himself. I am a priest. A subject of a far greater realm, an emissary between the divine and the profane. You will help me.”

“I will help you,” Anthony repeated, a string of saliva connecting his upper lip to his lower. His eyes were puffy, shot through with a web of red.

“You have the pages? Of his journal?”

Grinding his teeth so hard that Mayhew could hear the molars sliding against one another, the poor fool reached into his shirt pocket, and pulled out a wad of papers poorly folded.

“Tell me about him,” Mayhew said. “Whatever comes to mind. I have time.”

“He . . . he thinks he’s a soldier. He talks about, about Rome. About chariot races and something called ‘the Greens.’ He talks to nothing. Or everything. When I bring him girls, he drains them and lays them on the . . . the long couch thing, the chaise! The chaise. And he talks to them even after they’re dead. Sometimes he speaks to the air, arguing with . . . I don’t know what.”

“And what else?”

“He speaks of someone named Senex. I don’t know who the fuck that is, but he sometimes talks about him, and other times he talks *to* him. Like he’s his sire or master or something. Other names come and go. Lucretia? Decimus? He hates that one. Rages whenever he mentions his name. And the Camarilla. I don’t know who that is, but he talks about him a lot.”

“The Camarilla. What does he say?”

“He babbles, mostly. Something about Rome and the seven hills. About . . . about the old gods, the old ways. How they *created* this Camarilla.”

Mayhew's jaw clenched. *Gross heresy, that.* He resisted the impulse to tear out Anthony's tongue just for uttering such sedition against Heaven and its glorious monsters. The old gods were in opposition to the natural order, standing in the way of sanity and sanctity. Just look at the scattered cults of those so-called old gods now —! Disparate fools forging superstitious rituals while kneeling in the gutters. Was that sanity? Was that order?

Sucking in a deep breath, Anthony looked up at the cloud-ringed moon with his bleary eyes. He was on the cusp. Mayhew decided to push.

"Tell me where he rests during the day."

"I . . . I mustn't."

"You're not compelled to protect him."

"I know. But . . ."

"He'll kill you."

"Yes."

"And what is it you think God will do should you betray *Him*?"

Mayhew reached out and gently stroked Anthony's sweat-slick hair. He allowed that concept to sink in. An eternity of pain for one mistake? Anthony was a good Catholic boy — or was, once. As such, he was keenly aware of infinite tribulation.

And then, the dam broke.

Anthony, blubbering once more, told Mayhew where the Betrayer Bishop rested his perfidious head.



"He'll never know!"

Two nights before, Busker hunkered down in the brackish sewer water, the dark forgotten tunnel rising wide and tall around him, and he turned the coin over and over again in his hand. On one side, a bearded man with stark eyes, a bolt of lightning above his head. On the other side, a wreath encircling a pair of tongs. Busker laughed, licked the coin, bit it (he didn't know why people bit coins to determine their worth or authenticity, and he didn't know precisely what information was received when he *did* bite down, but it seemed good enough to him).

"Stupid old man will never know the treasures I find down here, *never*." He looked down at the audience to his comments, a pair of fat Norway rats, their gray fur patchy from flea bites and septic ringworm. He scooped up one of the rats — he wasn't sure if it was the one he called Mickey or the one he called Pluto — and kissed it on the top of its head. It squealed in what Busker believed to be delight.

The savage did not see the shadow behind him. Too consumed was he with his treasure find and his pet rats; he didn't hear the faint splashes of water.

He didn't even hear the whispered entreaties to the Magna Mater, the Liber Pater, the curses against the stolen blood in his dead body.

But he damn sure felt it when his muscles started to seize.

Busker cried out, and he could *hear* the dead blood hardening in his body, the Vitae going inert with the sound of ice cracking beneath one's feet. Then suddenly he flopped face down into the stagnant run-off as if someone had just cut his puppet strings.

Vitellus stepped over the body. Nathalie, smiling in awe at what her father could do, followed close behind.

“What do you have, filth?” Vitellus asked. He reached down and gripped Busker’s hand, peeling back the fingers like skin from a banana. When each finger reached the end of its movement, Vitellus kept going: brittle bones popping, one by one. “Nathalie, if you please.”

Eager, she grabbed the coin that revealed itself.

She needed no light to see it. Her eyes had learned to adjust to the darkness over time. Her ears, too — were she half a mile down the tunnels, she still could’ve heard Busker’s choked weeping, his murmurs of misery.

“It’s Vulcan,” she said. Spinning the coin around, she continued. “A laurel wreath and the tongs of the forge. It’s him. Isn’t it?”

Vitellus, bright eyes gleaming in the dark, let the savage drop down into the sewage. He stood, smiling.

“It may be, dear one. Perhaps it’s time for you to consult the birds.”

If Nathalie weren’t dead, her heart would’ve fluttered at the promise.



“He was a pretender.”

The words, spat with so much venom.

Renatus paced. Bare feet fell on cold white marble. Somewhere, a fountain within the penthouse burred, but he didn’t know where. Sometimes, this place was equal parts prison and temple. Palace and labyrinth. The vilest fundament, and loftiest Elysium.

The girl lay slumped over the chaise, her hindquarters up in the air. She was mostly dead. Her eyes were empty, but he still heard breathing. Saw the bubbles of sticky spit and blood rise and fall betwixt her painted lips.

Curling a finger under her chin, he tilted her head back. For a moment, her eyes found focus, and she looked at him. Those bloodied lips quietly smacked together as if she was trying to say something. She couldn’t.

“Do you know what Ovid said? Forgive me if I mangle the words. Consider this a paraphrase. He claimed that women should keep themselves hidden until they make themselves up. Because this —” He ran a thumb across her red lips, then beneath the eyes where he smeared her eyeliner into a coal-dark streak. “This is where your beauty truly lies. In all the little containers of paint and powder.”

He let her head drop. Her pinky twitched. But not much more.

“Was he right, Ovid? I don’t know. Beauty may lurk in ochre oil on the lips or soot and antimony around the eyes. Oh, but Lucretia, that beautiful lady and that bitter witch! Her beauty went deeper than what lay caked upon the skin. It went to the blood.” He forced his papery lungs to draw in a sigh, deep and forlorn — a habit that even now, after millennia, he could not break. “But we weren’t speaking about her, were we? Even though you have a faint glimpse of her beauty, even though I’d consider making you my childe if it weren’t for the fact that they’re going to betray me and surely you’d do the same someday soon . . .”

He slumped to the floor next to the chaise, resting his head against the hollow of the small of the girl’s back.

“No, I was speaking about Renatus. The other one. The real one. Strange, isn’t it? That I can, only rarely, recall my real name? The name from my days as a soldier? That’s sad, to me. Renatus, the true Renatus — which is to say the *false* Renatus — was a cruel pretender. He was the cancer in the system. The worm in the marrow. He, and others like him, were what laid our proud order so low . . .”



“He left the door open for us?” Hiram whispered. They stepped off the elevator, and up on this floor only one door waited for them: a red door with black fixtures, the doorway into the penthouse. And, currently, it sat ajar. “No security at all?”

Finch shrugged, ran his hand along the cool metal of the sawed-off’s barrel. “Either he’s really gone nuts, or he’s scary enough that he doesn’t *need* security.”

Mary scowled and put a finger against her lips. Then she pointed to her ear and tilted her head toward the door.

Somewhere, deep within the haven, they heard someone talking.

The words, a question: “Do you know what Ovid said?”

“It’s him,” Mayhew whispered.

Mary pointed toward the door. “Let’s move.”

They crept into the kingdom of the Betrayer Bishop. The penthouse was a mad mix of the modern and the archaic — pagan faces whose mouths spit rusty water, a flat-screen television on the wall (its power cord hanging limp and unconnected to anything resembling an outlet), a old claw foot strongbox sitting in the middle of the floor, a pile of celebrity magazines sitting in disarray only a few feet from it. Ferns and flowers swayed and shuddered in a breeze — a window was open, somewhere (they could smell the chemical stink of the city carried on the air). Somewhere, rooms away, a fluorescent light flickered and buzzed. In the other direction, guttering candlelight. Hiram nearly knocked over an alabaster vase; Mary shot him a look that could’ve taken his head off.

The voice deep in the haven continued: “. . . which is to say the *false* Renatus . . .”

With spidery fingers, Mayhew withdrew the slip of paper with the accursed name from his jacket.

Hiram’s hand tightened on his pistol. Finch’s shoulders eased back, and he felt the cold blood within himself warm to the possibility of urgent action.

Mary crept forward, knife in one hand, fresh-carved stake (its wood burned with many small crosses) in the other.

They entered the room.



“He will help us,” Mouse said, so sure of it.

The elevator slid upwards almost effortlessly. The golden dial at the top — an Art Deco arrow, its finials curved inward in a smooth loop — ticked off the floor numbers.

“No,” Vitellus corrected. “We will help him. The ancients need our assistance if they are going to be restored to glory. The gods are powerful, but not all-powerful. They need our faith and our work to operate. Renatus is the bridge between the old gods and this place, and so we will help him restore those connections. Once he has his mind in order,

his heart can again direct its ire toward the Sanctified. And we will help him achieve that, all of us acting in concert with the fury of the gods.”

Nathalie nearly swooned. The words of her master were so perfect, the dream so true that she could taste it on her tongue like fragrant blood.

“I’m fucking terrified,” Horatio said, a bold and unexpected declaration from someone who usually kept his cards so close to his chest.

“That,” Vitellus noted, “is the power of the ancient.”



“He, and others like him, were what laid our proud order so low . . .”

They had expected . . . well, they didn’t know what to expect, but it wasn’t this. The Betrayer Bishop should’ve been reclining in his throne, a blood-caked scepter in his lap. Or perhaps examining a steaming pile of entrails on an altar. He should’ve been a lion. Proud and defiant, but whose age had come and past. He could’ve been a snake, coiled around a beautiful tree and hissing entreaties of temptation to all who pass near.

But instead he was merely deflated. They found him lying against the chaise, a silken robe laying open, revealing his nakedness. A chest smeared with rusty red. Curls of hair ringing his burnished forehead.

He didn’t seem surprised to see them.

“My children,” he said. He made a weak, meaningless gesture with his left hand.

“We aren’t your children,” Mary barked.

“Can I offer you anything?” He looked to the girl, still clinging to life. “I’d give you this one, but it seems that I’ve . . . exhausted her.” Renatus looked disappointed.

Mayhew pinched the piece of paper between thumb and forefinger.

“The priest will stand before the accused,” Mayhew began, “holding a jar of bitter water that brings a curse to those who are guilty.”

“A curse?” Renatus asked. His voice suggested bemusement. “This is a grim irony, indeed. I recall wandering the dark tunnels of Necropolis with a contingent of good soldiers who wisely feared and respected all the gods. I remember hunting down you people, hiding in dusty rat warrens with your stars and spears and crosses. And here, the tables are turned — mostly, of course, since now we monsters live high in shining towers instead of lurking in the bowels and guts of the city. But the sentiment is the same, isn’t it?”

“Then may the people see the Lord’s curse is upon you,” Mayhew continued.

“Yes, yes, curse, so you say. Here’s the other irony, both bitter and sweet: we hunted you down, but it only seemed to strengthen you, didn’t it? You grew bolder. Every hand we chopped off, two more grew from the stump. Ah, but now it’s we whose limbs are vengeful and multifarious, we whose time has come.”

“Let it be so,” Mayhew finished.

Then he withdrew a single match.

They all expected Renatus to move. To leap, to pounce, his hands a blur as they reached to tear out throats or hearts.

But as Mayhew struck the match against the rough back of his lean hand (flinching as he did so, for the fear kicked up within him), Renatus only laughed. A mirthless sound, to be sure, but a laugh nevertheless.

The match tip burned the paper.

Renatus's name — and all his sins with it — caught aflame.

The Betrayer Bishop howled, a short yawp of agony mixing with his laugh. He slid further to the floor, his back arching as if caught in the throes of some kind of inexorable ecstasy.

"Now," Mayhew said to his people.

Hiram and Finch started shooting.



"He's besieged."

The reality was almost too terrifying to consider: someone had found him before they had. Thieves who wanted his treasures. Fiends who wanted his blood. Perhaps even the cruel Sanctified with their hunger for vengeance.

They stepped off the elevator, the ringing of gunfire echoing down the hall. The acrid tang of cordite stung their noses.

Vitellus seized Nathalie's arm in a firm grip. He could see that she was frightened and horrified, unable to comprehend what needed to be done next. She was young, his child, with great promise that hadn't yet been tested.

"Show me why I chose you," he said to her.

That seemed to do it.

They entered the penthouse.



He watched it all happen. Felt it, too.

The tragedy unfolded, he at center stage . . . but he felt distant from it, too. As if it was happening to someone else. A traitor so long ago at the Forum, the dull roar of voices arguing, the whisper of a word in a barbarian's ear, and the turning of fortunes that would end the Empire. The bullets in his chest shouldn't have hurt like this, but they did. Foul stings, sizzling at the edges, fat wads of lead sitting heavy in his flesh. His child had come to destroy him. These were his progeny, were they not? The faces of the false God? The pale eyes of Constantine's idiot savior? They looked familiar and yet . . . they didn't. Perhaps it no longer mattered. Whatever sorcery they had used to curse him, fine, so be it, he had long prepared for their coming.

Oh, but this dramaturgy was not over. The gods had chosen to rewrite the play as it unfolded, didn't they? Others entered the scene. A vulpine face. A beautiful girl with the flashing eyes of Athena. An old man with a satyr's glance. A tiny mouse. Such were the whims of the gods that they should bring new actors this late in the story!

It was a ballet put on by the spirits for his amusement.

It all seemed so slow, so delicate.

The way the old satyr moved to snap the neck of the priest.

The way the brutish dog with the knife and stake met the beauty with the flashing eyes, and how they struggled, pirouetting about.

The way the mouse cried out as a blast from the one weapon erased most of his face.

The way the fox-faced man and one of the dark-eyed fools danced an erratic zigzag toward the window — the smash of glass, and then they were gone, toppling into the dark night.

All the while he lay, bleeding, burning, the dozens of holes in his body just barely dribbling the red ochre. Some of them puckered and shuddered, mushrooms of gray lead spitting back out into his lap. But his body was marred by so many eruptions. Too many to manage. For a time he recalled the things his sire did to him, his cruel keeper, the one known as Decimus. That vicious man (also with a fox-face, yes?) put holes in his body, too — heated skewers of metal run through his skin, dozens of them, hundreds perhaps. That day, when he slept in his clay urn, it felt like biting ants as his body healed itself from the wounds. Though, perhaps that never happened. Perhaps he was Decimus. Perhaps there never was a Decimus, or a Renatus, or a Lucretia. Sometimes the gauze that wrapped his mind was too thick to undo, and it was all the more comfortable to let it stay. Easier, at least. So much easier to forget. So much simpler to ignore the deviations between what was real, and what was remembered.

He returned to the present.

Those of the Lance and Spear were gone. The brute girl with the stake was nowhere to be found, though a shadow of smoldering ash decorated the far wall, the wispy curls of still-smoking cinders roughly forming a once-human shape. The priest remained, his head cocked at an odd angle — dead, but weren't they all? The mouse lay faceless, grabbing at the cold marble but finding no purchase. The one dark-eyed man lay curled in the corner, reminding Renatus of a crumpled slip of paper.

The satyr and the girl with the flashing eyes approached him, hands out.

But he felt something inside. Something stirring.

He was hungry.

And he moved to eat.



Salvation in Fog

My childer came to destroy me. They could not. It stings the heart to realize that you have given second life to weak creatures. While I suppose there exists a great part of me that sits relieved that it is over and that I still walk this world, I am also filled with great shame. This shame threatens to overwhelm me. I was able to destroy my vile sire so many nights before, why couldn't they destroy me? I had to put them to dust again, though I know that it all goes around in cruel cycles and that their assault upon me will one night be renewed. Just because they are ash doesn't mean that they can't rise again, does it? How many times now must I go through this? They are born again, born again, Re Natus, resurrected. I am doomed to repeat this. A Hell not of my choosing.

But at least now I have a new partner in my pain. Someone to ease the misery that returns night after night.



Nathalie blinked away the crust of blood that had formed over her eyes.

Was it the same night? It couldn't be. Her head swam. Her body felt full. Sick. Slick. Behind her, the limp arm of the dead girl hung off the chaise, the back of her hand

pressed awkwardly (Nathalie recalled snapping the wrist so that she could get at those last drops of fleeting life in the girl's body) against the floor.

And all around her was ash. Dust. The remnants of her friends.

Of her sire.

They thought to help him, thought to extend a hand to the divine Renatus, thought to help return him to life and elevate him to his former glory. And perhaps in a way, they had. The ancient vampire, teeth chipped and cracked where a bullet had pierced his open mouth, leapt. Nathalie could not even comprehend that speed. Vitellus, an old soul himself, expired too swiftly, and in his final demise all of Nathalie's hopes for the future turned to bone and blood and powder. It was not just his end that plagued her now; it was what Renatus had demanded of her. Her sire, almost gone, with striations of red stretching across the skin of his face (and his eyes already going dry and cracking), was thrust upon her.

Renatus commanded her to drink. To drink until she was full.

It was not a command she could deny.

It is a strange and awful thing to devour a soul. It is both pleasure and pain: a mad relief, an empowering pleasure, an enervating disgust in one's self.

And while she consumed her sire, Renatus went around the room, feeding from the remaining few. Leeching them down to their last, and ending them.

Now, one night, two nights, maybe a whole week later, Nathalie could barely move. It had been a parade of new bodies. Humans. One lay dead in the corner, his face in a potted fern. Another -- someone that Renatus knew, a "traitor" known as Anthony -- lay bent up and broken beneath the archway to the bedroom (an archway decorated with two faces that might have been the faces of Janus, or the faces of the household gods known as Lares and Penates). The mass of bodies. Writhing and moving together, first as entertainment, later as food. The things that Renatus demanded . . .

She had never felt this way. So full, so *fulfilled*.

And yet, so base. Vile. She wondered if she could throw up. It wasn't so long ago that she was human. She remembered the way peristalsis felt, the shuddering of food up and out of the gut. Could she channel it? Throw up this blood? These souls? Would it allow her to forget all that had happened here tonight?

She so dearly wanted to forget.

"Shh," Renatus said (she did not hear him come up behind her). "Relax, my dear Lucretia, relax."

"Nathalie," she tried to say, tried to correct him, but her voice was small, too small to deny him loudly.



I am comforted that I do not need to think any longer of Lucretia's death. Dear Lucretia, gone from this world and gone from my heart — or so I thought. And then you march into my world again, young and vital, different but the same. You say to me that you are not Lucretia? Whatever it is that eases the pain, my love. We all do what we must to numb ourselves to agony. I have denied myself in the past. Now you, too, must do the same.

For a long time, now, I have been driven to the edge of madness by my thoughts. The torments I endured in the Black Spring. The horrors I visited on others in return. The long

hunts in Necropolis: banishing the Lance and Sanctum, seeking out the whispering puppets of the Strix or simply trying to find a quiet place to ruminate as a soldier on all the deaths I have made. I felt empty, fearing that the gods had abandoned me. Or that the God and his Spearman had destroyed those old gods (and even now I can conjure the bitter taste of uttering the prayers of that false God and prophet, acting as Bishop and almost forgetting who I truly was and to whom I actually belonged).

I have had to write these thoughts down time and time again.

I have had to tear up these thoughts time and time again.

No longer.



His neck was cold, like the marble beneath her feet. His hands were firm, callused, the hands of a ditch-digger (*or a smith*, Nathalie thought, *like the rough hands of Vulcan*). Those hands pushed her to the gill-like slit in the skin that he had made with a small knife. He told her to drink, and so she did.

Odd that his blood should taste differently from any other's. No human blood tasted like this. But neither did what she tasted of her sire, either. Several tastes dueled for supremacy upon the tip of her tongue and edge of her lips. A musty wine, almost gone to vinegar? The back-of-the-tongue richness of fatty olives? The abstract taste -- unable to be described as a known flavor -- of age, power, lunacy? The feeling of it threatened to overwhelm her. She could barely contain the paroxysms of emotion. Nathalie wanted to laugh, so she laughed (a sound that bubbled up out of her and frightened her). She wanted to cry, so she cried (rivulets of red traveling down her cheek like trickles of rusty water).

"Are you a god?" she asked him.

"No," he said. "I don't think so. I don't remember being one."

Her eyes rolled around in her head. "I think perhaps you are."

Renatus smiled.

"Maybe I am," he said. "Let's go out. I have things I want to do."



This is what Lucretia gives me: she lets me feel good again. I bask in her presence. I was able to do for her what she did for me so many nights before. I was once a callow cur, licking dust beneath the Colosseum for the tiniest taste of life, and now I am so much more. Here, this girl comes to me, and she is nothing, too. Young, untested. Much prettier than I was once, I'm sure, but a dog nevertheless. Crawling toward me on her filthy belly. It allowed me to return the favor. Circles and cycles.

In feeling good again, I am free to forget everything else. I feel strangely liberated. I've contemplated throwing my strongbox out the window where the glass remains broken, and letting my letters spill out as it tumbles, catching flight on the angry winds above the city. I don't, not yet. But if I throw it all away, my mind becomes my own again, doesn't it? Think of it. Ridding myself of any evidence leaves me free to concoct my own memories. I don't have to be as old as I am. Maybe I'm only a few hundred years old. Perhaps I'm from France, from the village of Caumont in the Pas de Calais. Perhaps I'm much older than what I am. Rubbing the

porous belly of a fertility statue in some bygone cluster of huts and tents. I've seen those of our kind who are ageless, who do not sleep, who were perhaps birthed from the earliest darkness. I can be one of those. I could even be one of the Strix, those vile spirits — no, too foolish to even contemplate. Insidious, those foul things. To even think how one could be within me now, pulling my strings as my mind wanders, disgusting. To think of them gives them power.

Instead, I grab hold of the idea — My mind is my own! My memory so tenuous . . . why cling to it? Why try to make sense of it? Fortunes past and present are within my grasp. Like clay or mud, I can shape it.

Though . . .

I have this other feeling.

I wonder — have I done this before?



The altar was a simple thing, a hunk of crooked slate beneath the trellis of the train above their heads, resting awkwardly on beams of corroded metal. On the altar rested a stone slab with braided rope carved around its edges. Words carved in the rock, in old Latin: “Jupiter, best and greatest.” Next to the slab were various animal skeletons — a rat, a cat, a big bird that might’ve been a buzzard. The bones still offered strings of meat, fur, feather.

Renatus, arm around her, took a moment.

Then he stepped away from her and destroyed the altar.

His hands, mighty and strong, crashed down upon the stone, breaking it into thirds. Bits of sharp rock stuck out of his hand and forearms. He swept the bones away, and they clattered to the ground. In the distance, Nathalie saw a passel of shapes gathered around a ghostly barrel fire. Homeless, probably. They took off running. It was wise of them, she felt -- even far away they knew that they were witness to something potent and perfectly unnatural.

“Don’t you fear that you’ll anger the gods?” she asked.

“No,” Renatus said. “I am the only god. Come. I have more such temples across the city, and we must destroy them all by morning.”



Consider it.

Am I really Renatus? A moment’s worth of doubt when it comes to one’s identity and memory is as simple as a tiny fracture in an aqueduct — the crack spreads, the stone breaks, the whole thing shudders and crumbles.

Was I really a Roman soldier? Perhaps I was something lesser. A slave. Or something greater, like a Praefectus annonae, an equestrian taken from the field of battle and allowed to monitor the grain that comes into the city. (Bread is life, after all. Or it was, once.)

Maybe I am not this Renatus. I am not the stolen name, but possibly the Renatus from whom I think I pilfered the name. Perhaps I was always the Christian who played at being pagan instead of the pagan who later pretended to Christianity. After all, I was a good Bishop, was I not? Did my flock not take counsel in my sermons? Did my priests

not tremble before me, wisely recognizing the power of The One True God in the dark of my eye? Was I that all along, and this most recent spate of journal pages is just a way of salving the guilt over what I've done to the Lance and Sanctum?

Certainly, my collection is home to a number of history books. Perhaps this is all invented. One could suggest that what I remember of Rome is just taken from books — few of which are firsthand accounts, only secondary sources, these. Is this story spun from someone else's recollections? Patched together from a thousand stories? Was I just a humble peasant or a foolish miller from only a handful of centuries ago?

Did I ever belong to the Legio Mortuum?

Did I ever serve the Senex?

Am I truly me?



As it turned out, questioning Renatus was not a recommended course. Numia found that out the hard way. Nathalie knew Numia, didn't like her — she mostly play-acted at being a sister of the Circle, gave a lot of lip-service to Sumerian gods that she seemed to pull out of some bullshit New Age encyclopedia. Lip curled in a sneer, she asked Renatus a single question:

“Who are you, really?”

And he answered her. He cut the witch's head off with her own athame. The others, gathered around because he had summoned them, gaped at how fast Renatus moved. They'd witnessed such before, of course, but rarely so close, rarely so clearly. Nathalie could see it on their faces: they maybe didn't believe he was a god, not yet. But he was the closest they'd seen in a long time, if ever.

So, when Renatus gave them a list of demands, they hurried off to the four corners of the city to comply.

A canine placenta from a bitch whose haunches did not touch the earth when she dropped the litter?

Snake skin brined in raisin wine?

A jar of earthworms, a hare stuffed with saffron, root of vervain?

Was any of that for real? Did it even matter? Later, Renatus would explain that he had little interest in using those old folk remedies for anything — he was immortal, after all, and such mundane medicines meant nothing to him. He only wanted to test their loyalty. Most complied. The few who didn't? Their fates remain unknown to all but Nathalie — well, Lucretia, now -- and Renatus. They lurk, still clinging to this not-so-mortal coil, chained up in a distant room in Renatus's penthouse. Though now he called the place the *Fanum Renatus*. The place of rebirth.

When he was ready, he gathered his new congregation there.

And he told them how they were going to break the Lance, and bring down the Sanctum.



I no longer concern myself with the veracity of memory.

It became liberating to let go of this worry. In recognizing that my memory is untrustworthy, I became a being only in the present. This night, and only this night, is what matters. Did I once wear the silver ring of the Equestrian? Did I rout barbarians both mortal and immortal from Necropolis, our city a bundle of tunnels shaped like a ball of mating serpents? Did my lovely Augur, Lucretia, ever truly exist in the first place?

It's good to let that all go. I was shackled to it for so long, chained to my supposed memory and history like a pair of rocks at each ankle.

I've chosen to forget all of that. Whatever truth floats to me, I will look at it, laugh at it, and banish it again.

Tonight, we execute two more priests of the Sanctum. We're working our way up. But before I watch my adherents do these deeds for me, I will burn my papers once more, I shall smash my strongbox and I shall even destroy all of my old books. I don't want to remember, any more. It's too troubling.

I once may have been a humble soldier. A gutter-fed fiend. A hunter of barbarism and treachery. An outcast. A wanderer. A childe in fear of his sire, a sire in fear of his childer. A Bishop of liars and cripples. That was once. No longer.

For now I am truly a god among my own.



Four Years, Old John

By Greg Stolze

Part One: In 1955, Solomon Finds Faith

Jeans cuffs at the edge of his ankle-bones, a nylon seersucker shirt glued on his massive chest, Solomon Birch leans on the lamp post, one brown loafer propped against its base. His pants are snug enough that he doesn't need a belt, but he wears one. Anyone who lifted the striped waistband of Sol's letterman jacket would notice that his belt passes only through the first and last loops.

The greased-back black hair, scowl-pursed mouth, and insolent eyes complete the picture of a brooding thug looking for a bottle of beer to drink and then smash on someone's head. This is not entirely accurate. It's not beer Solly wants.

When he sees the bus from downtown coming, he sidles away from his street lamp and into an alley, miming urination in case anyone's watching. The chortling college kids disembark, joshing and nervous and shushing each other. Hearing them, he turns back, scanning the group with all the contempt he can muster. He lets them go to the unmarked entrance and knock twice, then pause, then once more, holding their breath before going in. He's about to follow when he sees another man sidle in behind them, a sweating man in hard-used wool, waving a fedora over his balding pate to evaporate the gleaming perspiration.

The man's a weakling; he has to be. It is unimaginable that this man ever fought in a war, or stood up to a woman, or took punishment without complaint. At least, it's unimaginable to Sol, who almost grabs the man right there. Holding back, he compliments himself on his restraint. The prey looks over and flinches at Sol's leer and wink, scuttling inside, his hopes rewarded when the door closes between him and this sullen, pale greaser. It's a bad part of Chicago's West Side, rich with the reek of slaughterhouses and coal smoke and trains.

Sol shakes the door with thunderous fists, and the man that opens it has a profile like a floor safe. Solly picks him for a Ukranian or Czech, based on eye color, the wave of his hair, the length of his face.

"Eyyy," Solly drawls, "I'm 'ere for the movies. Y'dig?"

Mutely, the brute holds out a hand and Solomon drops in a dollar. “Keep the change.”

Descending the steps, Sol wonders what this place used to be. A bar, probably. Chicago loves its tippie, though what could have driven it out of business, screwing it one turn deeper into total depravity? Perhaps the owner groped the wrong alderman’s wife or refused to pay an appropriate bribe.

Whatever it once was, it’s empty now, except for row upon row of folding chairs, sparsely populated except for the group from the bus. They’re clustered at the front to get the best look at the grainy black and white film pouring from the back, lighting the dusty air like milk, splashing on the screen in a tangle of bodies and hair.

“There isn’t even any sound,” one of the young front-row sitters complains.

“Hey, shut up or I’ll get sound outta **you**,” one of his buddies replies, giving him a shoulder punch. The older men, scattered singly in the seats behind, watch impassively. The first short film, a gaggle of pudgy coeds stripping down to foundation garments and tickling one another, wraps up while Sol sits, still, waiting. The second is harsher stuff, though in tighter focus. It changes angles instead of having everything happen in one long, static shot.

“Geez, what’s she doing to her?”

“Shut up, man.”

For all his bulk, Solly can move quick when he wants to. And, as he slips off his belt and sneaks up behind the sweaty man, he wants to. Not that the old bald fellow is paying attention—not to anything but the screen, wincing when the young guys comment.

“That’s not a real knife.”

“**Shut up.**”

“I’m just sayin’, if she got cut like that for **real**...”

“Hey,” says a gravelly voice from the back. The doorman. “Quiet. Or get out.”

“Are you insulting me?” The loudmouth stands, affronted. “Are you insulting **us**?”

But Solly and the bald man pay no attention to the building drama, as they’re developing one of their own, starting when Sol slips his belt around the fat man’s neck.

“It is fake,” Sol whispers, conversationally. “Sure does make your earthworm dig though, don’t it?”

“I... ib...” the man’s voice is comically high, squeaking out through his compressed trachea.

“Shh. Don’t try to talk. Save your breath.” He’s bright crimson, but his lips aren’t blue tinged yet, so Solomon figures he has time. “If I... killed you right now, you would die at your worst. You got a wedding ring, I see,” he adds. “I bet your wife doesn’t know you scuttle off to watch fake women do fake-brutal things, does she? You think back on these dirty movies when you stick it in her, hmm? Well I’m gonna give you something even dirtier,” he says, and sinks in his fangs. He gets a good seal, lips to throat, then lets loose the belt, sucking the renewed and desperate surge as the man passes out.

Solly feels pretty good as he leaves the back way, right up to the point that a short, thin man moving incredibly fast slams a stake through the letter “F” on his jacket. The attacker isn’t aiming for the F, of course. It just happens to be over Sol’s dead, still heart.



Cool cat Max Clarke in his beret and goatee is wearing a black turtleneck and blacker sunglasses indoors as he snaps his fingers politely at the poetess denouncing the tyranny of daffodils. She's got red hair. He wants to see it against his skin, wants to wrap his fingers in it and feel the coarseness of the curls, wants to inspect her freckles and taste, slowly, the rapid pulse feeding the flush behind her near-translucent skin. He's had one feed tonight, but it was a guy, in the Palmer House, with whom he had an understanding. No real connection. Not anyone as interesting as a red-headed poetess. But then a hand falls on his shoulder, cold and still as wax, and he knows no one with a heartbeat can walk up behind him that way.

"Old John is putting on a show," the man-shaped figure behind him whispers.

"Where?"

"At his bordello, of course."

"Who?"

"You know Sol Birch?"

Maxwell's teeth gleam white as he stubs out his hand-rolled. "Yeah, I know Birch."

It takes an hour for Maxwell to get from the Near North Side to Cicero, to the hulking house freshly painted every spring, the house with a second story full of love (or, at least, the closest money can buy) and a basement full of meat-grinding equipment. The onetime human driving is named Dennis.

"Old John has a blue movie theater, ropes in clients for his whorehouse there. Solomon, out of hubris or ignorant bad luck, made devotion to the Dark Centurion within."

"Meaning, he sucked a guy."

Dennis, a priest, grimaces. "Old John took it amiss."

"Oh, did he? Did the Daeva Primogen get an itch in his slappin' hand when a friendless ancilla of his own clan poached his turf? What a strange reaction."

"Maxwell, please... you and I have always been able to... trust each other."

Max turns and quirks an eyebrow.

"Solomon is lost and confused," the minister continues. "His loneliness is self-imposed, for the most part. But I cultivate him for the Bleak Savior and I don't... don't want Old John to..." He trails off.

"So why don't you go ask Old John to pretty please let him go?"

Dennis keeps his eyes on traffic and whispers, "I dare not look upon Old John again. You know we have a past."

"And why should I care about your little lost lamb? I'm not in your church."

"I should consider your debt to me paid," Dennis says.

Max, who does not ever have to blink, blinks.

"This sullen creep who makes hook hands means that much to you?"

"I have dreamed dreams," Dennis says. "I see seeds of greatness in him."

Max shrugs in reply, mentally weighing what he owes Dennis and the hold he has over Old John. He nods.



A half hour later, Max has Sol's arm over his shoulders as they stumble out the door of Old John's bordello. Birch was in the attic: Old John says that's where he gets 'closest to God.'

"Come back any time, Max! You know the girls love you!" Old John has on a smoking jacket and waves, meerschaum pipe in his off hand.

"Owls," Sol mutters, eyes wide. Max has round eyes too, sunglasses askew.

"Shh," Max says, guiding Birch into Dennis' car.

"What happened?" the priest demands.

"Drive! Just drive!"

Doors slam. Tires screech. Old John's affable chuckle follows on the wind behind them.

"All light and life forsake me," Birch says, staring vacantly out the windshield. "Does firm, good Earth still uphold us or has all dissolved like an inkspot in an ocean?"

"Easy, Sol, you're breaking character pretty hard," Max tells him.

"Character, aye, as a hollow man upon a stage, face painted and strutting and all we know of love is a sty of deception..."

"What happened to his head?" Dennis demands. Max sighs.

"Sol, look at me," he says, and when the other complies, Max says, "Sleep and forget what..."

"NOOOOOO!" Snarling, Birch grabs Max by the head, bites his black cheek, then lunges backwards to head-butt out the car door's safety glass.

"*Sacre merde!*" Max grabs for Sol's ankles, but only gets a kick to his wound before the fugitive grabs the edges of the window, pulling himself through and out and into the air as Dennis slams on the brakes. Max rocks forward and rebounds off the back of the front seat as Sol spins onto the pavement.

"Solomon!" Dennis calls, but the wild-eyed escapee is up and running with cat-like quickness. He's gone before Dennis even gets the car pulled over.

"Ugh..." Max sticks a handkerchief to his blood-sopping face. "I did not think that was going to happen."

"We must find him!"

"What d'you mean 'we,' white man? You and I are more than square."

Dennis closes his eyes, for all the world as if he's praying.

"What," he asks for the third time, "happened?"

Max sighs. "I've seen off-rail scenes," he admits, "But that one... jolly ol' John said he was settling a bet that the buttons he pushes can make someone just as crazy as a Nosferatu gutter-brother, just as fast, and make them love it." He winces. "He was... compelling Sol to set his own hair on fire, match by match."



Dennis the priest, black robe with white throat notch, unseen and unregarded with his deeper cloak of black shade covering his too-white face, finds what he's looking for easily.

Sol is in his basement workshop, blood on his face and hands, vigorously working a treadle lathe, sculpting a chair leg. Sawdust sticks to the gore on his fingers, the ends of his jacket collar, the tracks of blood tears coursing down his face.

“Solomon,” Dennis says.

Mutely, the other turns and embraces him, burying his face in Dennis’ cassock like a hurt child rushing to its mother’s arms.

“Yes,” Sol says. “I’ll do it. Whatever you want. Whatever it takes. Let the Dark Messiah wash away this... these feelings, these weaknesses!”

“Shh...”

“He showed me things,” Sol whimpers, his voice too young for his frame, his scars. “Shadows... not just on surfaces, not just cast by things, shades interpenetrating, shadows sinking through! They fall like webs upon us all, through us like the air we breathe!”

“You can... forget, it is...”

“No. No, I mustn’t. Never.” He looks up, eyes no longer wild but strange, indomitable. “I must never look away from that emptiness, that void. I will never be cut off again. I will never again suffer estrangement from God’s touch, even if that touch is a blow. Show me the reality of the holy spear. Let God be father, daughter, brother and spouse to me and let Him hate me... so long as He is real.”

Part Two: In 1969, Maxwell Loses Praxis

Perfectly afro-picked in a sharkskin suit, silk shirt, satin-lined leather loafers, Maxwell’s manicured fingers pick a pawn from before a bishop and push it, placing it in the protective shadows of its two companions.

“It ain’t shit,” he says, decisively.

Solomon, red robed and barefoot, flexes a scarred hand and moves the black Queen’s pawn. He has a gold ring where the married wear a wedding band, worked like a Claddagh, but instead of a heart, it’s a mask, and instead of human hands, it is held in heavy paws like a bear.

“It still, my Prince, behooves you to tread with care.”

“Behooves, shit,” Max moves another pawn. He’s not good at chess. Neither one is, really. “This old testament Bible babble you got sounds more solid than your old half-baked greaser gab, Birch, but you ain’t got it pat.”

Solomon considers remarking on Maxwell’s ten-year transition from effete beat to blustering black radical, but he holds back. Running a church, even a small one on the South Side, has taught him a thing or two about discretion. And about playing the long game.

“You can call me ‘Prince’ again though. That ain’t nowhere near old yet. I might never get tired’a dat.”

“I would that my lord is mistaken. Were it in my meager power, I should have you reign long enough to find it tedious.”

Maxwell laughs out loud, a peal of delight. “Damned if you ain’t turned into a regular ol’ honeydripper. Does your congregation agree about me?”

“They are of... many opinions.”

The mask of jollity drops. “Now we in it. They bucking my saddle awready? I aint’ even ridden this town around the block yet.”

“Many would say that the time to break your grasp is before it’s firmly seated.” Solomon has his bishops out in the mid-board, playing aggressively. “Though I caution them against such ambitions, of course.”

“In your role as priest, or just as a catnip mouse who got pulled outta Old John’s pussy pile?”

Solomon’s cheek twitches as Maxwell trades a knight for a bishop.

“There’s no division,” he replies, voice smooth and deep. “To return the city to the Circle would be unmitigated disaster for any on the true path. Plus you.”

“Thanks for that.”

“Now, were you to convert...”

“Mm hmm, no, pass.” Maxwell gives Solomon a hard smirk and shifts the rightmost rook’s pawn. He can’t think of a better move.

“I’m morally obligated to try to convert you, of course.” For just a moment, he matches him smirk for smirk, like Solly the street smartass, before remembering he’s playing with the Prince this time.

“Let’s take it as read and move on. Tell me more about how much y’all hate the Cronies.”

“The rivalry is as bitter as ever. That said, the younger of my congregants... those without long memories of pagan persecution... find some sympathy with the blather of the Carthians. They insist that ‘religious freedom’ and ‘tolerance’ are of the essence, unwilling to see the inherent paradoxes of such a milk-livered course.”

“For real, ‘milk-livered’?” Another piece shifts, both sides massing around the center, waiting for an opportunity, but neither willing to trigger a heavy exchange of losses. Not yet. “You tell ‘em I’m as tolerant as any Carthian they wanna find. ‘Sides, the Carthians ain’t gonna rock my boat.”

“An Invictus leader with Carthian support? You must pardon my skepticism, oh Prince, but such a thing beggars credulity.”

“You’re looking at the labels, not the narrative,” Maxwell says, plucking a black pawn and setting it aside, continuing as Solomon responds in kind, black knight seizing red bishop and falling to black Queen. “The Carthians are a mob, and mobs are run by the loudest, and most numerous make big noise. Sure, the grudge-holding elders would love to put my ass on a stake until it went through my heart, but ‘Carthian elder’ is practically a contradiction in terms. Being a Carthian elder means you either really believe in their truth justice and equality horseshit—meaning, you’re a fool, and too damaged to manage power—or it means you can’t hack it as an elder in the Invictus or any other serious Covenant. So... also a fool too damaged to manage power.”

“Incisively stated, my liege. Also, checkmate.”

“What? Motherfucker, I don’t think so.”

“Ah, you’re right, you’re right. I was remiss. Check only.”

“Honky motherfucker,” Maxwell says with relish.

For the next several moves, they stare in silence, Maxwell statue-still on Solomon’s turns, Solomon gently caressing the pieces he captured. He lovingly hand turned each on

his trusty treadle lathe, before staining and wrapping and presenting the chess set to the lord and master he hopes to make an ally.

"The narrative for the young Carthians," Maxwell says, "is 'dirty nigger overthrows the corrupt old regime.' The rebel wing of the party, which is so big there's nothing internal to rebel against, loves that story. Loves it like fuckin' candy. So they're gonna put up with me as long as I strut and swear and throw the occasional Black Power fist. A few populist gestures, all the 'Open Court' rhetoric... that's the opiate for those masses. The Circle's had their whuppin'; they ain't gonna say boo. The Invictus wishes I was older, whiter, and the right kind of arrogant, but as long as they can chalk this up as a win, they got no cause to bitch. That leaves the Order, and y'all, and as for the Draculas, who cares about their politics? They don't even care about they politics. Check."

Solomon makes another move.

"Check," Maxwell repeats. With a frown, Solomon responds.

"Oh, you squirmed outta dat one," Maxwell says, satisfied and mild approval. "The Spear is pretty short an' flaccid these days, if you don't mind me sayin'..."

"I do, actually."

Maxwell looks up. Solomon is stone faced. Their eyes are locked. Both of them could, with a word, start the kind of conflict that can only be taken personally, because each can ooze in, eye to eye, soul to soul, and press for supremacy. Only a fool would meet the gaze of either.

"Right, I was outta line," Maxwell says, quiet, and more true than if he'd roared. "I don't got to make your faith, but I don't get to mock your faith."

"Thank you."

A shrug, and they both look to the board again.

"Why would the Lancea buck me anyhow? I'm open to everyone." Maxwell speaks as if he's alone.

"Your generosity with your time and presence is, indeed, remarkable," Solomon says carefully. The board is now almost bare. Both sides are weaker, Kings cringing in corners while the lone, strong Queens pick off pawns before they can complete their journeys, before they can transform into something far more free and dangerous. "How committed are you to this, as you call it, 'open' court?"

"Very," Maxwell replies. "I could lock myself up on some mansion on a hill and rule through ministers, but..." He shakes his head. "You lose touch like that. Living in a bubble, hearing only yes-men; it's dangerous. I'd rather be safe than feel safe, y'know?" He looks at the board. "Like I should get my King off the edge before your rooks pin his ass."

"Accessibility is, I grant, a potent sop to the Carthians. Holding out the hope of relevance to the defeated Circle may blunt their will to attack, but... your exposure is a risk. Were Rowen to decide that the course of nature is for the weak to ruin the strong..."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't want Rowen gunning for my ass under any circumstances. I got Garrett on my side. I'm thinking of getting a puma."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Bigass black cat, apex predator? You'd be surprised how easy it is to get an exotic pet license in this town, you know the right guy."

“I imagine it would be an admirable symbol of your authority and something to give pause to the riff-raff.”

“You crack me up, white boy. ‘Give pause to the riff-raff.’ Damn.”

The silence in which they play the last few moves is companionable, and after final, fateful ‘Checkmate,’ they shake hands.

“Thanks again for the board,” Maxwell says.

“‘Tis a mere bagatelle,” Solomon replies. “It is my will and pleasure to serve.”

“Even though I ain’t in your church?”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways, and His patience is as boundless as our ages and our depravity.”

Maxwell laughs again. “If you’re interested, I’m thinking I need a chair. Not quite a throne, but... not entirely not a throne either, y’know?”

“I’ll make some sketches.”



Four nights later, during a public Elysium meeting in a jazz club, Max adjudicates a he-said/she-said dispute between two unaligned neonate lovers who hate each other. The jazz is low-key, smooth, tepid, and heartless.

“Ugh, enough,” he says at last. “What’s wrong with you two is you ain’t never doin’ nothin’ without each other, got no idea how to behave, nothin’ to keep your minds right. So, you,” he says, pointing at the male, “You’re going to spend a month rustling up food for Pdraig on the East Side, and you,” the female, “You’re doin’ the same for Donna Brawn in Stickney.”

“Stickney?” she whines.

“Don’t make me come down there and slap yo’ ass!” he shouts. “Don’t you talk back at the Prince! Garrett, move ‘em out of here.”

The male grumbles something as Garrett takes his sleeve, yanks his arm free.

“What?” the Prince demands. “Look, you don’t like it, that’s fine too, you can just hit the motherfuckin’ road! If, however, you’d like to stay here where all the warm people is, you play by my rules. Otherwise, bitch, don’t let the sun come up on you here, am I clear?”

“Yessir...”

“Yes what?”

“Yes. my Prince!”

“‘S what I thought. Who’s next?”

Garrett brings forth a tall glum man in a suit, three-piece, three-button, three fingers missing from his left hand. The wound is visible as he doffs his fedora, holding it humbly to his halted heart.

“Howard,” the Prince says, genial and compassionate. “What brings you here from Cicero?”

“He has my daughter, sir. I’m sorry.”

“What?” Maxwell leans forward, and frowns. Howard hasn’t been with them long, though his arrival was celebrated. He was a bank vice president and heavily insured, and

now both his insurance money and his financial knowledge are heavily abused by Maxwell and his supporters. In other words, there's a strong incentive to keep him content.

"It's a deal. I'm sorry. I've never been good at being this anyhow," Howard says. He sounds lost, alone, and the murder-beasts around the club's edges shift away.

"Howard," Maxwell replies, voice gentle. "We can work this out, whatever it is. Just tell me."

"My daughter's alive, sir. Alive in Cicero. He has her. He has her in his house. Old John. He has her with the ravens."

"With the...?"

"He has to let her go, leave her alone. Has to. If I hold it. If I do it. I'm sorry."

He withdraws a gun from his coat, and several of the witnesses visibly relax.

"You're doing the right thing Howard," Maxwell says. "You have to make the try. I understand." He knows a bullet won't kill him, not even the six in Howard's revolver.

"Let's get this over with, and then talk to Old John."

"You don't understand. I have to hold it. It likes it when you ask it in. It won't use me long."

"Go on ahead." Max smiles, and can't resist a gesture, a Princely one. "Let me take off my coat and tie. They're from France."

Howard doesn't wait. Howard pulls the trigger. But instead of a bright light and loud noise, the gun explodes into dim silence, shadows flitting like crows, growing, swelling, radiating snowy chill. A musician's mouth stretches as his scream pulls it from his trombone, the suddenly-icy metal clinging, sticking, tearing flesh. But the sounds of oaths and howls is all distant, and in every present ear is a smothering quiet, grave-cold.

"I'm sorry..." Howard's words fade, sink, as his eyes flicker. "It's already in me."

"Stop!" Maxwell's voice is a hammer of command, his brown eyes locked on Howard's blue gaze, and it should smash through like a brick hitting stained glass, he should be within Howard's will consuming it, but it's not Howard, it's something golden yellow, something older, something essential and empty.

It rebuffs his will and answers back, a single word, irresistible.

"Die."

Taken by a nightfall of the soul, Maxwell can do nothing but obey.

Part Three: In 1974, Maxwell Recovers.

Solomon awakens in a vault, lying on his back, hands crossed over his chest, eyes open, the serpent cross medallion cold between fingers and shirt, but no colder than his body. He puts the pendant in a cavity in the metal above him, a slot precisely machined, the barbs of the symbol are the teeth of a key and he turns it, unlocking himself from the fireproof prison in which he sleeps. Every sunup he wonders if the next dusk is the one where the door opens to the crush of Lake Michigan's tonnage, or to flames, the sun, the scowls of enemies mortal and otherwise. A small, weak part of him longs for it, but that part is well-whipped, constrained, brought forth only when no one is present, in those rare instances where a well-honed, hungry cowardice is the right tool for the job.

Worse, he thinks, would be to press and feel only resistance. To push the lid with all his might and not shift it on its well-oiled, carefully designed hinges. To not move a lid

heavier than himself but so cunningly sprung and counter-weighted that, once unlocked, finger strength is sufficient to open it. That he dreads greatly, to be buried forever, encased in chains or concrete or just many tons of stone. Enemies of his have known that treatment, when he was too afraid (or, perhaps, too wise) to face them head-on. Interred with only hunger and the blind silence, the madness would surely come quick—but how would you know? How could you tell awake from asleep from dead from damned, in that dark?

Tonight, again, the lid hisses open and a servant attends. Hortense Brigman, beautiful and sophisticated, her distant loveliness only marred—or is it perfected?—by an anxious servility.

She bathes and feeds him and tells him of the latest Nixon impeachment developments, shows him his schedule and presents three sets of clothes. He frowns and puts on a suit with wide lapels, a wide bright tie, a wide white collar. No rings today, the necklace tucked in his shirt where its barbs can scratch and prick with the comforting sting of his Messiah's attention. He puts on a gold watch with an alligator band and goes to wind it, then frowns.

"It winds itself!" Hortense says, too bright, too eager. "You just, just shake your wrist."

She demonstrates, her own tapered forearm elegantly slim.

"I know," Solomon says, "what a self-winding wristwatch is."

She blinks, and for half a second he smells her tears, but she recovers fast, very fast. "Of course, of course." She laughs, a girlish melody, at her own silliness.

Then he looks at the door a half-beat before the knock, sharp and commanding.

"Enter."

Hortense's father, David, steps inside, and usually he nods and smiles at Hortense any time he enters a room with her. Not tonight, and that's how she knows it's something serious even before Solomon does.

"Your guest, sir..."

"Guest?"

David's cough is an expression of politeness. "In the disused wine cellar, sir?"

Both of them are watching Solomon, so both see his look of surprise, of hope and yearning. David doesn't see the brief, ugly snap of envy across his daughter's classic features. How she wishes she had brought the good news!



"Owls," Maxwell whispers. His lips are cracked, eyes sunken and the sclera's capillaries broken. His skin is gray as hippopotamus hide, wild hair and matted beard ashen-black, pale gums withdrawn, making his fangs even more prominent.

His nose flares as he sits up. "Owls!"

With the smooth motion of total certainty, Solomon yanks David to Maxwell, a small blade moving from pocket to hand, from closed to open, without even the appearance of thought. He cuts the man's wrist instead of letting Maxwell tear it with blunted teeth.

“Hortense!” he calls, voice sharp. “Tacitus’ Germania from the first floor foyer! Quickly, girl!”

He can feel David sag and wrests the wrist from Max’s mouth, regretfully knocking back his guest with a palm to the forehead, then a stronger shove off the sturdy oak table where he has lain, immobile, for most of the decade previous.

“Blood?” Maxwell mewls from the floor, stumbling to stand, and fleet as a doe Hortense appears in the doorway, leather volume in hand.

“Girl!” Maxwell shouts, making a clumsy lunge, but she kicked off her heels to run, to more quickly obey, and she ducks behind Solomon with the conviction of someone who has seen this hunger before and managed to survive. He takes the book and shoves it into Maxwell’s gaping maw.

“Release!” Solomon intones, and the book... dissolves. A trick, it was never a book, or stopped being one when he polluted it years back, staining it with some small part of his essence and lore, containing the miracle of his cruel savior within it. Anointed by blood, it becomes blood and Maxwell is astonished, but not too surprised to suck at it, to cram the dissolving pieces of leather and paper into his mouth, to slurp at crimson fingers.

“More!”

Solomon yanks off his medallion, presents the chain and repeats, “Release!” as he presses it between Maxwell’s snapping fangs. The metal dissolves, leaving the jewelry behind, and the deposed Prince’s wild gnawing opens Solomon’s thumb before he can pull it back. With the blood-chain slurped in, Maxwell grabs for Solomon’s bleeding hand.

“No!” Solomon roars, a backhand driving Maxwell into the table. “Not for you! Never!”

Hortense is pulling her slumped father away, his arm over her shoulder, and she flushes with pride through her terror. She has tasted Solomon’s blood, she longs for it, she lies awake at night fixated on the taste, and it is all her heart desires to hear him say, “The vinculum is only for mortals!”

Maxwell snarls like an animal and glares, and Solomon stares back.

“Control yourself,” the priest demands, in tones of cold command.

The madness recedes. Maxwell takes a deep breath he doesn’t need, and straightens up. His posture shifts from that of an ape or a bear, takes on the upright carriage of a man.

“Thanks, Birch. I needed that.”

“It was my duty,” Solomon says. “You know I would never command you, save to give you back yourself.”

“...yeah,” Maxwell says. “Do you have somewhere I can clean up and shave?” For the first time, he takes stock of himself. “Shit, how long was I out? Are these cobwebs?”

“There’s a bathroom. Hortense will... no, I will show you,” Solomon says. “Hortense will find you some clothes.” He looks and sees her father’s state. “After putting David to bed, of course.”

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that.”

“S all right,” David mumbles.



“Five years?” Maxwell’s eyes stare into the surface of the Brigman kitchen table. “I was in... that... for five years?”

“I fear so,” Solomon says.

“So I guess I can’t just go back and say, ‘Hey, I’d like my praxis back.’”

“It is well that you retain a sense of humor.”

“Who’s in charge then?”

“Jacqueline Edens.”

“*Oh, Sacre Jesu.*”

“Please do not blaspheme in my home.”

Maxwell shakes his head. “I’m sorry it’s just... it’s been so long. In there.”

They’re both quiet.

“Did you...” Solomon frowns. “Did you say ‘owls’?”

“Yeah.”

“You saw them.” It’s not a question.

“Yeah.” Maxwell’s gaze gets even more distant, as if he’s looking through the surface of the table into the heart of the earth, and that core is not molten, it’s dead lead and shadow cold.

“I saw them flying through... us. Through everything.”

Solomon nods. “I too.”

“Old John.”

“Yes.”

“He has to go.”

Solomon squeezes his eyes shut.

“It is forbidden,” Solomon says, “To shed Kindred blood, by the will of Longinus. We have had a great blossoming of theological thought here. When God Himself has condemned a man to haunt the earth eternally, who are we to declare that curse is finished?”

“Really? That’s orthodoxy now?”

“There’s considerable debate, but the excesses of previous regimes have not been forgotten. The disarray that attended your... disappearance... left many eager to impose social constraints on such encounters.”

“You’ve grown into that preacher voice,” Maxwell comments.

“Thank you.”

“I really owe you one, don’t I?”

“You do.”

Maxwell rubs his cold, dead, fresh-shaven chin. “And yet instead, I’m asking you to break your own rules and help me kill Old John.”

“I will not raise hand against my fellow Kindred.”

“Are you sure he even is that anymore?”

Solomon is quiet.

"I saw ravens, too," the priest murmurs. Then, his eyes become bright and immediate. "It won't be easy. Or wouldn't be, were someone discussing such a 'sin' hypothetically. He is popular and he is feared, and he has made show of powers that give even the Order's weirdling scholars pause."

"His popularity won't last," Maxwell says. "It may not fall apart soon for him, but he'll be weak one night. It clearly has to be done. And we have nothing but time."

Part Four: In 1984, Old John is Defeated.

"She's quite a find," Solomon says. He and Maxwell have just killed a beautiful thirty-three-year-old socialite together, Maxwell in front on the right common carotid artery, Solomon behind her on the left external.

Maxwell smiles, sings a bit of a commercial jingle. "'Here's to good friends/Tonight is kinda special...'"

"Please, don't coarsen this. Taken the very day she aborted her lover's babe to keep her husband ignorant..."

"Only a few days from her gallery opening," Maxwell sighs. "One almost wishes we could have brought her over."

"The Embrace?" Solomon looks even more offended than he was by the ad song. "After all we've discussed? I thought..."

"No, no, just a ghoul!" Maxwell says, as if Solomon misunderstood instead of grasping his meaning all too well. "You can't deny she'd have her uses."

"Better to consign her to her pit before an opportunity to repent presented itself."

"She never would have."

"No," Solomon says, with a sigh. "She was too strong. Strong like the weakness of God."

Maxwell steps away, privately wondering when Solomon became so tiresome.

"A decade ago, I awakened to find my throne stolen, along with five years I might otherwise have... well, probably not enjoyed, but at least experienced. Ten years to the night. And over fifteen since Howard... did whatever that was."

"And we're still no closer to understanding that night."

"Most of those who witnessed it remember nothing," Maxwell's repeating himself. They've gone over this, again and again.

"Not even Garrett." When Solomon says this, Maxwell looks away.

At that moment, the phone rings. They're in a room in the Palmer House, and Maxwell answers it. "Hello? Speaking. Yes?"

His eyes widen. Solomon silently mimes the word 'What?' while busily wrapping the dead woman in plastic. Maxwell makes a pushing gesture and turns away.

"You're sure?" the former Prince says. "Who?" He listens for a while. "Then how are you sure?" More silence, insect-like sounds from the back of the phone receiver. "Oh, well, if the spooky Crone hoodoo witch says..." He frowns, interrupted. "Are you in, then?"

Another pause.

“In or out.” He’s icy, impatient, magnificent.

“Awright then. Bring the car around.”

He hangs up, smiling. “Old John is weak. He made a childe, Solomon. He’s going to be...” He runs his tongue over sharpening teeth, sucking back the stolen blood that leaks from the gash. “Tonight is kinda special.”



An hour later, Maxwell’s in the basement of the Cicero bordello. The crashes and screams from upstairs are muted, then drowned out entirely when Old John’s industrial sausage machine turns on.

Maxwell’s irritated—almost insulted—when the small and light-footed pimp darts out of the shadows and seizes him. Blood floods Maxwell’s muscles; he feels as if the resolute selfishness of that artist debutante still lingers in it. He turns Old John’s body, light despite its age and rage, he rotates him into a wall, pulls back a piston fist and launches it. Old John seizes Maxwell’s head, bracketing it with his palms, but Maxwell won’t meet that slaving gaze. He’s wise to that trick and has his own view unfocussed, the man before him just a blob in a blue suit as he burns blood for fury, spends it to heal bruises before they even sting, and his undershirt vanishes, drawn into his skin.

(Weeks earlier, Solomon killed a drifter and stored the blood in the t-shirt.)

“Is that the best you can do?” Maxwell sneers, and hoists the limp form to the mouth of the grinder. The reek of diesel exhaust is thick, if he had to breathe for life he’d be passing out, but it’s only a distraction, and barely that. The roar in his ears, the stink in his nose, they’re nothing compared to the bloodlust in his heart.

(His watch disappears. It was from 1980, Solomon had one of his Brigmans bleed into a chalice for it. Maxwell has no fewer than eight vitae reliquaries remaining on his person, letting him be profligate in his use and consumption of stolen life, unnaturally stored.)

“Kill me and I will only get stronger!” Old John shrieks.

“Fool, I seen Star Wars!”

“I will fly through time on shadowed wings! Four years, four days, four decades are as nothing; I move through ages as a bird through the air!”

Maxwell truly wishes he had some pithy, action-hero comeback to that, but instead he just crams the body into the opening, watching as the gears grind and pull it in, crushing and smearing pale skin and grayer bone, very little blood left. (He’s pleased to see that, to see that he pushed Old John to his limits.)

Then the machine seizes, a grinding shriek like a bad transmission getting louder and louder...

...before Old John bursts into shadows. A cascade of black ravens, transparent like a dimness on the sun, glints of orange in their eyes so brief, like campfire sparks, and they wheel around and dart at him. Maxwell remembers, remembers them from the dark, from torpor, from being helpless and mad and only as real as a whisper...

They circle him as he uses the blood, as he leaps away, as the machine bursts. Its metal case cracks and shudders open, diesel tank sputtering and spraying just as Maxwell surmounts it.

It's on him, in the air, on the walls and floor, and it ignites. He does not know how. A spark from the device's death-throes? A figure in the corners, watching with a lighter at the ready? The ineffable will of an angry God? Something does it. Something sets fire to him, and the machine, and the shelves in the basement full of pickled organ meat, and mason jar of mineral spirits on a shelf by the machine, kept there to clean off its blades. The diesel fuel burns smoky dim red. The mineral spirits burst in bright angry blue. His coat and his hair are a merrier orange, reddening as his flesh sings, cracks, leaches out old fat to burn like wax. He screams of course, how he howls and those ravens, those owls, fly towards his mouth... and turn aside.

They flit back towards the machine and circle, angry, impatient, but there's no flesh for them to return to, they pelt through the basement and don't burn but neither do they cross the flames. Maxwell, he is quite mad at this point, desperate, bestial, but he can still tell that some of them flit off into the corners of time itself. Do they flee to future, or past? (He never speaks of that part.)

He just shrieks and scrambles up the stairs and on the third step remembers his wealth of blood, that his blazing suitcoat can vanish into sweet solace, his only joy, the singed shirt below too and it's not enough for the burns, not nearly enough, but it does let him stumble out of the house.

It keeps him sane enough for that minute, which turns into hours and accolades, which turn into years of pledges and praxis once again.

Prince Maxwell, they call him, 'Giver of Tranquility,' but behind his back he is more revered for slaying Old John.

Part Five: In 1995, Rafael Ladue Finds a Curious Relic

"Betamax? No kidding?"

"Yes, Filthfoot, you've got me. I'm kidding you. I asked you to track down a Beta-max player because I actually have a VHS tape and I thought it would be so, so funny." Raphael Ladue used to be a bitter, cynical college student, before Old John killed him and resurrected him into a ghastly burlesque of humanity. He remains bitter and cynical, and indeed, has become more so since developing a need for the blood of the living.

"Where'd you get the tape?"

"This old vampire," Raphael says, casually, as if that tired old word could hide what Old John did to him, and was to him. "He had a safety deposit box we'd all forgotten about. I was running his financials, before he got turned into a s'more." Raphael cannot speak respectfully of his maker, refuses to, the way an alcoholic knows better than to take that first sip of whiskey.

"Yeah?" Filthfoot, a resourceful vagrant, plugs the old video box into an equally old CRT television as he listens. "This Old John you're talkin' about?"

"Who else?"

"Well, gee, I know you're so respected, I figured all kinds of old licks would be eager for your advice and assistance."

"Don't be a jerk. Is it ready?"

"Not quite."

Raphael rolls his eyes, sighs, as if this is a favor he's doing and not one done for him.

“Anyhow. The bank it was in closed and they finally got the letter forwarded to me from one of his old P.O. Boxes. Picked the stuff up today.”

“Anything in it except the tape?”

“Eh, some locks of hair, a crappy bone sculpture, some kind of old green metal whistle. Just junk. You know what old ones are like.”

“I know what Old John was like.” Filthfoot rises and switches it on. “Turn it to channel three.”

They plug in the tape and watch. Then they rewind and watch again.

“Is that...?”

“Can’t be,” Raphael says decisively. “Not by daylight.”

“Sure looks like him,” Filthfoot says, tilting his head.

“Use your brain! If it was Old John, would the picture be clear? Huh? You ever see one of us leave a strong impression like that on video?”

“We can firm up our images...”

“Not like that, not even if it is in daylight and not just, just some trick, special effects, a sound stage.”

In silent accord, they rewind it and watch again.

“Could it be transferred from something older? No, that’s 333 Wacker in the background, see that construction stuff? It didn’t get finished until 1983.”

On the small screen, a man in the sunlight holds out his arms, like he’s performed a wonderful magic trick. He stands in the sun and turns in place, visibly pleased with himself.

“Old John could have had a twin brother and he ghouled him and kept him secret and used him as a body double and this was to convince people he could... do this...” Raphael says, and even though his dead mouth is always dry, this is one of the rare times it feels dry. “It has to be a trick,” Filthfoot says, eyes afraid, voice low.

On the screen, Old John waves his arms like a pair of wings.

Lullay, Lullay

By Joshua Alan Doetsch

My windshield is a moth-gore massacre. The wipers make it worse. The road is all cricket croons, whispering leaves, and groans-by-night corn—all things that make monsters nervous. We crossed roads even fiends fear to tread. Four domains. Four temperamental dead guys. Not a hitch. But there's one last stop.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep. That whole bit.

I kill the engine under blinking neon. It's a strip club off of I-39, surrounded by farmland, the smell of diesel, and nothing and nothing, just north of Normal.

The animated lights do lewd things through the blur of glowing guts. She looks up at me from the passenger seat, from under her red hood—escaping strands of dark hair, a nine-year old grin, and those big, big eyes.

“You better wait out here,” I say.

“OK, Daddy.” She kisses my cheek. A goofy grin breaks my goonish face. Suddenly it's all worth it.

Out of the car, into the halogen-bright lot, and then into the music-throb dark.

“Here to see Rycroft,” I say.

The bouncer's eyes narrow. I sigh and whisper a secret word. He turns and leads me further in, past the tables, the stage, and the weekday dancers who don't look anything like the billboards that haunt the lonesome freeway. Can't say I don't scarf a few eyefuls though.

Back in the VIP rooms with the little shower stalls that offer certain slippery fantasies, the bouncer turns.

“Hey-hey-hey,” he says. “Aren't you...that guy?”

I nod.

“Yeah-yeah. You were in that movie. What's it called? The one with the sledgehammer fight.”

I nod. Once upon a time, I was a stuntman. I've got King Kong proportions and a craggy, Karloffian demeanor, scored a lot of bit roles, always a bad-guy heavy, always

dying in some horrible way. You won't remember my name, but might recognize my face. The title of the flick will wriggle on the tip of your tongue.

He laughs. He claps me on the shoulder, shakes my hand. "Fan-fucking-tastic! An honor, man. Truly. Best death scene ever. Must be a blast doing that work."

"Just something I used to do."

"Whatcha got going these days?"

"This and that. Got a little girl to feed now."

"Ah, right. Changes your world, don't it?"

"That it does."

He points to a door at the end of a hall. I take a breath and open it.

Back room office. I can count three of them. Two are dead. All look up.

"Here to talk to Rycroft," I say. I use my most gravelly voice, like my character from that movie, the one where I'm torn apart by alligators. I've died so many times.

The guy sitting behind the desk motions me in. "That would be me. Please, come in." He's wearing a blue suit coat. He's trying to stand out as regal, which can't be that hard in Central Illinois, but he's just so much gaudy, greasy trash held up by a bullet-proof smile. He's dead. He's a Lord.

In a corner of the room, a woman plays with a jukebox. Black jeans. Black T-shirt that says, "I sold my soul, and all I got was this lousy shirt." Her boots are untied. She's dead. That'd make her Knox. She's a Shadow.

Lurking next to the desk, like a sweating gargoyle, is a squat lump of muscles and jailhouse tattoos with no neck. Perspiring, living, probably a ghoul. He doesn't have a named role in this picture.

I linger in the doorway. Always let them see you framed. Makes an impression. I count two dead folk. One...two... I try to count to three, but it doesn't work.

I have to duck a little, going in, and walk to the center of the room. I make myself take up more space. I take up a lot anyway, but I make myself take more. It's a trick you learn on the set.

Two pairs of dead eyes. One...two... Damn.

"I'm looking for your friend, Booth," I say.

"And you are?" asks Rycroft.

"On official business from Peoria."

"Oh? Did Leer send you?"

I nod. The baron himself. I don't think Leer ever read any Shakespeare, but before he died, his right cheek got split all the way up, and his mouth is always a toothy half-grin.

"You're a little outside of Peoria." Rycroft says, standing up and coming around the front of his desk.

"You're a little outside of Normal."

"Touché. Well, I don't know where Booth is. Knox, darling, have you seen Booth?"

Pause. No answer. She just smiles, head bobbing mechanically to the music. She's humming, or attempting to, but it's broken.

Rycroft looks from her to me and back to her. His mouth opens and closes. Feels like some patter just fell apart, like someone's about to call, "Line?"

I stomp my foot. Rycroft flinches ever so slightly. Good. I crack stalactite knuckles and point a big finger. "Listen, lordling, I didn't come all this way to get jerked around. You--"

"Hey!" No-neck says. "This guy is a breather." Well damn. Those beady little eyes are perceptive. Very suddenly, he and Rycroft are very close.

I back up into someone nearly as big as me. He's dark, not just dark, but jet; eyes and teeth startling white, floating in the pitch. Those eyes have floated way too far apart and those grasping fingers are way too long. One. Two. Three dead folk. He's a Haunt. He's Booth.

I kidney-punch my memory, and it squeals, saying he's been there the whole time. Yeah, I got him right where I want him.

"Peoria licks sent us a lickstick?" says Booth. "Remind me to send them a fruit basket."

The room becomes crowded with fangs.

Oh shit—oh shit!

"Little Red!" I yell. "Help!"

A wind invades the room, kisses a few papers off the desk, bringing a rural scent of harvest and wide open spaces—all things that make monsters nervous.

We all look up to see my little girl perched at the open window, barefoot in her oversized red hoodie. It's her joke. The punch line is brutal.

"He's mine," she says, pointing at me. "You can't have any."

They back off a little. I find a spot in the room that isn't center. I take up less space.

"Little Red," says Booth. "Heard of you. You're old Leer's sheriff." I can see the dilemma playing in those far out eyes—he wants to vanish again, but not with all those witnesses, not to a little girl.

She drops from the window and walks to the Haunt, looking way, way up at him. "You've set up a haven awfully far out from the Four Fiefs," she says sweetly. "How stupid are you people?"

"What do you mean 'you people?'" Booth snarls.

"You've taken offense to the wrong half of that sentence. You were in Peoria last night."

"Maybe."

"You fed in another's hunting grounds. Slim Jim took offense."

"Slim Jim is shit-can punk. Let him take it up with me."

"You killed Slim Jim."

"You're out of your jurisdiction, little girl!" Booth bends his rubbery bulk down, face inches from Little Red's delicate nose. "Did you really think you'd come all the way out here and the three of us would just roll to one of you?"

No-neck and I lock sympathetic eyes. They never count us ghouls.

Rycroft clears his throat. "Little Red, I suggest you and your thrall—"

“Some breathers saw you do it, Booth,” Little Red interrupts. The Lord shuts up. “They saw you juicing his soul.”

Silence now, except for the jukebox. Finally, Rycroft laughs. “Bullshit. Tell her, Booth. Tell her it’s bullshit. Booth?”

Silence and music.

“Booth?”

The Haunt shivers—the dead don’t usually remember that trick. Silence. Music. The pitter-patter of red tears on the floor.

“It wasn’t...” Booth whispers. “Wasn’t me. I didn’t...I didn’t mean to... It got in. Something got in.”

“Booth? No...” Rycroft inches away from his friend. “Jesus. Booth, you—” Music blares. “Knox! What the fuck?”

Knox smiles back with a shrug. She’s still fiddling with the jukebox, cycling from song to song. She keeps trying to hum along. Always failing enthusiastically.

“Booth Lowry of Clan Nosferatu,” says the little girl to the big, bad monster, “you are found guilty of breaking the Masquerade and of Diablerie.”

“No-no-no-no,” says Booth, shiny black fingers writhing on his head like a lamprey nest. “Wasn’t me. It... by the river. An owl... owl in the smoke. It knew my name. It... it got in. Everything was yellow. Asked me to sing. Don’t know what happened... didn’t come to till he was crumbling in my hands.”

Little Red continues in a voice that may as well be telling a Teddy bear he can’t have any more imaginary tea, “By the will of the barons of the Four Fiefs, you are sentenced to Final Death.”

That’s my cue. I unfold a document. Heavy paper with four large globs of wax: red and blue and green and black. It’s not as though paperwork means anything to them. It is the belief that we indeed traveled to all four domains, and all four elder vampires of vicious ego, who never agree on anything, all concur that Booth Lowry must die.

The Haunt looks to his fellows. They all look away.

“All of you get fucked!” Booth bellows. A black hand envelopes Little Red’s throat and lifts her high off the ground. The other hand unsheathes a ridiculous dagger, some mail-order-stainless-steel piece of shit. “Girlie, you are lost in the Woods!”

Her smile is almost a thank you.

“Little pig, little pig, let me in!” she says.

Her tiny right hand vanishes into Booth’s gaping maw. He gags, tries to say something—can’t. His hand on her throat—her hand down his.

Her eyes make a wild dare.

Booth’s knife thinks about moving, and then it happens. Little Red’s mouth opens in crocodile ecstasy. She doesn’t change so much as relax a muscle, let something out, and I can see the tips of her toes and left-hand fingers gape open with Caesarean tears, birthing black claws.

A muffled rip squelches from inside Booth’s head. For a moment he just stands there, holding the girl, her right hand still in his mouth. Then the black blood oozes from his nose, from his ears and eyes.

"She's a Savage!" Rycroft shrieks, a pistol materializing in his hand. I hurl a chair across the room, and he loses his weapon in the crash. A locomotive hits me—must be No-neck—lifting me off my feet, and the remaining chair splinters under my weight. But if there's one thing I know how to do, it's fall.

Animal noises now. Music blaring. By the time I'm on my feet, it's over.

No-neck screams from a fetal position, left hand hanging by a ligament. Rycroft is on his knees, clutching a face raked to tatters. Standing above us all is Little Red, perched on the great desk, toe-talons dug into the wood, hand still in Booth's mouth as he dangles like a hooked leech. Her eyes glow red like taillights before a fatal accident.

"Jesus," Rycroft says.

Something's dawning on them now, the elasticity of a child's squishy brain and what happens when it goes undead. I once saw a four-year-old teach a clumsy adult how to program his smartphone.

There are faces a child should not be able to make. No little girl voice now—it's too loud—bounces off the walls too aggressively, and hits us all with the invisible force of a dog snarling inches from your face.

"I am a boundary breaker, wild walker, road crosser. I'm not lost in the Woods. All of you are!" She rips her hand out of Booth's face, spattering the walls and jukebox. I think of my windshield.

"I am the motherfucking psychopomp!" she howls. "You do not leave your domains, do not stray from the safety of your light pollution, not without asking one of us to hold your hand!"

She flicks her talons. Rycroft raises his arms to shield himself from raining bits of brain.

"If I see any of you tender lumpings in Peoria ever again, I won't kill you. I'll just take you out to the Deep Woods, leave you in a field, in the dark. Let the Weird take you! Understand?"

Her toes punctuate with a squeeze and a crack of heavy oak.

"Yes," the bloodied Lord says, head bowed. "Yes—yes—yes..." He looks up. "Any time you want to help, Knox!"

The Shadow is still at the jukebox. The music playing is the sort of heavy bass that vibrates the innards. She's rubbing her chest against the speakers, oblivious to the clotting mess, chanting, "Lullay, lullay, lullay..."

She's staring at Little Red in a way I don't like.

"Shoes untied," I growl.

Knox looks down at her splayed laces. Then she looks at the knots on my shoes with a hunger that makes me want to hide my feet.

Little Red slips out of her hoodie, uses it to wipe away the slaughterhouse mess on her face and hands. When she looks up, it's a little girl's face.

"Can we go now, Daddy?" she asks. "I'm tired." She takes my hand. "Come on." The word "on" is said with three impatient syllables.

She leads me out. In a mirror, I can still see Knox staring and I swear her eyes gleam yellow. The door closes, and the last I hear of it all is the music changing and Rycroft in near hysterics, "Knox, what the holy fuck is wrong with you tonight?"



“Tell me a story before bed,” she says.

“Alright,” I say. “Once upon a time, there was a kingdom of four fiefs—Peoria and East Peoria—and across the river, down a goblin road, was Bloomington and Normal. A Prince arose, a powerful Lord who called himself Romulus. He had a plan to unite four tiny fiefs into a larger kingdom cut off from all other kingdoms by the Woods.”

“What are the Woods?”

“The Kindred cling to cities. Everywhere else is the Woods. The Four Fiefs float in an ocean of fields, baron highways, and tiny ghost towns, where blood is thin on the ground, where hiding places from the sun are scarce. The Kindred do not like looking across the miles and seeing the horizon on the other side. The wolf people roam such places, and the Weird.”

“Tell me about the Weird.”

“They are the other things that go bump in the night, but have no names, and the Kindred do not like what they cannot name. Even boogeymen have boogeymen.”

“How did Prince Romulus rule such a place?”

“The power of the Prince rested on the shoulders of his four barons. He picked them from his covenant, the Invictus, and placed one in each fief—four old Gangrel. And Gangrel do not fear the Woods.”

“Why not?”

“In every Kindred lurks the Beast. But Gangrel are special. Their Beasts are not just nasty abstracts. Their Beasts have teeth and claws and wings and fur swimming under the skin. The Savages can talk to the coyote, skip between truck stops, and sleep in the earth. All the world is a haven. And so, the four barons and their children were messengers and ferrymen, guiding their shivering Kindred through the Woods, and Romulus ruled a connected Kingdom. Everyone needed the Gangrel, and so everyone needed the Prince...before it all went bad.”

“What happened?”

“The Prince forgot who he owed his power to. The Savages tolerate insults only so long. The barons dragged their Prince from his coffin. They took him into the Deep Woods, in a field where scarecrows come alive.

“The barons said, ‘Romulus, you will suckle at the four teats of the She-Wolf no longer. This is your test.’ They hobbled him and left him in the field.”

“Did the Prince pass his test?”

“He never left the Woods. The Four Fiefs cracked. Each baron ruled separately. They snap at each other, and the nights are violent. The Woods and the Weird creep in—not just the fields, but unmarked alleys, unclaimed warehouses. Every door and keyhole could lead to the Woods. The Kindred huddled in their tiny villages. In huddling they remain, for they need the Savages more than ever. And a little girl might seize opportunity that she would not find in a kingdom with more stability and stagnation.”

“You get better and better at telling that story,” she says.

Tucking her in, I sing, “Little Miss Magic, what you gonna be? Little Miss Magic, just can’t wait to see.” It’s the song I used to sing to Silvie.

Little Red doesn't yawn or stretch. She just goes still. I stroke her hair, kiss her forehead, and, with my fingers, gently close her vacant eyes. There are no windows in the basement. I leave the night light on.



I notice it over the next few nights—intent intent looks from strangers passing by. The old woman at the gas station. The teenager on the street. The little boy in the park. Smells. Spoiling meat. I get hyperaware. I get agitated. Do that many people really not know how to tie their shoes? Did I see yellow eyes? Did I hear broken humming?



“You a cat person?”

The dying bar is mostly empty. He must be talking to me. I grunt in the shape of a question mark. He points to the shreds in my clothes. Then he points to a similar tear on his pant leg.

“We can smell our own,” he says, raising his whiskey; it’s not as cheap as mine.

I nod. We clink and toss ‘em back.

“Yours must be a big one,” he says.

“Mmmm,” I reply, a little self-conscious of my clothes. I’d learned a while back to wear a thick leather coat, and to stitch it up when that wasn’t enough. Big, messy stitches in thick, black cord. Looks like Frankenstein’s tanned ass.

“I could never declaw her though,” he says. “She’d never forgive me.”

I nod.

“Mind you, she doesn’t mean to. She just doesn’t realize how sharp her claws are.”

I nod.

“She’s very affectionate. Likes to be by my head. Always trying to climb up my clothes with those claws. Scratches the shit out of me sometimes. Yours does the same?” He points to my stitched shoulder.

I nod.

“I mean, they are predators. It’s a wonder they let us hold them at all.”

“Yeah.”

He buys us both a round. Then another. We chat. My jaw loosens. We spin a few sad stories. I don’t know why. Sometimes enough rain water accrues that you’ll spill over to a stranger at the barest tip of inclination.

Eventually, I stand. I’m running late. Got a little too drunk on whiskey and unintentional poignancy.

“I’ve gotta get rambling,” I say.

“Sure, sure,” he says, shaking my hand.

I check my inner pocket, make sure a very particular plastic baggie is there.

“What’s that?”

“Catnip,” I say.

He laughs. “To us lonely cat people. And hey, I’m really sorry to hear about your wife and daughter.”

I nod.

And I'm out the door. The sun is too bright. I take the catnip from my pocket—not the leaves, but the root of the plant. There was once a belief that it could turn a gentle man violent. They called it “executioner’s root.” Colonial hangmen drank the broth boiled from it before they did their job. I don’t know that it works like that for everyone; chemistries vary. It works for me.

I chew the root.

Sometimes, I hate this job.

I open my trunk. I chew. I put on the rubber Frankenstein mask. I chew. I take out the wooden axe handle and the can of red spray paint. I chew. I look up at the name of the butcher shop across the street. It matches what’s in my notebook. The bell on the door jingles when I walk in.

I really hate this job.



Dusk. I’m sobbing on a park bench. The alley mouths wail mournfully, and the stray dogs are their tongues. The cracked axe handle rests in some dumpster, with the Frankenstein mask, spray paint can, and the now empty container of Handi Wipes.

My memories are a gore-smear massacre. Wiping my eyes makes it worse. Every meat impact. Every bone crunch. I could feel it all through the wooden handle. I wipe my hands together, but can’t get rid of the writhing wet feeling of palming that woman’s face—she she came at me with a knife—and, with a bellow, I flung her—Little Red’s gift makes me so horribly strong—and she bounced so high and so hard off the wall. She left a star-shaped stain.

There were five of them, patsies of some Kindred pushing into Peoria without permission. The butcher shop was a front. Don’t know what they were doing there. Wasn’t need-to-know. Don’t know which ones were ghouls, which ones would recover from what I did. Wasn’t need to know.

Should have said something witty and scary, like one of my movie thug characters. Something like, “Stay out of Peoria, or next time I won’t bother removing the axe blade.” Instead, all I could say was, “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry... sorry,” while I beat them down to blood and screams and silence. Then there was only the rhythm of the blows and the latex mask sealed to my face with tears and snot.

Then out came the can of spray paint, and I marked the wall with Little Red’s message:

A ROOM IS A PLACE WHERE YOU HIDE FROM WOLVES.

THAT’S ALL ANY ROOM IS.

I walked out of the butcher shop in my grim-stitch coat with my red right hand.

Now I’m blubbering like a baby and passers-by are inching away. I’m not my movie characters. Why’d I have to do it? “Because we’re sending a message,” Little Red had told me. “Want to scare a monster? Show her you can get to her during the day.”

Sundown. Suddenly, the place is lousy with squirrels.

“Is it done?” asks a sweet voice. She’s perched on the back of the bench, red hoodie and all. Sometimes she lets me tuck her in at the house, but mostly she sleeps in the earth, in the parks that dot Leer’s turf.

I nod.

She concentrates, then she slides down into the seat, sitting like a kid. She touches my cheek with a cold hand. “Oh, my Cowardly Lion.”

I wipe my face with a sleeve. “Heya, Dorothy.”

The squirrels skulk around us, eager as cultists.

“Come on,” she says getting up, pulling my hand. “You can take me out for ice cream.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I buy her ice cream. Eventually it drips down to the pavement.



The phone screams. I try to browbeat it to silence.

We sit together at the dinner table at least twice a week. Little Red slashes her wrist and bleeds into a soup bowl. Family time is important.

She calls it “mending the sheep’s clothing.” She lets me tuck her in, buy ice cream, push her on the swing. We do these little rituals.

I don’t know how long she’s been dead—a lot longer than she’s been alive, anyway. If she doesn’t think about it, she forgets to breathe, makes unnatural postures, stares too intently, shows her teeth when agitated, snatches passing birds out of the air.

But she practices hard. When she focuses, she can do the little rituals. But then, some caterpillars can pretend to be snakes. Mimicry is an old racket. So we mend the sheep’s clothing. It’s a treat for me and rehearsal for her.

My little girl passes the soup bowl. Everything’s set: place mats, coasters, the whole bit.

The phone rings again.

I look about the room, see the door frame where I measure Little Red’s height every month. The magic marker lines all overlap. I see the empty place on the wall where a family picture used to hang, feel the empty space on my left ring finger.

I pick up the soup bowl and drink. All of it. I lick the bowl clean. Her blood slithers into every cell, fills in the deep hollow. I could almost howl, but that’s not dinner table behavior. This makes us blood related. Rituals make us family.

The phone rings.

I jump to my feet and yank the receiver.

UNKNOWN CALLER

“Hello? Hello?” Another crank. All night long. This time, I can hear broken humming on the other end.



It’s not epic. Not even a story really. Just hit a patch of black ice. Then the world rolled with semi truck lights and that louder than loud metal-crunch-scream.

Right before the ice, Silvie, my little girl, she asked me a question, one of those non sequiturs only children ask.

“Daddy, who is the guardian angel of the platypus?”

I love when kids ask things like that.

Little Red never does.



I wake up, face mashed against the linoleum floor.

Little Red screams.

Sunset. Why are my shoes untied? Paralyzed, then it passes, and I’m running down the basement stairs. Through the false door. She’s pacing her room like a tiger, face contorted in howler monkey rage.

“What is that?” she hisses at me, pointing to her bed. Then her voice stretches into octaves and frequencies it should not, “What! Is! That?”

On her pillow is a magic marker. On the headboard, a message in black:

LOOK AT YOU

LOOK AT YOU

SOMETHING OLD

AND SOMETHING KNEW

YOUR BLOOD IS BORROWED

YOUR HEART IS BLUE

She yanks me, easily, to my knees. She extrudes words through fangs. “Explain—the fuck—happened.”

“I fell asleep, Red. Somehow. I don’t... I don’t—”

Her slap rocks my head in a whiplash dance. She punches through the drywall next to my head. She yells things that start as words, but evolve wings and tentacles—bird of prey shrieks mated with coyote screams. I look down. I don’t make eye contact. I don’t run.

I hear rending.

Furniture breaking.

Somewhere in the stew, my ears pluck out words that sound something like, “Never protect me—while I sleep—none of you do—never—never!”

Silence.

There’s no transition—none of the heavy, slowing breathing or clenching hands or apologies of the living. A switch just flips. Her face is calm again. And then...something I have never seen on her. Apprehension? Nervousness?

“Get ready,” she says. “We’re late.”

“For what?”

“A wake. Wash your face.”

In the bathroom mirror, I see it. All over my mug, over and over, in black marker, the word “lullay.”



I was feeling really jealous of the stiff in the coffin, when he gets up and starts killing everyone.

Little Red wore a dress. She never does that.

His name was Marty McGillycuddy. Was he Red’s father? She didn’t say. He looked like an ancient Richard Harris, gaunt, maybe in his seventies or eighties, but hard to tell through that waxy post-mortem makeover. How old might that make her?

The wake was mostly empty when we got there, only two other people: a middle-aged woman and a young man. We stood in back. She just stared, and when she looked at him, her face...moved. I don’t think it was the sheep’s clothing either. Something ugly clenched inside my chest.

“Stay,” she said, and my ribs squeezed my innards harder as she approached the coffin. She whispered something to him. She leaned in and kissed his cheek. Envy icepicked deep into my guts, into that undead place where Little Red’s blood pooled.

Then she came back to me, and the young man took her place on the kneeler. I stewed. Then jealousy turned to dread—sudden—nameless—I remembered that inexplicable feeling I got when my body froze from chronic night terrors as a kid.

Then a flapping—like angry wings. I thought I saw them, black and passing. Little Red stiffened and snarled. A muffled noise came, like someone shouting into a pillow. The young man, leaning over the coffin, convulsed, legs rising into the air. He fell limp to the ground, lips gone as though from a razor wire kiss.

And that is when Marty McGillycuddy rose shrieking from his coffin.

And now I’m yelling something forgettable in four letter strings. Marty unties his own shoes saying, “Undo—undo—undo,” then leaps about the room, only gravity isn’t working right; he’s a marionette wielded by a palsied puppeteer. Wisps of white hair flying wild, he lands in front of the middle-aged woman. She screams. He puts a finger to his dripping lips and says, “Shhhh.”

She falls to the floor.

The cadaver moves back to the now lipless young man and unties his shoes. That complete, he runs his hand on the texture of the kid’s corduroy pants, utterly fascinated.

“Red?” I say. “What...what is that?”

Marty rips into the kid, unspooling his intestines on the floor, saying, “Undo—undo—undo.”

“Red! What are we doing?”

She stares unblinking.

The middle-aged woman wakes up on the floor to find Marty sitting on her chest like a nightmare painting. She doesn’t scream, her face just mutely contorts. Her body shudders, but does not move.

Marty looks down at her and says, “Now, sing. When you stop singing, I eat you.”

Just like that, shaking on the floor, with a corpse-monster perched on her chest, the woman begins murdering The Rolling Stones. I draw my gun and aim.

Marty-monster presses his head against his victim's chest as she sings, he rubs his ear against her, hands groping her, humming that busted hum. When Silvie was an infant, I used to sing with her head tucked under my chin, because I'd read that infants liked that reverberation.

"Red!" I rasp.

Marty-monster keeps lunging at the woman, teeth bared, but stops short, gasping at the delayed gratification. Tears stream down her face and still she sings. He tries to hum along, fails. He chants, "Lullay, lullay, lullay."

I fire. Twice. Through his chest. Marty jerks and looks at me. I nearly drop the gun at the gleam of yellow eyes. The woman runs out of lyrics and falters. Not looking away from me, Marty scoops out the woman's throat with a casual gesture.

"Red, we are on the fucking clock!"

Marty chews a word in his dripping mouth, "Ma-tiiiiil-da? Matilda! I watched you sleep." He sings, off key like a warped record, "Lullay, thou little tiny child—bye-bye, lulloo, lullay—bye-bye-bye, lulloo, lullay."

Little Red grabs my hand.

"We're gone," she says.

"What?"

And we're out the door.



I meet her at a park. She says, "Mend the sheep's clothing," so I carry her on my shoulders, like all the other dads. Predators and prey have a compulsion to get that extra few feet of perspective.

She talked business-as-usual into my ear, as though last night never happened. She had a gash in her forehead. Leer must of been none too pleased—no survivors at the funeral home—his eyes must have burned, face like a half-finished Jack O' Lantern.

"Red, what was that thing?"

"Mend the sheep's clothing," she says, and I'm pushing her on a swing. Another father and daughter do likewise. The girl laughs. Little Red mimics the sound.

"Such a wonderful age," says the other dad, and I nod. "Savor it. She's your little girl now. She wants to be around you unconditionally. Someday she won't."

Little Red is feeding squirrels when I ask again, "Red, what was that thing?"

"I don't know." She throws a handful of bread crumbs soaked in her blood. The tree rats gather, eager and reverent.

"Was it a vampire?"

"It wasn't Kindred."

She feeds the animals once a week. Park to park. Bread, seed, food scraps—spiked with a little vitae. The animals always answer: squirrels, pigeons, crows, stray cats and dogs, even coyotes. If I squint my eyes, she almost looks like a Disney princess, singing the animals to her, to help her thwart some wicked stepparent. Don't know how long she's done this—longer than I've known her—whole generations of critters fed on her juice. Peoria has urban myths of giant rats and mutant raccoons. I once saw a pigeon kill and rip apart a mouse.

“We’re going to get that thing, right?” I ask.

My little girl does not move, but the squirrel throng writhes and chitters as one.

“We will,” she says. “It’s my job.”

“Is your name really Matilda McGillicuddy?”

“Yes. You won’t tell anyone?”

“Two can keep a secret, if one of them is dead.”

She laughs viciously.



The nights and days blur together on amphetamines and fear. Little Red sleeps in the parks. I stay in a different motel each day. Don’t sleep much anymore. We don’t use the house. My universe grinds down to staring at passing shoelaces.



The amphetamine blur.

A grungy pet shop.

9:30 p.m.

I show my P.I. badge. The shop owner tells me about the old man who came in, humming and smelling of old meat. Jolly as you please, he holds and talks to the parrots, one by one, popping off their heads with his thumb. He spared the two that could sing.

“Were his shoes untied, ma’am?”

“I don’t know.”

The animals all get excited. A red hood peers expectantly through the window.



The amphetamine blur.

Police tape snapping in the wind. Flashing reds and blues.

12:13 a.m.

On the other side of the tape is a boy glazed with shock. The sole survivor of a slumber party. A golem like me can’t get to him, but no one stops the little girl in the red hoodie. Maybe she’s a neighbor. No one stops her when she gives the poor boy a heart-breaking hug. They whisper to one another.

“Well,” I say, when she comes back, “how did he survive?”

“He checked out a book from the library, The Encyclopedia Vampyre. Found something useful in there.”

A wandering rumor in the crowd speaks of intestines strung out like party streamers. All undone. The undoer.

Kids. They never tie their shoes.



The amphetamine blur.

Creeping through a grade school.

1:39 a.m.

I don't like looking at the walls. I've been with Little Red for a while now. When you've been backstage, you can't unsee that shit; you can't look through a newspaper or listen to the radio, glossing over most stories, without catching those patterns and telltales hidden in the margins. I get that same goosebump feel when I see all the crayon monster drawings taped on the wall in anticipation of October.

Something hums in the pipes. We get to the boiler room too late. Always too late.



The amphetamine blur.

Another motel room.

What time is it? Dawn?

We've killed three of them. Little Red tore the throat out of a mail man. She beheaded a teenager in a basketball uniform. I ran down an old woman with my car—then back and over again. They keep coming, all with yellow eyes, untied laces, and humming. I say “they,” but I think it's an “it.” I think that's what scares Little Red. How do you get your claws in a nasty abstract?

It harasses Little Red when she hunts. She can't feed. I've given her a little blood, but this can't last.

Lullay. I think it's playing with us.



The amphetamine blur.

I'm running.

6:52 p.m.

I shot a stranger. Shoes untied. He fell, screaming for the police. Didn't get a look at his eyes. Still screaming.

I'm running. I'm running.



The amphetamine blur.

A park. There isn't much left to bury.

3:37 AM.

I.D. says Ted Lewinski. A jogger. Little Red was finally able to feed, but in her hunger she took too much. I got the call. I cursed. I came out.

We were arguing the finer points of body disposal, when Dead Ted sat up and attacked. Almost got us, but Little Red growled and she yowled and she howled, and all the wildlife of Peoria answered. They came in waves, on paw and wing, and tore into Dead Ted with claw, tooth, and beak. He shrieked once, vanishing in the feather-fur tide, all these beasts bred on monster blood, defending this being their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents had worshiped as a god.

Ted Lewinski began the night as a corpse, became a monster, and now he is not much of anything at all.



The amphetamine blur.

Some motel.

Don't know the time. Dark?

How long have I been asleep? Wait. Why am I naked? I leap out of bed, tangled in sheets that would glow like a Christmas tree under the black light.

All the knotted bits of string I left on the table are undone. In the mirror, the exhausted, terrified face that stares back has "Lullay" written over and over in magic marker. The copy of *The Encyclopedia Vampyre* I left on the table is gone.

Death and library fines seem immanent.



I'm in Normal. In an alley. On top of Knox. Tonight, she's wearing a T-shirt that says, "I'm only wearing black until they invent something darker."

The gothy little vixen hisses at me, tries to bite. Little Red cups the Shadow's head, talon points indenting the pale flesh with the promise of a ripping comeuppance. Knox puts her fangs away.

"Spill," says my little Savage.

Knox spills. She tells us about the oddities, about one of Booth's feed kills coming back from the dead, about Booth's strange behavior after that. Yellow eyes. Laces undone.

"I saw it," Knox whispers. "I saw the owl in the smoke. It looked at me. The Beast... the Beast recognized it!"

She doesn't remember much after that, just flicker-flashes over a dull light: Booth's death, stalking Little Red, crank calls.

I note that her shoes are tied.

She remembers biting Rycroft. When she came too, he was a feral thing. He tore their ghoul apart, and she was forced to put a chair leg through his chest.

"That's all I know," she says. "Cross my heart and—"

"But what is it?" Little Red asks, desperation harshing her tones. "Tell me. Now!"

"I don't know. I swear."

"Not good enough!" Little Red raises a handful of wicked claws to dash Knox's head.

"Wait!" I say. Both vampires look up at me. "Please. Red. Let's not... I can't... No more, OK? She spilled. We're not even on our turf. Let her go. Let's get out of here. Please."

My little Savage looks at Knox and me and back. She snarls, slashing the alley floor next to Knox's head, leaving rends in the blacktop. She stalks off.

Knox gets to her shaking feet. "Thanks. I guess."

"You owe me," I say.

"Excuse me?" She looks incredulous. Kindred don't owe ghouls favors. We don't rate.

"Do you have any idea what she is going to do to me because she didn't do it to you?"

Knox can see the fear cracking my granite face.

“OK,” she says. “I owe you.”

And she’s gone.

I catch up to Little Red, and find her sitting on the curb, calmly playing with a doll head.

“Did you get a boon out of her?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“Well done.”

I’d like to thank the Academy.



Heaven slits itself along the vein on the rusty-jagged skyline, bleeding red on everything. Peoria sunsets are serious, never a cry for help. I brave the house. I want a change of clothes. I want something familiar. I want more bullets.

I scramble to find my things. The sun is setting too-too fast.

In the family room, my hands reach into a drawer and pull out a picture. They betray me like that sometimes. It’s a portrait of Loraine, Silvie, and me. I know it’s my ripped mind creating the disappointed look on their faces. These days, they seem so far away. They—

Something’s wrong.

Dark already. The houseplants are all withered to black husks. They weren’t a minute ago.

“Shhhh.”

I crumple to the floor. I dip into the darkness, but not very far, not very long. When I come to, I’m just a boy with his night terrors. I try to move my body, but it doesn’t budge. I try to scream, but my face only contorts. I try to breathe, but the corpse of Marty McGillicuddy sits on my chest.

He smells rancid, looks more than spoiled, eyes sunken back to black caves. His skin is ruddy, his once gaunt body bloated. How much blood did he drink? This close, under his coat, I can see the autopsy sutures are stretched and popping.

“Marty?” I manage.

“Nooo,” it says. Its breath makes my stomach turn to vomit, but my body can’t even manage that much motion. “You can do better, yes?”

“Lullay.”

“Ohhh, yes. There are those who have wagged their vocal meat to name me Lullay. Lullo-lullay, lullo-lullay...”

“What are you?” I ask. “Are there more?” I’ve seen vampires of all sorts, these Kindred. They’re all slick heroine needles and AIDS. But this thing is the bubonic plague.

“I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one,” it croons tunelessly. “We were the first love of the Beast. We come for the pretenders. We have diversions.”

“You’ve got... a thing for children.”

“Children,” it says with joy. “They are wonderful. I am always there when the children cry out. I was there to sing the Black Death in their ears—we all fall down. I was there when the soldiers dashed the little ones against the walls of Bethlehem.”

It sings, almost keeping the melody this time:

*“Herod the King, in his raging,
Set forth upon this day;
By his decree, no lives spare he
All children young, to slay.
All children young, to slay”*

“Little Red,” I say.

“Matilda,” it corrects. “She is special. The pretenders do not often embrace a little one. I will wear her. Very soon.”

“Why don’t you just do it?”

“I like the moment before—stretched out—taut—‘til I can pluck a pleasing sound.”

I try to struggle.

“Shhhh,” Lullay says. “Be still.” It looks me in the eyes. “Now, sing. When you stop singing, I eat you.”

My mouth betrays me. The words come out on their own. “Little Miss Magic, what you gonna be? Little Miss Magic, just can’t wait to see...”

Lullay quivers in delight. It writhes against me, hands fondling over me, head nuzzling under my throat, warbling “Lulloo-lullay—lullooo-lullay—lulloo-lullay...”

I keep singing, “I know someday she’ll learn to make up her own rhymes—One day she’s gonna learn how to fly—Oh, that I won’t deny...”

I sing and the monster loves it. “Wonderful. You clay apes make such lovely noise. I wish I could. I wish I could.”

I keep singing. Lullay’s mouth opens, surging forward to devour me, but it stops short, again and again—not the precise fangs of Little Red, but a boneyard of jagged stones. I keep singing. It lunges and stops, wheezing in delight, maggots falling out of its mouth. One falls into mine. I keep singing. It runs a scabby tongue across my face, over my open eye. It nuzzles me. Its hand absentmindedly shatters my left wrist. I try to scream, but I keep singing.

This song is mine and Silvie’s. And mine and Red’s. This song does not belong to it!

I manage to kick my feet.

Disrupted, Lullay looks down at my shoes. It makes a plaintiff noise and compulsively crawls to them. It tugs at the strings. It makes a frustrated sound. Ha! Double knots. Tiny victories.

As it fiddles with the laces, I squeeze my right hand, force it into my pocket.

“What do you have there?” Lullay asks.

In answer, I flick my mitt, and a wad of shoe strings—two dozen pairs tied together in ridiculous knots—flies across the room.

“Naughty!” Lullay hisses, leaps off of me, and begins working at the tangled mess. “Undo—undo—undo—undo...”

I hold my broken wrist to my body and find my feet.

“Go on, false father,” it says. “I won’t eat you. That’s not how it ends.”

I fling the front door open and run into the clotting gloom.

“She is going to kill you!” Lullay calls after. “She was always going to kill you!”



I pushed her on the swing out of habit—every robot-rote gear grinding. The red hoodie hung in tatters. She didn't bother with shoes anymore. Snappish and starved, she started at every sound.

I told her what I knew, and then one of the times I pushed her, the swing came back empty. I looked up to see her perched, clawed feet gripping the upper bar of the swing set, staring into a patch of brush. She leapt, little body hurtling, vanishing into the branches.

There were nasty sounds, of course—rabid cats and coons shaken in a burlap sack. Then I saw it.

The owl in the smoke.

It flew, an oily nightmare, out of the brush and away. Soon after, there trailed a bat. A pissed off bat.

I shouldered into the brush to find a corpse, shredded to a shambles, throat vacated. Shoes untied. A janitor. I checked his name tag.

“Eh, Joe. What's your story?”

Left with another body, I sat next to Joe, giggling a little too hard.

That was two hours ago. Now, I'm in a 7-11. The flickering lights stretch into migraine.

“Give me some cough medicine and something to make me cough.”

The man behind the counter gives me Jack Daniel's and Lucky Strikes. I pay. I stare into a crud-crusting vending machine full of ancient Skittles, sun-bleached, drained of all color, and I stare too long, feel a little too sorry for the sugar lumps...

My phone rings.

“I followed it,” Little Red says. “Get your stuff.”

“What stuff?”

She tells me. Then she tells me where.



Of course it would be Bartonville. Where else? Bartonville State Hospital, A.K.A. the Illinois Asylum for the Incurable Insane. Closed down in what, the 70s? It's where college kids sneak in on a dare, and urban myths collect. Some of the buildings are burnt out, some renovated, some demolished. The city can't seem to decide if it's trying to resuscitate it or put it out of its misery. There's probably a metaphor in there somewhere, but I'm too fucking tired and twisted.

It is dark in here.

The ghost hunters come to this place, all green, shaky night cams, interpreting every sound into sentences like ink blots in the ear. I got no night vision, just a flashlight and nerves.

Yellow eyes.

Down the hall.

Jagged shards of humming.

Love is going to the last place in the world you want to be. I step forward. Bug carcasses crunch underfoot.

“False daddy?” it says.

“Lullay?”

The yellow eyes bounce toward me, at first in a walking motion, but then they float and rotate unnaturally on the black plane. My flashlight finds the rotting face of Marty.

It chuckles. “The little ones shroud themselves in blankets at my approach. Do you really think all that padding will save you from me?”

“Yeah?” I say. I adjust the gloves and the thick hood. Does it notice the smell?

Red eyes join the yellow in the dark, lower to the ground. They swirl about each other in regard.

“Daughter of mine?” says Lullay.

“No,” snarls Little Red.

“No? Matilda, look at me.”

The red eyes stop moving.

“Look at me.”

The red eyes go round and huge. “D-daddy?” A shadow puppet squeezes my heart.

The yellow eyes float closer. “Remember when I tucked you in?” Closer. “Remember when I said you were safe?” Closer. “But the monsters got you anyway, didn’t they? I let them take you. I let the Beast eat my baby! Eats her all up!”

The yellow eyes dart down to the red, overlap. A yelp. In the flashlight beam, I see Little Red clutching her neck. I see Lullay licking Marty’s lips. The red eyes sharpen to slits, and a growl fills the hall.

I don’t catch much in the preternatural speed and flashlight flicker. They’re on each other, on the floor, the walls, the ceiling, rotating, darting, shrieking, laughing. Red eyes and yellow.

They stop. The flashlight beam catches them—Lullay held against the wall, Little Red’s fingers sunk between his ribs. He’s missing an arm at the elbow and looks at the stump curiously.

Little Red twists her hands. Lullay winces.

“Hmmm...no, no, Matilda. It is already over.”

She clutches her neck again, shakes, backing away into darkness. Something in her moans down deep. The red eyes rapidly change shape and aperture.

“Lullay, thou little tiny Child,” sings the yellow eyes off key. “Bye, bye, lulloo, lullay.”

I hear the Beast. I hear it echoing in her esophagus and then the hallway. When my light finds her, I see the Beast staring back.

“Red?” I say.

“Daughter of mine,” says Lullay. “Your pet thinks he’s people. Let us put him to sleep. Let us do it together.”

They advance towards me. I back up. She lopes low to the ground, nearly quadruped, all hackles and bloody drool dripping from the chin.

“Red? Don’t.”

Her hand blurs. My flashlight breaks against the wall. Blackness. Red eyes. Yellow eyes. They keep coming. I back into a room. They cut me off. Red on one side. Yellow on the other. The whole world is sharp teeth. I've died so many times.

"We want you to sing," says Lullay. "We... What is that you have there?"

I snap the road flare to life. Both Beasts flinch. Red and yellow eyes widen when I put the flare to my own chest and ignite.

I've died by fire dozens of times. You've probably seen me. A man or a monster on the celluloid, set ablaze, lumbering and screaming before falling dead. Still have the gear, I know a guy—talcum powder on the skin, layers of long underwear soaked in protective gel, triple-layer suit of Nomex and Kevlar, accelerant.

The Beast frenzies not only from hunger or rage, but also from fear. Little Red squeals. I don't see her retreat so much as I see a trail of objects knocking over in a path out the door.

Lullay freezes, blasted by light.

I lumber toward it laughing. I like to think this scares it on three levels: fear of the fire that kills the Beast, the nightmare of a humanoid blaze walking toward it, and the blasphemous horror, in a vampire's eyes, of a being committing self-immolation. I like to think after thousands of years, a washed-up movie goon is the most inexplicably scary thing this demon-fuck ever did see. I like to think.

Lullay wails and cowers. I hug the flailing corpse in my big arms, crushing it to me. It goes up like a twig. Wild thrashing. I slam it into a wall, then into the ground.

I don't need my catnip. Something ugly in me howls. Vampires aren't the only things with Beasts.

"She's my daughter!" I scream. "I'm the daddy!"

Lullay writhes helplessly on its back, my monolithic bulk on its chest, a phosphorus terror. I sing it a song—"Ring of Fire." Don't know if it's a Johnny Cash fan. Don't know if it can hear me over its own keening.

I sing the fucker to a bright, screaming sleep.

The fire, my pet, eats all the oxygen.

"Greedy bastard," I wheeze.

Greedy feeders, aren't we all.

I go to a bright darkness.

• • • • •

The extinguishing spray wakes me.

I hack hard through scorched lungs. I touch the place where my eyebrows used to be. I was lit for too long. I'll be a dominion of blisters for sure.

A fire extinguisher clanks down. A hand takes mine, and Knox helps me up. Tonight she's wearing a T-shirt that says, "I had fun once. It was horrible."

"That it?" she asks, pointing to an ashen snow angel smear on the floor.

"Yeah."

"So. Is it gone?"

“How should I know?”

“We square?”

“Yeah. We square.”

She’s gone.

I don’t hear sirens, but I should be making scarce. I walk through the dilapidated asylum, stripping off layers of Nomex and gel.

I find her in a barren room, moonlit.

She’s crying.

Little Red might be a badass blood-drinker, monster-ripper, terror of an undead, battle bitch, but her brain is still borrowed from a little girl. It has the same squishy nooks and crannies, where the emotion runoff collects. Sometimes it floods. Doesn’t happen often. Less and less now. We keep it a secret from her Kindred.

Splayed on the floor crying, she sounds like a child wailing for Daddy, and like a cat yowling, and like a dying rabbit screaming in the forest. She’s clutching something.

Under the Beast fear, primal signals got lost somewhere in that kiddie-brain maze and locked onto a lingering synapse for safety.

She holds the rotting arm of Marty. Sobbing, she strokes her cheeks with the dead hand. She rocks back and forth, not seeing me. Taloned toes curl and uncurl, eyes still gleaming.

I inch closer. Setting my phone to speaker, I play a twinkling music-box track. Sometimes that calms her. I place it on the floor.

She makes sounds—not quite words. I circle behind. Holding my breath, I replace Marty’s hand on her cheek with my own. I slowly pry the dead arm from her grip and toss it away. She takes my arm in its stead. I give her my wrist and she sinks her teeth.

I feel the love course through me.

Suckling, she makes pacified noises. I scoop her up. She drinks, hands gripping my arm, feet gripping the fronts of my thighs. I feel sharp points punch through cloth and jean and skin, sticky warmth welling up. I wince, but I don’t make any sudden moves. She doesn’t mean to. She just doesn’t realize how sharp her claws are.

I rock her in my arms.

“There, there, my little platypus.”

I hum, because I know how. I sing, but blood loss and fatigue slur the words.

“Little Miss... little Miss Magic...what you gonna be?”

The twinkling music plays. My little girl keeps drinking. I hope she’ll be able to make herself stop in time. Someday, she won’t.

Night, Winter, and Death

By Myranda Kalis

The last time I saw the mountains of Pădurea Craiului, I was not yet dead. It was late autumn, and the last of the leaves had long since fallen. In another half-month, perhaps less, it would truly be winter. Each morning, I rose early from my bed, such as it was, a bedroll too thin to ward off the cold and damp that seeped up through the freezing ground every night, even with a mound of dried pine leaves beneath it and the body of another huddled next to mine. Each morning, I crawled out of my shelter, such as it was, a lean-to of pine boughs lashed together over a sapling center pole, a tarpaulin that we pretended was waterproof for the sake of our own morale spread over that. Each morning, I watched the sun rise bright silver over the snow-covered mountains and then went to check on the men on morning watch, and then the men in the “infirmary,” which was our only actual tent left, though no warmer than any of the other shelters for that. We were freezing to death slowly, clinging to the side of the mountain, hiding from the Russians and the Austrians and any who might betray our location to them. We were starving to death slowly because we hardly dared venture out of our mountain fastness to hunt or scavenge for food, for the risk of being caught, or even use what little money we had to purchase supplies. The wounded were dying slowly for want of real medical attention, and we had almost all been sick with some horrid illness that turned our bowels to water and made us burn with fever and left us weak as children when it passed. I had been cured of the romance of war by my first battle, and this slow death by degrees was rapidly curing me of the desire to martyr myself for the liberty of my homeland. In that, I knew I was not alone.

That morning, there was no sunrise. The sky overhead was low and leaden with snow and the wind was rising, rushing down the valley like a torrent of cold water, tasting of ice and smoke from the cook-fires. Someone’s snares had caught a few hares in the night, I remember, and the morning watch was gutting and skinning them, slicing away the meat to put in our battered pots—the things were bitter and tough but if you boiled them long enough they became edible. There was just enough tea left for everyone to have a thin half-cup, but no breakfast to speak of, as we’d eaten the last of the bread the week before and we were holding the cheese in reserve. I walked about the perimeter of the camp, taking reports, and then I went to shake my shelter-mate awake and give him the gist: he was the captain, after all, and I the lieutenant, but I took first watch and he the midnight hours, so I rose first.

His name was Sandor Kajetan and I had the worst, most girlish sort of infatuation with him, practically from the moment we first met. It wasn't so much that he was handsome. His nose was a bit crooked from being broken in a fight with his elder brother when he was a young boy and his chin was far too stubborn by half. It was that he possessed a fine nature that made others turn toward him like flowers following the sun, a smile for everyone, a disposition that no hardship could long depress, and sense besides. We would have all of us killed or died for him, or followed him into Hell. To this night I regret that I was never in a position to tell him how I felt, as Tzigane, the woman I truly was, and not Zoltan, the man I pretended to be in those days. A foolish regret, but one I treasure.

The staff meeting that morning was tense. In truth, there was not much in the way of staff to meet with. Our little band of rebels had been bleeding men for weeks. Less than half of the group that had sworn to resist the despoilers of our homeland to our dying breath remained to fulfill that vow. Now, with winter coming on in earnest, the rate of desertion had increased, particularly in the night watches, when it was easier to slip away unnoticed. We were, in fact, talking seriously among ourselves of laying down our arms and going back home, travelling in twos and threes to make certain the more severely wounded members of our little company made it back home alive, if not entirely whole. Then the morning foragers came back in with an unexpected report: they had found the opening to a cave, further along the heights of the valley than any of them had gone before, while they searched for a wild goat or a stray sheep to drag back to camp. Sandor and I went back up with them to see what use it might be, kicking ourselves all the while for not searching for such a place before this—all of us that grew up in the mountains had a story about the local cave and the luckless boy or girl who had gotten lost in one and never found and the like. In truth, I could see how it might have been missed before this, as the entrance was less than a man's height and half-hidden by a drift of scree and scrub brush, roughly triangular in shape. We lit a lantern and squeezed inside, for the entrance passage was narrow, but beyond the cavern opened into a single large chamber and branched into smaller rooms as far back as we could find which, admittedly, was not very far. We were principally concerned that no large animal, like a bear, used it to lair in, which did not seem to be the case. In fact, there weren't even bats.

In retrospect, that should have told the mountain-reared among us that something wasn't right about that place. Every cave has some sort of creatures dwelling in it, if not bats, then insects, rodents, something. This place had nothing in it, nothing living but us. Had I thought about it, I would have been troubled. At the moment, I was only thinking that it would be warmer by far than sleeping out beneath the winter weather and the relentless wind, and more secure, as well. It took us the best part of two days, our progress slowed by the snow-squalls that swept back and forth across the valley, but in the end we had everyone inside. It was snug, but warmer for it, and to celebrate some of the men went out and poached a pair of unwary sheep from some local's pasture and a few loaves of bread from his shelf. That night, snug in our new hideaway, sleeping warmer than we had in weeks, albeit not quite as soft, we felt safer than we had in a very long time.

More fools we.



The apartment building was a tiny thing, a few blocks off the campus of Eötvös Loránd University, tucked at the end of a side street cul-de-sac with a good view of the river and a little patioed garden in the back where the residents, most of them graduate

students and adjunct faculty, would sit and talk into the small hours of the night. Klara liked the place because she was firmly of the opinion that one of the things her sire needed more of was basic human contact unrelated to lecturing on 19th century Hungarian literature or picking up easy underclassmen for dining purposes, and the night-garden definitely served that purpose. Occasionally, she would come by and find Tzigane sitting at one of the patio tables in the light of a citronella lamp, actually smiling as she mostly listened to the conversation with a sweet and slightly sad expression.

No one had seen her there recently, and neither was she answering her phone. No one had seen her at the university, either, since spring term had ended.

“You’re a loon, you know that, right? She probably just forgot to turn her cell phone on again.” Jozsef was, to Klara’s everlasting annoyance, utterly incapable of taking anything seriously when it came to worrying about their mutual mentor. “She’s not a spring chicken, you know, it’s not like tech comes naturally to her.”

“I am *not* a loon.” It took all of her strength and patience not to bounce his head off the iron patio railing. “She’s not answering the landline, either, and yes, the bill’s been paid, I made the arrangements for that *myself*. No one’s seen her for *nights*, Jozsef, and I have a bad feeling about it—she wasn’t herself all winter.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Brotherly condescension dripped from every syllable. “You and your special bond. Look, I’ll allow that she might have gone to sleep—but if we open up the door and find her sitting in the study reading some phone-book treatise on some author no one’s ever heard of, you’re going to owe me an American exchange student. *Two*, if her cell phone’s off.”

“You’re making it really very difficult not to hurt you.” Klara replied, between clenched fangs, and opened the apartment door.

This was a somewhat difficult operation, because there was a small mountain of mail behind it on the entryway floor. Klara shot her companion a venomous look and made a pointed gesture downward to draw his attention to the mess. That seemed to adjust his attitude. Even when the lady was brooding, she opened her mail.

“Wait here.” He caught her by the shoulder and stepped past her, calling, “Lady Tzigane!”

No answer. Klara waited as her companion went room to room, turning on lights, and ventured inside once he finished his circuit and came back into the entrance way. “She’s not here.”

“You’re sure? Not even in the sleeping room?” Klara hurried into the smallest of the apartment’s spaces, the windows bricked over from the inside. It contained nothing but a closet for storing clothing and the old-fashioned iron bedstead, unused for who knew how long.

“I was just in there, Klara,” he said, drumming his fingers on the wall. “Come here. There’s something in the study.”

“What?”

“A letter. For you.” A stack of them, actually—one for her, and for Jozsef, as well, and a dozen others addressed but not sent to assorted individuals in Hungary and further abroad.

Klara tore it open. Inside was a single sheet of her sire’s stationary, her favorite cream-colored paper with the painted tea roses in each corner, a few lines in her own

elegant hand. “It’s...instructions. We’re to mail the letters. If she does not return in two months, we’re to contact Master Lakatos to continue our tuition, as he’s agreed to take us as students on her recommendation. She’s been gone almost *three weeks* if she left just after these were written, Jozsef!”

She looked up to find him staring at the floor. The expression on his face wasn’t guilt, not exactly. “She told me to keep you from doing anything stupid, Klara. I had no idea she possessed such faith in my abilities. I’m touched.”

This time she did hit him. She felt his jaw crack under her fist, and she bared her fangs, the Beast demanding retribution. “*You.*”

Jozsef opened his mouth and flexed his jaw. It made a wet crackling sound as the bones knit again. “Has it occurred to you that you should just let her go? She doesn’t want you to follow her; she’s made that clear. Why can’t you—”

She pulled back to hit him again, but he dropped his gaze, and Klara reined in her anger. “I don’t expect you to understand, Jozsef. You don’t need to help me, just don’t get in my way.” Klara dropped down into a chair. Why *was* she doing this? Out of love? Blood-born loyalty? Real loyalty? “If she dies, it’s a loss. It’s a loss to the world; it’s a loss to knowledge and history.” She swallowed. Her throat was dry, and the action made a scraping sound. “It’s a loss to us, Jozsef.”

He crouched down next to her. “I didn’t say I was *going* to prevent you from doing anything stupid.” He put his hand on her chin, and lifted it so they were facing. “Now, use your head. Where do *you* think she might have gone? You know her better than anyone.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, “I’m not sure” but that would have been a lie. “She was born in this little town in the mountains—I’m not even sure it’s in Hungary anymore. She talked about going back there sometimes.”

“Good. Let’s see what we can find out about the place and start from there.”



We didn’t realize something was wrong straight away. In fact, we didn’t realize something was wrong for several weeks after we moved from the bowl of the valley into the cave, until winter was well and truly underway and the snow was piling to a tall man’s height outside and we had almost no chance of escape.

It was patient that way.

The first things we noticed were tiny: easily dismissible as tricks of the mind, of the isolation and the boredom that assailed us. The night outside the circles of light cast by our lamps and the tiny fires that we built seemed, from time to time, to be just a touch too dark. The shadows that lay on the far sides of certain of the cave formations seemed a trifle too long. The sounds we made seemed to echo a bit too far or else not quite far enough. A cold breeze that seemed to come from nowhere, a sound where no sound should be, like the scraping of stone on stone.

Fear grew slowly in us. We had all lived in fear for a very long time before this—fear of our lives on the battlefield, fear of being caught by our enemies and suffering ignoble execution for our refusal to surrender our arms—and so we were a little inured to fears that seemed, at first blush, to be childish things left over from a parochial up-bringing, a belief in foolish legends. We had forgotten that some legends have at least a grain of truth in them, and some even more than that. Some legends have fangs and claws.

It took one of the wounded first, of course. We had carried our injured with us, unwilling to leave them to be butchered by the Russians, and some had been direly hurt, indeed. Adolar's shin had been struck by a ball, the bone shattered, and the wound had festered. Before he left, our medic had amputated the leg below the knee, and the stump was healing slowly and not at all prettily. He could not walk, of course, nor move without aid. One morning he was simply gone. There was no sign of a struggle. No sign of footprints. We never did find any trace of him, search though we might.

He was only the first.



Zavod, as it turned out, was still in Hungary, a sleepy little town in the southern mountains with a picturesque old church and streets named after the heroes of the Revolution of 1848 surrounded in orchards and fields. Some of the gravestones in the churchyard were more than a century old, worn almost illegible by the passage of the seasons and the hard mountain winters, but Klara felt the need to look among them, anyway.

"Here, this is one of them—Zoltan Dvorzsak, Tzigane's elder brother. She told me all about him. And here are her parents, Devald and Milush." Klara frowned. "I didn't know that. They all died in December 1849."

"Probably some kind of epidemic." Jozsef played his flashlight beam down the row of headstones. "She doesn't have a grave."

"I didn't know that, either," Klara admitted, the frown deepening. "I would have thought—"

"What's that?" Jozsef's flashlight beam came to rest on Zoltan Dvorzsak's headstone; something caught the light and glittered, looped over the cruciform ornament on top.

"It's a chain." Klara hooked her finger through it and tugged gently. It came free with only minimal effort, with a soft scrape of metal against stone. An old iron key on a new block-link chain. "This can't be to their house...that would have been torn down ages ago."

"No. It looks like the sort of key that would've gone to an old steamer trunk. Where did they live?"

"A farm just outside of town." She gestured over her shoulder toward the village.

"Let's go exploring, then," he said.



It never did let us see it. It was, in fact, extremely adept at keeping just out of the range of our lamps, just out of reach of our hands unless it wished to touch us, a vague suggestion of a shape in the darkness, glittering eyes or teeth catching a stray lamp-beam, a swift skittering motion that set off echoes in the wrong direction. It was fast, and it was strong, and once it was finished picking off our weakest, it blocked the entrance so we couldn't escape it easily, and set to work on the rest of us.

We tried to get away, of course. There was more than one way in and out of those caverns—we could tell that much from the air currents we could feel and tried to follow. We tried to stay together, but it wasn't possible. There was too much fear, and too much ground to cover, and too little fuel for the lamps, too few candles. By day—and we could

tell it was day, because in those hours none of us could hear it, or catch glimpses of it, or feel its presence hanging over us—we tried to find our way out. We sent out two-man search parties that often didn't return at all. By night, we found a place to huddle together in our dwindling numbers, fighting terror and exhaustion, staring blindly into the darkness beyond our sad little circles of light.

It hunted us like rabbits, and like rabbits we fled from it.

By the end, there were only four of us left, four out of almost two dozen that found the second exit, too small for a grown man to make it through. So we set about trying to widen it with crude tools of stone and the butts of the weapons we had left and the blades of our hunting knives. It made a horrible racket, and I'm certain the thing heard us in whatever hole it slept during the day. We knew, in our hearts, that it would come for the rest of us that night and that knowledge lent us desperate strength as we worked furiously, the shaft of light passing through the aperture we had found dwindling as the day died.

In the end, we failed. The exit was still too narrow when sunset turned the sky bloody—too narrow for all but one. I was slender enough to get out and Sandor, damn him, forced me through as I stood arguing with him in front of it, shoved me into the opening and out the other side with kicks and blows and shouts. I heard him screaming behind me as I fled down the hill, half-running, half-falling, more than half-blind with tears.

If I see a thousand years pass, I will never forget those screams.



Breaking into the local historical society building was not a particularly taxing exercise in burglary. In fact, it took more effort to keep their flashlight beams from being seen than jimmying the simple locks. Occasionally Klara could find it in her heart to be grateful of Jozsef's misspent mortal life.

"Here...property records from the 19th century." A cloud of dust went up. "It's a good thing we don't need to breathe."

"Read fast. Sunrise is in two hours and we'll need to—"

"Here's a thought: why don't we just *take* the damned ledgers, since I doubt there's going to be a run on primary resources relating to obscure mid-century properties, and read them at our leisure?"

Klara was forced to admit there was a certain amount of sense to that viewpoint, which was how they spent a day sleeping, uncomfortably, in the trunk of her car with two enormous and horribly dusty antique property ledgers for pillows. The next night found them creeping about an orchard that occupied the ground that had once been the Dvorak family farm and, upon which the foundation of the old farmhouse could still be found by the appropriately motivated.

"Damn it."

"What's the matter?"

"I think I found what we're looking for—the ground's all rucked up over here. Someone's been digging." Klara found Jozsef with her flashlight beam, sunk knee-deep into the freshly turned earth. "Help me up?"

A few hard tugs later, and he was back on solid ground and they were both on their hands and knees, digging as swiftly and silently as they were able, with their hands, lack-

ing any other tools. Klara reached what they were looking for first, starting in surprise as her fingernails struck leather-covered wood, and then metal. A quick few minutes' work found them pulling a small trunk, little more than a large letter casket, out of the old foundation-hole. The key fit perfectly, as Klara knew it would, in the built-in lock.

“What...?”

“It’s...her journals. I’ve seen her writing in them.” Klara gently eased one out; they were packed tightly together, more than a dozen tiny leather-bound books in almost as many styles, filled with her sire’s neat, elegant handwriting. “Why would she come all the way out here to bury her journals?”



It pursued me, of course. I was the last morsel of the banquet it had prepared for itself, after all, and I doubt it ever had any intention of letting me go. And, of course, it caught me, for I was only a grief-stricken, terrified girl who had just left her only friends to be slaughtered while she made her escape. By some miracle, I even managed to strike it. I can still remember the sensation of its blood on my hands, burning cold, colder even than the air and the snow bank into which it threw me as it took me, tearing away my life and my humanity in great hungry gulps. I remember the pain as it speared out my eye with one long talon and the horrible taste of the blood it spat into my mouth and the agony as I twisted and writhed in the grip of the change.

But I do not remember it. I cannot recall its face, or the form of its body, or anything about it. I cannot remember these things, and I cannot step beyond them. They tether me to a point where I do not wish to remain. I must, in some way, make my peace with the agonies and fears of my past, or I will never progress beyond them, never transcend the anguish of that night in any meaningful way.

Klara, I am sure that it will be you that reads these words, and I beg you to listen. The past has weight. History has mass and density, and sometimes hands to hold us down, to tear us apart. If you have come this far, you have saved my journals, and therefore much of my memory, from those grasping, tearing hands. You cannot save me. I must do that on my own.

I must do this thing for myself: I must find it. I must face it. And I must leave its ashes in the wind of the mountains.

I must be more than what it made me.

Marple

By Wood Ingham

“This was you, wasn’t it?”

I keep getting that. I have no idea why. I mean, do I look like a criminal mastermind? Seriously? Me?

“It’s the badges, isn’t it?” I ask.

Bianca, not possessed of a sense of humour at the best of times, stares at me like I have gone mad. She puts a hand on her hip. The three creepy blondes in the sunglasses do the same, wherever they happen to be standing in the room. This does not, in my view, make them any less creepy, but in the circles in which I am wont to move, this is pretty much what you expect, so I don’t make that observation just now, filing it for later.

“Honestly,” I say, “You look at me with the badges and everything and you think, how can someone be such a... such a... sadcase, and then you think, obviously I can’t be that sad and then it’s all a front because no one’s that sad and that actually it’s a front, and if it’s a front and no one’s managed to destroy me yet, I must be some sort of manipulative, plotting genius, and it never once occurs to you that I actually am that sad. Because I actually am that sad.”

I realise that I’ve lost the thread. Oh, arse. It started so well.

Bianca’s expression doesn’t change once. Not that it tends to, ever, but I at least expected some reaction. No one else in the room says anything.

Adrian Novis, there in the corner, fluorescent light reflecting unhealthily off of the top of his early-onset male-pattern baldness, has his mouth behind his hand, his eyes creased up. His aura is a comedy shade of orange. At least he’s finding this fun. Idiot.

Richard Davies is staring at the door, as if by staring at it he can open it. He hasn’t ever spoken to me, not once, not since we came in, not since I’ve been in this city—neither a minion nor anyone he can suck up to, see. Tall, broad, hunched over, his seamed face slack in his default politician’s smile, that doesn’t reach eyes behind his politician’s glasses. He’s all auraed in yellow, but lemony-yellow, the colour of insecurity. Honestly, it’s always got veins of that colour in it, but now, pow, it’s as bright as a dead man can get.

Louise Rees—compact, curly-haired, composed—has her arms folded and her back to Davies, which is yet more conclusive evidence that she is nowhere near as good at this as she thinks she is. Her aura is a fear-blue. Well done, Louise. About time you learnt a bit of honesty.

And Bianca Crowe, here with her three identical blonde minions in their identical bug-eye sunglasses and identical business suits with the white starched blouses buttoned right up to the throat, while Bianca—you can make a monster from a girl out of Essex, but you can't take Essex out of the girl—doesn't appear to wearing a blouse under her jacket at all. Classy. A couple of bees crawl up from inside the jacket and wander over her cleavage.

“Do you know you have bees in your cleavage?” I say.

She folds her arms and moves to the other hip. The three blondes do the same. God, I hate that. “That's irrelevant.”

Louise is absolutely still; her voice is utterly calm. Her aura says otherwise. “We need an explanation, Frances.”

I'll grant you, an explanation is probably necessary.

“This isn't, I'll admit, exactly as I planned it,” I say.

“You admit you planned it?” says Louise.

“If you call this planning,” says Adrian.

The moon shines low above the whole vista of London, visible through boardroom windows from which all the blinds have been removed. Seven reflections in the glass, the three women, crisp and clear, and four blurs. None of them is me. This, at least, is good.

On the conference table is a box, made of rough wood, showing signs of dust and mold, about seven foot long by three foot wide by two feet high, bound together, somewhat incongruously, with blue vinyl strapping.

Yes, I know. Honestly, the box was something of a surprise. No one here has mentioned it, but it doesn't take a genius detective to realise that we are all surprised to see it here. Likewise, I wasn't really expecting the words WHO IS CAIN? to be daubed on one of the walls in bloody great... well, bloody letters. Or the windows to have these lines of blood painted on the windowsills that none of us seem to be able to cross. Or for the doors to have developed the same thing the moment the last of us arrived.

Or the people--living people—I can hear breathing in the corridor outside, whispering little snatches of conversation, shuffling urgently, tense, excited, ready for violence.

This is the story of my life.

Or whatever one would choose to call it.



I always used to sympathise with the actor Margaret Rutherford, who famously said that her biggest regret was that she never got to play Juliet. Instead, she was saddled with what they always euphemistically called “character parts”. Madame Arcati. Miss Prism. And, of course, Miss Marple. Me, I always thought the idea of Miss Marple was just a little bit brilliant, this sweet little old lady who lives in one of those sweet little old English villages of the sort that you never really believe exists in real life until you actually visit one, and who happens to have this razor-sharp criminological instinct, and no one

really thinks she's got the slightest clue until she gets everyone in the drawing room and explains who did the murder and why and the culprit breaks down and the local police inspector grudgingly admits that yes, Miss Marple may be an infuriating old busybody but oh, she's solved the case once again, and no one seems to be bothered by the fact that St. Mary Mead has the highest murder rate of any community in the world ever. This is something I have always, always loved. In retrospect, an enthusiasm for Agatha Christie and a sense of insecurity about not being one of the cool vampires do not a Great Amateur Sleuth make.

Besides, I was bored.

I do get myself into these messes.

So. When Jacqueline Lyndon was—wait, is “murdered” even the right word? Beats me. Let's go with murdered. It's such a dirty word. Such a delicious, fun, lovely little word. (What? I'm English. It's in my blood, the love of a nice cup of tea and a cosy English murder.)

Anyway. When Jacqueline Lyndon was murdered, I thought it might be fun to find out who did it. She was in a locked room! She had a mysterious letter from none other than Mother Elisabeta, the Plague Nun, that implied she had had a box of some import in her possession! But where was the box?

Now, I've met Elisabeta, and she's not the sort to send magic boxes in the post without some sort of reason. So I thought I'd start digging. It's not like anyone really cares. I mean, this sort of thing happens more or less every night, and as long as it's neatly organised and it's no one important, it's just a newish vampire after all, another pawn in the great game.

I didn't think it would do any harm.



Around the head of the table, we're all sitting down, and possibly because they're all trying not to think about the fact the doors are shut and they can't get out and there is no place where one can escape the sun that will be up in three hours because this is an east-facing room with no blinds, everyone looking at this box and thinking hard and no one is saying anything.

Now, if I were a great amateur sleuth, I'd be running through everyone and their motives and they'd all be listening with bated breath as I explained the solution. Fact is, they all commit murder most days, and no one actually cares, and when I revealed to them why they were all here, they all said things like, “You got me here because of what?” Or “Who cares about that?”

And then Louise said, “Who is Cain, anyway?” to which Bianca replied, “Beats me.” Novis said something about the first murderer and the idea that the mark of Cain was the mark of the undead. Louise replied that she knew he was in the Sanctified, but she didn't know he was an idiot, and he pointed out quite reasonably that given who we were and what we knew about ourselves and what we didn't know ourselves, it seemed terribly naive to scoff at any explanation of our origins. She thought skepticism was a mug's game really. Davies started to laugh at him, which I thought, even given what I know, seemed unduly cruel. But then that's Richard Davies all over.

Fact is, they're not playing. Not that I thought that they necessarily would, but it's still terribly disappointing.

I suppose I must run through the script in my head while they bicker and score points and try not to address the fact that they can't get out and there is no place where one can escape the sun that will be up in three hours because this is an east-facing room with no blinds.

So.

The question, ladies and gentlemen, of why Jacqueline Lyndon was destroyed, falls upon you four. Her room was locked from the inside. The box, which we believe to contain something of great value, and which is now sitting here on this boardroom table for no apparent reason, was stolen. That must have required strength, and speed, and cunning to perform. This was no ordinary murder.

Let's start with you, Mr Davies. Once a man of some small power—not as much as you thought you had, granted, but nonetheless it must have been a real come-down to find yourself a bottom-feeder in the hierarchy of the dead. Let alone to find that you were suddenly really good at talking to rats. Finding that every one of your dubious achievements as Managing Director of a small legal concern would be reversed within twelve months of your funeral can't have helped. And to require the permission of Jacqueline Lyndon to feed in her territory—a woman who, let's face it, you wouldn't have looked at, let alone spoken to when you were alive—that had to be the icing on the metaphorical cake. Yes, Mr. Davies. You had the motive, all right. Did you discover that she had been entrusted with Elisabeta's box? Did you think that ridding yourself of her and taking the box might gain you power? Or prestige? Or revenge?

And what about you, Mrs Rees? Jacqueline made you, she didn't she? You knew all her secrets, and after all the public indignities she put you through—I remember that time with the raspberry jam and I'm sure everyone else does as well—you had very good reason to hate her. And Mr Novis, you are so very close to Mrs Rees. Did she enlist you, with your ability to enter keyholes and windowcracks, to create a classic “locked room” scenario?

And finally, Miss Crowe. No one likes you much, and you've murdered most everyone else. Also, your girls with the sunglasses creep me out. So basically you're a suspect because I don't like you.

So, I'm not the best at this. But honestly, when everyone is killing everyone else all the time and no one really cares beyond the inconvenience, how exactly does one pursue a murder enquiry?



It's about 4.45am when I say, “Look. Whoever barred the windows and doors knew we were coming.”

Bianca lets out and audible sigh. The three silent women standing behind her chair sigh in unison with her.

“For heaven's sake,” says Adrian, “Can you get more obvious?”

“No, listen, listen I know that no one cares about Jacqueline—I quite liked her, as it happens, but that's neither here nor there—but the very fact that the box is in here with us proves that I was right. What happened to her matters.”

Davies stares at me with that stupid-looking slack smile. “Your understanding of this is shallow, young lady.”

“Don’t patronise me.”

“You’ve really said enough,” he says, the slack politician’s smile never leaving his mouth. I decide that if we get out of this situation, I am going to sneak into his sleeping place and mess with his things every single night.

“Yes, but do you know who is in the box?” I ask.

Davies sits back, and the default smile flattens.

No one here is daft enough not to have realised that a seven by three by two foot box likely contains one of us. That’s obvious, that is. But I have some advantage over them on this. Preparation is all.

“Anyone want to ask him, then?” I say, leaning over and hooking a finger under the strapping.

“Don’t,” says Novis, reaching over and putting his hand on my wrist.

I honestly hadn’t thought that would actually work. “You know who’s in the box, don’t you?”

He withdraws his hand and glowers.

I sit back, feeling a small satisfaction. Then I glance towards the window and my smile vanishes as I realise I can now see eight reflections in the window. My own reflection smiles and waves happily at me.

“Come on,” says Louise. “You can’t keep us on tenterhooks like that. If I’m going to be incinerated, I’d like to know what I’m going to be incinerated for.”

“Speak for yourself,” grumbles Bianca, “I’d rather not be incinerated at all.”

“Don’t you have the means to stop it?” asks Novis.

“What?” Bianca does not move, nor does her expression change, but her voice is razor sharp. A bug crawls up out of her jacket and onto her lapel.

Novis motions to the three motionless women standing behind Bianca’s chair. “They’re not like us. Maybe whatever it is that stops us leaving won’t work on them.”

“So what?” says Bianca. “The moment one of the drones steps outside, whoever’s out there will smack their heads in.”

“It’s on the doorstep,” I say. “The girls don’t need to step outside. You just need one of them to break that line of blood and whatever it is on the threshold. That’ll do it. Then, it’s fair to say that any of us could take them. I can hear them breathing outside. They’re not anything special. I mean, if Mr Davies here had half a brain, he’d have found a rat to do it for him.”

“There aren’t any,” says Davies. “Not a single one in the whole building.” Well. Maybe he’s not such a fool after all.

“Really?” I’m sort of flabbergasted by this. This is London, after all. “Gosh. They’re pretty thorough, aren’t they?”

“Listen,” says Louise. “They’re expendable. Just get one of your girls to open the door. She’s surely got enough time to break the line.”

“Do you have any idea how much time it takes to make one of these?” Bianca purses her lips. The three girls do the same.

“You want the chance to make one again?” asks Louise.

Bianca sighs. “All right. P?” Bianca gives her slaves letters rather than names. I once asked her if she had the whole alphabet, and she said she didn’t have one called “T”. I was too creeped out to figure out if she was joking or not.

One of the girls walks towards the door and reaches for the handle, stops. Then she walks back and joins the others.

“See?” says Bianca. “It’s not just us.”

Novis is resigned to destruction, Davies is silent, and Rees is protesting strenuously, but I lose the thread pretty quickly because I am not paying the attention I perhaps should—my reflection in the glass is waving at me. She is pointing at the box. I make a “what?” expression. She points more urgently. I turn back to the box. I realise that everso slightly, the box is beginning to move, that something is pushing the tiniest bit against the strapped-down box lid.

“Excuse me?” I say.

No one pays any attention. They keep arguing.

I try making it a bit louder.

“Will you excuse me for one moment and please pay attention to the box because I think he might be waking up OK?” I say in one breath. Everyone stops arguing.

“He can’t get out,” says Novis, withdrawing from the table and shrinking back against the defaced wall, clutching one hand to his bald spot, one to his mouth. “He can’t get out. We can’t let him get out.”

“Who can’t get out?” asks Louise.

“It’s desperately important,” says Novis. It’s evident to me that he’s really not joking.

“He’s really not joking,” I say.

“No one is answering the question,” says Davies. “Tell me who is in the box. Now.”

“Ask nicely,” I say.

“What?”

“Ask nicely. Say, please. A little bit of politeness costs nothing.”

Davies turns from me, stands, and approaches Novis, looms over him. “Tell me, man.”

Novis can barely get it out, but Davies is looming over him and suddenly is scarier than the box. “It’s the Plague Angel.”

Davies stops. “Never heard of it.”

“Oh,” says Bianca. “Who?”

“Means nothing to me,” says Louise.

I decide to elucidate a little, explaining that the occupant of the box is most likely to be one Thascius Hostilinus, writer of a book I read called *The Testimony of the Plague Angel*, and that he may or may not be the oldest of that particularly unpleasant group we call the Morbus, and even if he isn’t, he’s most likely really, really old. I expect them to be impressed by this. They’re not, particularly. Typical. No bloody regard for history.

“More importantly,” I add, “He’s also likely to be really, really hungry.”

This is somewhat more relevant to the vampires in the room.

“So wait, this is some sort of Sanctified saint?” asks Louise. Honestly, and they say I state the obvious.

“He’s nothing of the sort,” says Novis. “Thascius Hostilinus was one of the founders of the Chapel and Spear. He is a Blooded Saint. This cannot be him.”

“Wait,” I interrupt. “I get it. You want him gone because he’s not going to live up to the expectations your religion has of him. And your religion can’t let facts get in the way of a good hagiography, oh no, no, no.”

“The thing in there is tainted,” says Novis, the last vestiges of humour falling away from him.

And now it is time to reveal the truth. I have been looking forward to this bit. “You see! It was you who stole the box. It was you. You found out that Jackie Lyndon had the box and she was going to wake him up, and get him up to speed, and teach him English and stuff, and you really didn’t want to do that because your theology has moved on a bit and you didn’t like the idea of someone who was as horribly compromised as him being one of the founders of the church, and...” I have to pause. I become terribly aware that the sentence has already gone on long enough. “That was why you killed her.”

Novis stares at me for a moment.

“No,” he says slowly. “I didn’t kill her. That wasn’t me.”

“Oh,” I blink. This isn’t right. I had it all figured out.

“Don’t get me wrong. I would quite happily have killed her. I meant to. I was on my way to put her to the torch. And then I got there, and I found she was already rotting away. And the box was gone too.”

“So, however did the box get here?” I ask. “Who brought the box here and told... well, whoever wrote that—“ I motion to the wall—“ that we were going to be here?”

“Ask her,” says Louise, pointing at Bianca.

Bianca cocks her head to one side. An angry buzzing noise comes from inside her chest.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

The thing is, I can see her aura here. It’s all shifty and mottly and... I never thought I would say this, but it has all this white in it.

“She really doesn’t know what you mean,” I say.

“Then how come,” asks Louise, getting up and standing tall—or at least as tall as she can because she’s about as short as I am—and beginning to circle the table. “The men who brought it here were accompanied by one of your... entourage... or whatever they are? It’s not like any of them are going to have any agency, is it?”

She walks over to one of Bianca’s drones and whips off the girl’s sunglasses. Her eyes are completely empty, glazed over with a near-opaque white film.

Bianca’s mouth drops open.

“It wasn’t one of mine,” she says.

“I was here earlier,” counters Louise. “I saw.”

“Excuse me,” I say, “What were you doing here earlier?”

“I... um... had business.”

“With whom?” demands Novis.

The hateful black that swirls around in Louise's aura pretty much dominates her.

"You told them we were going to be here," says Novis.

"No," says Louise, rounding on me. "I was following you. You told them we were going to be here."

Uh-oh.

"I was following you," Louise repeats.

"Why would you follow me?"

She raises an eyebrow. "So I could find a reason to dispose of you? Obviously."

Wait a minute. "When?"

"About seven. Just after sunset."

Oh, great. "I was over in Clerkenwell. With Bianca." My reflection, still visible in the window, gives me a thumbs up.

"She actually was," says Bianca.

"No she wasn't," argues Louise. "She was here."

"It wasn't strictly me," I say. "Well, it was sort of me. But not really."

"You're talking nonsense now," says Novis.

"While I was following her"—Louise points at me—"I saw her"—and she points at P—"bringing the box in."

"But that's impossible. I know where P was. She was..." Bianca looks confused all of a sudden. "I don't..."

The other two women, the one with the glasses and the one without, stand still one hand on hip, but P, I notice, is standing differently. She takes off her sunglasses. Her eyes are not opaque; rather, they reflect the artificial light like some sort of animal's, or bird's.

"OK," I say. "It's all OK. I get it now."

Everyone turns to look at me for a moment.

Then P punches her left hand through the back of Louise Rees' head. Withdrawing it, Louise's decaying body collapses in on itself and drops to the floor.

Davies, fangs bared, leaps across the table, across the box, knocking it askew, and although she catches him by the throat with her right hand, he pushes her back for a moment. She stumbles, hand still around his throat, his arms flailing around and not reaching her. I think, crikey, doesn't he have short arms for such a tall bloke? and then it's a moot point because although she's halfway across the room, nearly by the window, her fingers meet in the middle of his throat, his head falls off and he's a pile of dust.

About two seconds have passed. Bianca makes a movement with a hand and the two other drone girls leap at their former colleague in unison. Each is flung across the room, lying there and there, bent in impossibly awkward angles but still trying to move as if they haven't noticed their spines are broken.

The only sounds now are a strangled sobbing from Novis, who is curled into a ball on the floor, clutching his head and the hammering of hands against the inside of a box. The hammering is harder now, so much so that with each blow the box bounces a little on the table. Bianca is standing, frozen, the psychic shock of her hive-mind's disruption preventing her from even moving. And me? I'm trying to think of something to say, some way to get out of this.

“So,” I say. “Nice night for it.”

The former slave, now possessed by—well, I know what possesses her, but it fills me with an unreasoning terror, and part of me refuses even to admit its existence—grins at me.

“This is the part where you explain everything before you kill me, right?” I suggest, hopefully.

“No. This is the part where I kill you.” Her voice is harsh, like an animal trying to make human noises using a human throat as if it were an animal throat, which makes sense to me for a moment, and then doesn’t.

“You brought the box here because you wanted to dispatch everyone who knew about the box: me, and Davies, and Rees, and him”—I indicate Novis—“and you wanted the box because you were done hiding in Bianca’s girl and you wanted someone a bit bigger. A bit more important.”

“I knew him.” The possessed woman stands up straight. “I knew him. It was only fitting. This body is weak. But he is old and strong. And he means something.”

I feel quite pleased with myself for actually managing to get her talking. The hammering on the inside of the box is beginning to splinter the wood.

“You weren’t expecting the hunters to be here.” I can see my reflection in the window. She’s looking at her watch.

“No matter.”

The possessed woman takes a step back, as if to spring... and my reflection reaches out of the glass and drags her in, in a single fluid motion. I hear, or imagine I hear, a shriek like a bird or something else and then, a few seconds later, a sound somewhere between a splat, a crack, and a thud.

OK. I wasn’t quite expecting that.

I turn to Bianca. She is fried. No one home. Novis has started rocking back and forth. The box is banging about quite frighteningly now. OK, Frances. Now what?

I turn and look at the door. Think. Think.

“Ahem.” I turn. My reflection is standing behind me.

“Excuse me?” she says.

“Uh, yeah. OK.” I stand aside.

She opens the door and with a simple motion of a ghostly foot, disrupts the line of blood and salt across the doorframe, and vanishes, moments before three men and a woman, haggard, dressed in army surplus, bathroom army haircuts, dive into the room, with their knives and stakes, screaming. I’m already out of their sight, out the door and for all intents and purposes invisible. I’m down the corridor and as far as the lift when I hear the battle cries turn into screams of terror and the sounds of violence turn into sickening, wet sounds.

I’m going down. There is a time to be curious about this sort of thing. This is not it.

My reflection is in the mirror, smiling at me.

“You knew about the owl, didn’t you?” I say.

She looks intolerably smug. God, I hope I don’t look like that when stuff I plan works out.

“And you did this to get me in trouble, didn’t you?”

She laughs, silently and she’s gone.

Time to go.

I’m out and trying not to think about what happens if the old chap in the box escapes.

Bianca might be a little annoyed too, although her chances are somewhat slimmer.

And Novis, well, I don’t think I’ll be seeing him again.

I have a niggling feeling all this might be my fault.

Oh well. You live, you learn.



Owl Sign

By Joseph Carriker

In bayou country—hell, in all of the deep South, for that matter—there are some signs you don't ignore. You don't ignore wrong colored dirt scattered on your front stoop. You don't ignore weird-smelling oils on your door knobs or car door handles. You don't ignore it when the shiny leap year dime you keep tied with red thread around your ankle blackens.

And you sure as hell don't ignore owl sign.

There were a great many things that a new vampire sheds, along with her need to eat food and ability to walk around in sunlight. Amandine knew this well. Her ties to kin, so strong in life. Her desire to see the rest of the world, to walk in its parks and drink its alcohols. The surety that she'd maybe marry a handsome, sensitive Yankee boy who'd surely piss off her Cajun parents, that she'd eventually get around to going to college, that she'd make it out of Louisiana. All gone.

But most telling was what she didn't shed. Her love for the nightlife in New Orleans. Her fascination with its cemeteries, and its hanging oaks in riverside parks. But most importantly, she didn't shed her knowledge of “spiritual stuff,” what some folk called hoodoo, or conjure, or rootworking. That was as much a part of her as that thick, bitter blood her sire fed her that made her a Mekhet; moreso, really, because it had been with her for all her life, as far as she could remember.

She sometimes wondered why he Embraced her. She wasn't much to look at. A bit plain in the face, though she knew she had good cheekbones and full lips. Her hair was a simple brown, and more often than not worn away from her face in a ponytail. She preferred simple blue jeans and hiking boots, boy's dress shirts bought at a thrift store, her ubiquitous leather messenger bag.

Her sire wasn't the sort who answered questions like that, though. He found them frivolous and contemptible. “Reflective of self-obsession,” as he liked to say. He'd made her a blood-sucker and then inducted her into the Circle of the Crone, a covenant of half-wild and deeply primal witches in the grand old tradition of Baba Yaga, Louhi, and Circe. They were pagans...or they considered themselves gods.

To be honest, Amandine had a hard time keeping up with their bloody theology. She was with them for the magic, though, a mutual exchange: their old expert on hoodoo and

other “syncretic Southern folk magics” (as her sire put it) had died a few years ago, just before Katrina, and so she was the replacement.

After her Embrace, Amandine told herself she wouldn’t come back to the bayous. Not for a while. If vampires were real, she didn’t want to face down the loup-garou her granny told her stories about, or any of the other spirits and things she knew had to be real, too. Heck, she’d never really believed in vampires, after all—God forbid she find out the truth of the things she really did believe in.

But sometimes you don’t have a choice.

It had been years since she’d seen Martin. He’d been a stupid kid three years younger than her when she went away to work in a bar on Royal Street, far away from the bayou country, where a pretty girl could make some money for herself (and find some freedom from her family, really). But when she saw him again, it was in the Cat’s Meow. She’d done a double-take, almost not recognizing him.

He’d grown up, sure enough, though she doubted he was actually old enough to be in the bar. His boyishly thin features had given way to sleek, handsome lines in cheekbones and chin, lithe strengths in chest and shoulders. And throat. Oh, yes, throat most of all, a fact not lost on Bertrandt who was feeding with succulent gusto from that shapely throat. Amandine narrowed her eyes when she saw him, and then sighed. Bertrandt probably wouldn’t kill him, but Martin was as good as kin.

She’d get the boy out of that danger. She owed old Miss Victoria at least that.

“Bertrandt,” she’d said, and the older vampire fluttered his eyelids, retreating from the ecstasy of his feeding. He narrowed his eyes and half-snarled, clutching a still-reeling Martin to him possessively. “Sorry to interrupt. I heard some of the tourists in the front of the bar talking about you and this one. They were talking about there being a couple of guys back here making out, and there being some kinky blood stuff going on, too.”

Bertrandt’s head snapped to the front of the bar, and then back at her suspiciously.

“Which...which ones?” he slurred, bringing himself to his senses. Prince Vidal didn’t tolerate potential breaches, particularly after the madness during Katrina, so everyone was careful. Amandine smiled and pointed out a small gaggle of visiting sorority sisters from Georgia. Bertrandt sighed. Amandine could read the frustration washing across his thoughts—this was going to be the work of all evening figuring out who knew what, and excising those memories.

Perfect.

“Let me get rid of this fella for you,” Amandine offered, taking Martin by the shoulder. Bertrandt looked at him for a moment, and threw her a look. She smiled. “He’s all yours, Bertrandt. I don’t do Cajun boys.”

With an exasperated sigh, Bertrandt rose and stalked over to the bar, where Amandine could hear him begin the process of learning as much about the women as possible, including Dominating the bartender into showing him their tab-establishing credit cards. Amandine hooked one of Martin’s arms around her shoulder and pushed him toward the back, the strength-giving vitae burning in her body pleasurably.

“Mandy?” he slurred as they got into the back room. “That you?” She shushed him until they were through the VIP lounge, and then out the back exit, and into a cab. His head lolled against the seat back, and he looked at her dreamily, a stupid grin on his face.

“Heh,” he chuckled. “So drunk. Can’t see your ‘flection.” She shook her head and blocked his view of the window behind her. A quick glance toward the front seat reassured

her that the cabby wasn't paying any attention. Anyone who works in the French Quarter quickly learns to ignore the stupid shit drunks say.



Her haven was a small, second-story flop off Royal Street, with a rickety cast-iron-railed balcony that she'd never dared actually stepped out on. It was a long night, nursing the boy back to sobriety. She was grateful for small mercies, like the fact that she'd never met Martin while drunk before. If she had, she probably would have left him to Bertrand's tender mercies.

He babbled. Incessantly. He bragged that he'd never made out with a dude before, and how awesome it was that that rich dude was all up on him. He knew it would piss off his dad if he found out, but "Pssht. Whatever." He'd had his eyes on some of the chicks in there earlier, too, but then he got to drinking, and that guy was just so interesting. And he totally didn't look gay at all.

She fed him the po'boys they got out of the food cart in front of her place. Thankfully, he was too drunk to think to ask for a plate or something to drink besides water. As he sobered up, he became less of the motormouth she was ready to toss out onto the balcony just to see what happened, and more of the sweet kid she remembered. She stood at the window watching the night life while he talked about life in the bayou since she'd left, relating the stories and goings-on of people she'd half convinced herself that she'd hoped to never see again.

It's also amazing what you try to get rid of, but don't quite manage to, when you're dead.

She found herself missing her Uncle Tommy, who lived just up the road from her family's house, and Martin's older sister Zett (Lisette, properly, but calling her that was a road to a black eye), who'd apparently run away with some young shrimper she met in Shreveport.

"She's living on the coast there with that guy," Martin sighed. He clearly missed her, and it was something she appreciated about her people—family was there to be loved, and most the folks she grew up around did just that, without a second thought. "She didn't even come back out for Granny's funeral."

The blood in her veins was thick, and torpid, but even room temperature blood can run cold.

"What?" she said, turning to him. He looked up at her in surprise, almost as though he was surprised to find her there.

"Zett. She didn't make Granny's funeral. Never even sent a card or called or nuthin'."

"Miss Victoria is dead?" She hoped that her face didn't show what she was feeling, but she'd never been very good with grief.

"Aw, shit," Martin said, standing. "Mandy, I thought you knew!" In an instant, she was in his arms, a big brotherly hug. It was nice. Human.

Her Beast thought so, too, and rose, sniffing at the faint traces of blood on the boy's body. Suddenly she was a battleground. She quickly stepped back, out of his reach, before her Beast won that little war. Amandine cleared her throat.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I'm just...I can't believe Miss Victoria is gone."

Amandine saw something under the surface in the boy's stance, and his aura flared in her vision like street lights on wet glass, refracted and impossible to ignore. A thin lattice of ruby desire and amethyst excitement was there, frail and anemic—the attempt of the desperate to make themselves feel something to cover up what they're really feeling.

Under that, in a dull wash like a silver-gray watercolor, was the grief and melancholy that was haunting him, driving him to the French Quarter, to idle drunkenness, to try strange new things to make the pain just stop.

“Martin,” she whispered, and stepped close to him again. She clenched her jaw, and forced her Beast down. This time she was the consoler, he the comforted, and safe in her arms, he wept like a little boy. Miss Victoria had all but raised him, as his mother and father both were overly fond of the bottle and their knock-down drag outs with one another.

The old woman's run-down home, with its candles on every surface, bottles, and jars on every shelf, smelling of lemongrass and smoky High John the Conqueror root, had been his literal sanctuary, and he'd loved that old woman fiercely. And she him. It was where Amandine and Martin knew one another from.

Mandy frequently came over to learn a little this and that, helping the old woman with the chores. Martin didn't have the gift, Miss Victoria had said, but he still loved it there. It was a secret world of mojo bags and Tarot cards, of saint's candles and bottles of strange-smelling oils with animal, mineral and root curios suspended in them.

He cried long and hard, like someone denied the opportunity. Not surprising really - he was a sweet kid, and his siblings were more like their parents than he ever was. This was a grief hidden by necessity, because mean people got meaner when they were trying to secret away their own grief, and loved to make targets of those who couldn't.

So he sat with Amandine, and he wept, and she basked in his grief, feeling some of it herself, while praying those secret prayers to whoever would listen that her Beast would stay quiescent. Eventually, he sniffled, and laughed and hugged her again.

It was a simple, honest and beautiful affection, and she inhaled it deeply like an addict denied her drug of choice for too long.

“How did she die?” Amandine finally asked. He sighed, and picked at his po'boy some more.

“They don't know,” he finally admitted. “She was old, and her heart just quit working one night.” He recital was rote; an echo, probably of a medical examiner's words that filtered down through the family and community. But even as he spoke it, a slender pale green worm of doubt wriggled its way through his aura.

“What are you not telling me?” She levied an eye toward him, and he looked shocked for a moment, and a flash of citrine fear rippled through his colors. She grinned, then, and he grinned right back at her.

“Man, I should'a known you'd know something,” he chuckled. “I dunno, Mandy. I think...I think she was hag-rode.” His whisper sounded like the shame of a young man in the big city, afraid to be thought a yokel for believing that nonsense, but the fearful orange returned, this time dying his aura like spilt paint. He wasn't embarrassed - he was afraid.

“Why do you think that?” Amandine rose and walked to the window to listen to him. The shifting in his aura was too bright, too vibrant. It was too familiar, somehow, and her Beast rumbled deep down in her gut.

“Because there was others who was hag-rode. She was helping ‘em. Went over to their houses, laid down red brick dust and salts on their door steps. She said it was the same one, one after another, some bad-ass hag-witch that was drinking their breath while they slept.”

Like many other places in the world, the folk lore of the South taught that the souls of witches can fly out of their bodies and settle knees-down on a sleeping person’s chest. That old witch can drink the breath of the poor unfortunate, coming back again and again to slowly consume them until that person dies. While the sleep is hag-ridden, they’re paralyzed, partially awake, and sure that their death is just around the corner. She’d learned about that long before she ever learned about something called parasomnia, sleep paralysis or any of the other name that medicine gave it.

“How did she know it was a witch?” She favored Martin with a grin. The boy shrugged, with a quick glance at the window, like he expected to find something waiting there, watching him.

“Owl sign,” was all he said.



For the week following Martin’s visit, Amandine stayed busy. Investigating coroner’s reports, talking to others in the Circle of the Crone, even paying visits to some of the hoodoos in their tucked away little houses and shops throughout New Orleans and its environs. Ultimately, those investigations led her here, an hour into bayou country outside of NOLA. It was full-on dark by the time she pulled up in her Impala.

For a moment, she sat in the dark car and looked around. There was a stagnant-sweet smell that blew in off the swamps on the western wind. The cypresses were thick here, and it was stupid humid. She glanced at the mirror and it shocked her for half a breath—just like it always did. Her sire assured her that there was a time when she’d get used to not showing up there. Amandine only half-believed him, really.

She finally glanced at the old, ugly plantation, half sunk into the swamp.

Goddamn it. She was stalling. She had to admit, it was because she was afraid. The oldest vampire she’d ever met was Vidal, the Prince of New Orleans. A couple hundred years old, or so. The age and power rolled off him like miasma off the bayou, and when she’d first encountered him, her Beast nearly tore her out the door she’d come through. Only her sire’s hand on her lower back had kept her there.

But the owl signs concerned the Circle of New Orleans. They talked about the harbingers, the devil birds who came before Katrina. They were connected somehow to some old vampire legends that dated all the way back to Rome (or so they said). So she bought herself into debt with the Invictus for a piece of lore she’d heard about: the location of an ancient Nosferatu who was supposedly old enough to have been in Rome, now holed up here in Louisiana.

She was just called Domina, and the Invictus were terrified of her. They believed she was an old patrician noblewoman, and claimed that she’d seen more than anyone—including herself—could remember. She occasionally showed up at Invictus gatherings, which usually derailed the assemblies. The appearance of an old, red-eyed, and hungry lady-monster holding court, telling the stories that were half-remembered and possibly born wholly out of age-madness, while the other vampires in the room shit themselves in fear? Yeah, that would derail things a bit.

Amandine glanced up into the trees, wondering. Gritting her teeth, she put a yoke on her wandering thoughts, got out of the car and looked around. The textures of the early evening bayou leapt out at her, and she absorbed the details of the place. Muck-filled footsteps from treads in the softer mud here and there. Too-long grass under the cypress trees, and the single big, ugly oak whose crowding branches threatened to reach out and crush the upper eaves of the plantation.

Domina kept a brood of young Nosferatu, the Invictus said, but they weren't anywhere to be found. Amandine was a fair hand at piercing the occultation of self some Kindred used, so she was fair sure they weren't hiding somewhere. Still, she could hardly blame them—if this old witch was her sire, she'd probably find business elsewhere, too.

Walking up the gritty steps, she found the door half-open.

The rank smell of the place hit her before she was even all the way inside. The bayou worked fast to reclaim the edifices of human hands, especially when no one was around to prevent it from doing so. Amandine wrinkled her nose at the scents that assailed her. Long fingers of mold crept up the walls behind stained wallpaper and plaster alike. Stagnant water pooled beneath the floorboards, discolored from the places where it had seeped into the house through floor and roof to begin with.

There was the smell of rotting plant material somewhere to her left, probably from a broken window that had let in blown leaves, kudzu, and rainwater somewhere along the way. The unmistakable odor of rodents filled the hidden spaces of the house, wafting out to distract her as she walked through the large rooms in front. The ammoniac sting of bird droppings filtered down from the attics.

But behind it all, somehow both alarming and exciting, the sharp scent of old, spilt blood. She followed the smell to the back kitchens, a cavernous space once filled with life, and warmth, and industriousness, now abandoned and choked with dust and cobwebs. A shifting on the stairs, a clumsy tread that creaked the old wood, drew her attention to the doors that led into the old cellars. Placing her back to the door in hopes of accomplishing a quick escape if it all went wrong, Amandine waited for the shuffling figure to rise. She slipped the strap of her messenger bag over her head and set it beside the door.

She saw the eyes first, orbs like terrible spheres of amber glass. They came searching out of the darkness and found her immediately. The ancient Nosferatu matron was withered in form, a slight bony hunch to the joints, and jowls in the face that suggested old age in life. But those limbs moved with whipcord strength, like coiled steel cabling, and those old woman's jowls surrounded a lipless slash of a mouth, filled with lamprey mouth-needles for teeth.

She wore what looked like some old house marm's dress, once a light color perhaps, faded by time and stained by swamp-water and old blood. Domina stumbled subtly, as though unsure on her feet. She rose to the last step and into the room on tiny feet like piss-bleached leather. They were tightly warped and cracked with ill-care, crowned by curving black horn-like nails that arched over the front of her warped root-like toes. The talons etched tiny scratches in the floor as she walked.

"Forgive me for invading your haven, Domina." Amandine felt a strange urge to curtsy, almost, though she hadn't the first idea how to execute such a thing. "I was looking for one of your childer or servants to announce me. I hope I haven't upset you."

"Cautious childe," the old creature hissed, and then made a chortling, choking sound that Amandine supposed must have passed for laughter. The Nosferatu matriarch shifted

in a sickening popping of joints to a crouching position, then a kneeling one, her clawed fingers playing through the thick grit on the floor around her. “My childer have gone away, and my servants besides.”

Amandine watched her for a moment, and then smiled, nodding.

“Then I hope you’ll excuse my rudeness in just showing up unannounced. I was hoping I might gain your help.”

“Perhaps.” Domina’s voice was raspy, breathy in an unsettling way, with the slightest trace of an indefinable accent. “There are too few things interesting enough to warrant my attention. Do you think yours is?”

“Oh, I suspect so, Domina,” Amandine smiled, and walked to the window. She stared outside of it for a moment, and then glanced over her shoulder. The old Nosferatu’s head swiveled on its twisted neck to follow her, twisting about perhaps too far to be natural.

“The Invictus of New Orleans seemed to believe that you might have some knowledge of the things called ‘Strix’. They say that you might have been around in the very early days, when the Strix first came among the Kindred of old Rome—or at least, have heard about it from those who did.”

“Well.” The ungainly noblewoman smiled her lamprey smile, and clicked her nails on the floor. The tiny echoes filled the kitchen with the sound of her pondering. “Suppose I do have such knowledge. Why should I give it to you?”

Amandine sighed. Always with these fucking games.

“Because it costs you nothing to give. You literally lose nothing for the sharing of the information, and stand to win the gratitude of everyone you might help.”

The hag-like Nosferatu chortled, a choking, cackling sound deep in her throat. “Well, the gratitude of the Kindred! Such a fine thing to keep me warm with.”

Amandine wandered the periphery of the room, touching the mildewing wallpaper here, brushing away the cobwebs in the corner there. She pondered as she walked. Halfway through the circuit, she stopped and turned to face Domina, who watched her like a spider in the middle of her web.

“What do you want, then?” Amandine gestured around the ruined room. “If you wanted things, you’d have them easily. You’re powerful, and the Invictus, at least, would stumble over themselves to pay you tribute if you beckoned. We both know that. So, it isn’t material goods you want.”

The hag chortled again, and gestured for her to continue. Amandine continued to walk the circuit of the room, stepping over a puddle of stagnant water here, kicking a pile of sodden leaves out of the way there.

“I suspect you don’t want knowledge,” she continued, walking. “I have it on good authority that things about the mortal world are trivial to find for someone with your... connections. And if you were interested in what was happening among the Kindred, you’d know that, too. In much the same way, I suspect.”

Amandine seemed wrapped in thought as she walked. One hand dipped into her pocket and emerged, flicking and twitching over and over, looking for all the world like a nervous gesture, the sort of unconscious tick that one made when lost in contemplation.

Finally, she returned to the place where she began, completing the circle around the old hag. With a smile, she clapped her hands together, wiping the powder from them.

“I’d say that you might want what many ancient Kindred want from younger,” she said with a smile. Domina’s eyes narrowed at the shift in her tone. “But it’s clear you’ve already gotten that. The grit all over this floor, and on the front steps—that used to be your childer, didn’t it?”

The hag hissed, and rose into a predatory crouch, her lamprey teeth bared, those horrible lamplight yellow eyes practically shining in her leathery face.

“No, I don’t think you want any of those things.”

For all her preparedness, she still flinched when the ancient Nosferatu leapt at her. Potent strength—more supernatural power than raw muscle—carried her quickly across the filthy floor. Halfway to Amandine, however, the leap brought Domina across the light circle of salt, glass, red brick dust, and ground-up hyssop that the Mekhet rootworker had carefully sprinkled around her.

The result was horrifying to behold. The hag howled, and her leap turned into a flailing tumble. Black blood sprayed across the span, and there was a terrible detonation in Amandine’s psychic senses, the equivalent of a sonic boom heard only in the mind. Domina landed in a sprawl, wailing, and promptly vomited black, bubbling vitae, her scrawny form heaving brutally.

Despite this gruesome scene, Amandine ignored the thrashing of the potent Nosferatu. It was the thing that remained inside the circle, torn from Domina’s body as she crossed the line, that held her interest: a whirling body of smoke-like mist, rising in the shape of an ephemeral owl, only to collapse in its fury into a cloud of roiling fog. Baleful yellow luminance skewered Amandine’s spirit, and the young vampire clutched at the mojo bag tied around her neck.

“Comment...comment savez-vous...” Domina gagged from her place on the ground, and studied the young Mekhet with a sunken-in crimson gaze.

“Your eyes were my first clue,” Amandine said in French, not taking her eyes off the furious owl-spirit. The thing filled the room with its psychic invective, a sensation not unlike claws on a chalkboard. “The Invictus who told me about you warned me not to be unnerved by the blood of your eyes.”

Amandine glanced at the Nosferatu, who smiled weakly, her limbs still tremblingly incapable of supporting her after the trauma of having the possessing spirit ripped from her.

“It was other things, though. I’ve aided the Sheriff in his investigations before, so I recognized the grit that remains when particularly old vampires meet the Final Death. Also? She spoke to me in English. I was warned that since my Latin wasn’t quite up to conversation, you only spoke French and Spanish these days.”

The hag laughed. Not the horrible sound she’d emitted when possessed earlier, but a bright, rich sound, full of humor and life. Amandine glanced at her in surprise, and then turned her gaze back on the spirit, a smile on her face.

“I’d been investigating what the people of the bayou call a hag-riding,” she continued. The spirit roiled less furiously now, and its gleaming eyes-in-the-smoke now shined steadily, watching her. “People normally experience them, feeling like they’re going to die. They sometimes call on rootworkers—spiritual doctors, if you will—for help with them. To have one person die from being hag-ridden is almost unheard of. But three, and then the rootworker who was called on to help to be claimed by it as well? Impossible.”

Amandine steeled her thoughts now, with every ounce of discipline she had, keeping her grief at bay. Miss Victoria - Martin's Granny - meant so much to her, and she missed her with a longing like a hound gnawing a bone. She worried at it, but refused to let it show. Not now.

She was relieved when Domina changed the subject.

"How did you know it was one of the noctua birds?" With a creaking of her joints like old rope stretched too far, Domina rose to an unsteady standing position. "They are rare in this age. Blessedly."

"Some of the Circle knew of them. They made an appearance just before Hurricane Katrina out here a few years ago, so the information on them was near to hand. But it was the Invictus who suggested I come and see you. One of them—he asked me to keep his name out of such things, of course—suggested that you might know something."

"Oh, indeed I do. Have you the means of making a spirit-trap?" Amandine felt her Beast react in terror at the ancient presence of the Beast in Domina's breast, as the old Nosferatu stepped up beside her. She clutched the bag around her neck even more tightly, and took comfort from the small fluttering of the tiny little courageous spirit there.

"Already made." She backed away from the spirit, glancing behind her to the bag she set beside the door. Scooping it up without taking her eyes from the spirit, she opened it. Inside was a simple mason jar, half-stuffed with salt, broken glass shards, bits of dried Spanish moss, and a fistful of rusted needles and pins. She smiled and unscrewed the cap—inside was a Sharpie-drawn Solomonic seal. Placing the jar on the floor, she watched as the spirit quailed and pulled away from the edge of the circle.

"Oh, Mister Screech-owl knows what this is, don't he?" she cooed at it, with a shit-eating grin. Reaching into her pocket, she drew out more of the powder she'd laid the circle with. From the nearest edge of the circle, she drew a V-shape, like a funnel, and then where the lines met at the bottom of the V, an inward-curving spiral, with the jar in the middle.

"You fucked with the wrong rootworker, Mister Screech-owl. She had friends," she said, and then wiped away the edge of the circle, opening it up to the funnel design she'd just drawn on the floor and then stepped back quickly.

As though a vacuum cleaner had just been turned on, the feathery ephemera of the Strix spun towards the break into the circle. It is the nature of spirit and ward that a completed circle always contains the spirit, but a spirit's body always seeks to escape a broken one. It could no more try and remain within the ward than a cup of water could try and keep from leaking itself out a crack in the glass. The thing screeched to Amandine's strange-senses, and then went quickly silent.

The lid of the mason jar made its distinctive tinny sound as she clapped it on the glass jar, and screwed it closed tight. Amandine raised the jar carefully, appraisingly, and held it up to the moonlight filtering into the room. Nightmares roiled in the container.

"So, that's that." Amandine smiled. She nabbed up the long piece of red flannel in her bag, and wrapped the jar securely. "I'm going to get these back to the temple. Some of the old witches want to look at it."

Domina smiled, and stepped up beside Amandine. "You are quite resourceful, for one so young."

“Thank you, Domina,” the young Mekhet said soberly, slinging her bag across her back. “I’m sorry you were in its clutches as long as you were.”

“I suspect it is I who should thank you, little one. Gods only know what horrors it might have wrought in my body. The diablerie of mine own childer was terrible enough, and I suspect I shall wear the soul-deep scourge-marks of those sins for many years.”

Amandine nodded as they walked to the doorway and stepped out onto the covered porch. The ancient Nosferatu laid her hand on Amandine’s shoulder, and the rootworker stopped to look the elder in her red eyes.

“In all truth. I am in your debt.” Amandine simply bowed, thanking her, and turned to leave.

“You know...” Amandine said as Domina turned to retreat into her sanctum. “You, uh, might get the chance to repay me here pretty quickly.”

With gliding steps, the noble Nosferatu crossed to the top of the steps, into the night air. There, in the trees above Amandine’s half-rusted Impala, roosted in the trees a score or more owls, wan as the clouds in the moonlight.

As one, they turned to regard the two Kindred with hate-filled, yellow eyes.



Noblesse Oblige

By Benjamin Baugh

Felix

Clothes are one of the few uncomplicated pleasures we have, and often, one of the few areas we can truly demonstrate our agency. Our dearest prince might dictate when we feed, who we initiate, where we dwell, and with whom we may associate, but we'll damned well wear the designer labels we want while crawling like good little maggots. Of course, I use "we" for a collective sense of solidarity. I find that for myself it is better not to crawl. It is for these reasons that I am both very well-dressed (a depressed teenager could self-harm with my suit, it is so sharp), and very irritable—the voice on the other end of my phone is taking a tone friend Felix finds frustratingly forceful. Positively strident.

Voice says, "Describe the field again. Who is looking keen. Who is looking bored. When the lot comes up, who is staring, and who is reading the catalog."

Felix says, "Answer is now same as before, ask me again and I'm out the door."

Voice sours, pickling my ear, "Felix! Take this seriously. We may have history, but I'd always believed you at least had sense where these matters were concerned."

And Felix says, "And I was the only one close by when your people noticed this thing."

Voice says, "It's not me who's asking this of you. I'm just telling you what to do."

Of course, Voice was in the right on this, for a certain value of 'right'.

When reading a crowd, the most obvious first-pass sign one looks for is incongruity. Who belongs? Who stands out? Who is relaxed in this setting, and who looks like a virgin in a sex dungeon? There is a way to become syrup, a golden thick liquid, and pour yourself into a scene, conforming perfectly to the expected social mold, filling the role so perfectly you create no incongruity. To spot a syrupy player takes a more cunning eye (which of course, I have), but it also takes a certain effort of will and brain which (given the circumstances and a general tendency towards petulance which I acknowledge is a character flaw) I was unwilling to make. So surface details only...

Timbult Auctions is located in downtown Syracuse, near the Landmark Theater (where I had tickets later to see *Wicked* with a certain someone with whom I wished to become better acquainted). Timbult apes the English auction houses, with formal decor

and open bidding via numbered paddle. When Voice had called in the favor that put me here, I'd hoped for something more rousing, like a proper cowboy cattleyard auction, with a fast-talking character rattling off bids. Instead, I got a New World attempt at Old World charm, and an auctioneer with an Upstate accent wearing Long Island's pants.

Voice called me the previous night, all a'twitter over an auction catalog (Voice spends an inordinate amount time reviewing such things and imagining terrible things) A collection of personal effects which had belonged to a writer were being sold by his estate to support the charity called "our deadbeat relative left us more debts than cash, and we ought to have something to show for putting up with him for all those years." Richard Harper wrote some quite-popular suspense and horror in the seventies and early eighties, sold some film rights, collected ex-wives, and died while skiing after a disagreement with a tree. The Richard Harper Collection (as the catalog described it, with no small pomposity) consisted mostly of memorabilia, photographs of the author with famous people, a desk set, one of his typewriters (a Royal Fleetwood, fake woodgrain and all—the catalog claimed it was the one he wrote the first draft of *Night Owl* on), several pairs of reading glasses, a side table, a set of dreadful deco whiskey tumblers I'd decided to bid on because they'd make a terrible gift for somebody I didn't really like, and finally, the reason I was here and Voice was barking, Lot 23.

It was listed as "Statue, wood. 14 inches tall. A stylized representation of an owl, age unknown. Lacquered black. Condition, fair." What made Lot 23 the prize of the night was its appearance in all of the dust-jacket "About the Author" photos of Richard Harper from his books. If a photograph of the author is to be found in one of his editions, then it has him sitting at a desk—rarely the same desk—with assorted bric-a-brac (growing more baroque and gothic as his career took off), the only common element being the bird statue, which was always placed to his right, and always oriented to face towards him. Most of the conversations I'd overheard concerned the bird, and the bidding promised to be interesting. It was the sort of niche collectable that did well. It had a story; it was connected to a famous person; it was black and shiny, so had an air of mystery about it. And, obvious to even my bored eyes, the people drifting in as things proceeded closer to this last lot seemed of a different sort than those who'd stuck it out from the beginning and picked at the earlier lots.

The bird made Voice quite concerned.

One of Richard Harper's early best-sellers was *Smoke Eagles*, a Navajo ghost story set in Chicago. Cultural appropriation aside, it wasn't a bad read. Detective Dame Kimble has to protect a young Indian girl from hungry bird-ghosts who possess corpses. He sold the movie rights in '79, but the studio shelved it. They kept renewing, and he kept selling. He named the boat this paid for the Hollywood Ransom. He had more success with *Eyes like Lanterns*, *Mr. Screech*, and in a surprising departure, the spy thriller *Bird Watcher*.

Voice interrupted my woolgathering, "Well?"

Felix responded, somewhat sharply, "When there is something worth saying, I'll say it. Am I supposed to bid on the bird, or just watch?"

Voice responded, "I am still trying to authorize the funds."

Felix sighs, "You've already got my time and attention. I'm not also funding this adventure."

Voice snaps back, "Just watch and report! See who's keen on the bird, find out who buys it. We can obtain it later if there turns out to be cause."

I prepare a rejoinder, and then in walks a justification for me being there, and instead I clam up. Pride? Perhaps. Probably in fact, but rather than narrate, I watched. A group of three, obviously cousins of mine (though using one of my little tricks, they didn't notice the same affinity from me). The lads were dressed quite well, and I felt the old prickling along my spine as I sized them up. Were their suits sharper? Their watches more expensively understated? The lady was their feminine counterpart, with expensive clothes worn well and custom tailored. Faces tell you nothing of age and experience, of course, but there are clues. A certain incaution to movement, a degree of unwariness, the animated way of speaking. Not young, but not old either. Wealthy, clearly. And well-used to dressing well. They stood too close to three people in the front row, and one of the males spoke to them with a disingenuous smile, and they got up stiffly and wandered to the back of the hall leaving their seats for the newcomers. The speaker smiled a self-satisfied little smile, and I downgraded their age by a significant mark.

Felix said, "Hmmm, something interesting seems to be happening."

Voice replied, sharp as glass, "What?"

Then the Count walked in.

At the time, of course, I had no idea who he was. But I suddenly almost desperately wanted to know. I spoke earlier about clothes and about incongruity. The right clothes and the right manner can make one at home in any situation. But take the opposite extreme, and bizarrely, it can also sometimes serve.

He was the tallest man I'd ever seen, but built solid rather than attenuated. Leather, boots, with a shiny bald bullet-like head, and a face full of metal. His scent was a mix of musk and machine oil, engine exhaust, road dust, blood. Almost immediately, one of the jacketed porters approached this apocalyptic figure, and the big man looked down and just stared at him. I watched hard, because the pleasure in seeing a magic trick done is to see a magic trick done well, even if you know it has to be a trick. But no, I caught no sparkly eyes, no hypno voice—just a presence as imposing and implacable as an Eastern Island stone idol. The porter folded up like flower in a fire, mumbled something, and shuffled off. God, it was well done.

Felix said, "Let me call you back."

Voice said, "Felix, if you hang up, I'll..."

Felix said, "click".

The phone went into my left pocket, the battery into my right, and I got up to go and introduce myself.

The Count

The Count is a man of Obligation and Responsibility. The title comes with power, but the liege owes protection to his vassals, even if his vassals are fuckoff shits who don't know their place.

The three I'd followed here knew I was behind them the whole way. The Count's pipes announce his coming, and I followed close to make sure they knew I wasn't letting them off with just the warning I'd already issued. The education of the young is the duty of the educated man. Despite following the old man's philosophy, the three jokers did not know the Count, and worse, didn't believe when it was patiently explained.

"It's motherfucking noblesse oblige. You wrap yourself in the dragon's coils, and you're vassals to the castle lord, and you better recognize."

“Hey friend, believe what you like. It’s fine. But we have a thing tonight, right? And if we’re late, Chet is going to be miserable all night. Right Chet?”

“Oh yeah, I’ll be inconsolable.”

“See friend? We have to think of Chet. If we ever come visit your castle, then we’ll talk some more about it.”

The kid has no idea how hard the Count has to work to be a man of restraint.

The three made a point to ignore me, and a show of looking over the auction book. A house guard came forward, wise to suspect that the Count might be trouble, but wiser still to back off. Over at the side of the room, in cases, the merchandise was laid out for examination. The chattels of a dead man sold by his greedy kin. The only object worth considering other than a tight set of whiskey glasses was the bird. My ribs itched on the right side where the fresh ink prickled in sympathy, getting stronger as I walked towards the bird, blood memory swam up like a hologram. The sacking of the temple, the unending screech of burning birds, their wings on fire, they flee into the forest, falling, setting the winter-dry tinder alight. The red wrath of my line, the unending ache to end it all in steel, to clean it all with fire. I recognized the Bird, though I’d never seen it before.

“Yeah, I thought so.”

Twenty or so people in here, plus the three draculs, the shapeless auctioneer dressed in sweat and a brown suit, a few more house guards in red jackets. There would be alarms and cameras too. I envied the Old Count. In his age, steel and fire got the job done, and if anyone was wiser, they knew to keep quiet. But there are times when even now, a man must act decisively. I unzipped my coat so I could get to my knife, and let the tension drain away, replaced with the cool pleasure imminent violence.

Then from the Count’s left, much closer than anybody ought to have gotten, somebody said, “Hi! My name is Felix. I’d really love to get to know you.”

Felix

The gigantic man gave me a look, and I’m not ashamed to say I felt the ghost of shivers along my spine, and a prickling on my scalp. If looks could kill... I started to think and then noticed the thick hilt of antler under the man’s unzipped biker’s leather, and then further on to notice the enormous gutting blade it was attached to. Looks, no, but that Bowie would certainly do.

For a moment, I considered tweaking him a little bit, greasing my smile with the old bloody trick, but on consideration he didn’t look the sort who’d take that kind of thing well, and knowing nothing about him (other than the obvious—huge, armed, and itchy with barely suppressed violence) I couldn’t risk him knowing the ways of noticing that kind of thing. Some people get touchy when you fuck with their hearts and minds, even for the most genteel reasons.

“You are by far the most interesting thing in this room. You were eyeing the bird. You were eyeing those three idiots up front. And you don’t look like a collector of literary biographical memorabilia. Forgive me for being forward. And if this is your domain, forgive my trespass. I’d intended only to drop by, observe the auction, and take my leave.”

I have never met anyone less readable than this man—in stillness, he was like a sequoia. His face, a carven stone. That carapace of poise fascinated me as much as anything else. He was clearly a man ready to do violence. He’d been preparing to draw steel and deal death—even in this crowd!

I waited, and for the first time in a very long time I missed my heartbeat, which might have chopped the moment into comprehensible slices. Without it, time constricted, as did my vision. So used to seeing every tick and tell, it narrowed minutely searching the broad pierced face for some sign, whether I'd next be fighting or making friends.

He extended his hand slowly, empty of blade, and I shook it, and felt absurdly childlike (memories of walking across a street, my tiny hand in my father's heavy calloused one...).

"My name is Dracula."

I was not prepared for that answer. It must have shown for at least a moment.

"Really?"

His immobile face came alive, irritation giving way to resignation.

He explained, "Count Dracula. It's an inherited title."

His voice was a Harley at idle, the massed charge of heavy horse felt through the ground; it was a killing dog about to slip its leash.

Enchanted. Utterly enchanted. The things you can learn, even at my age.

"I think I would like to know everything about you. In exchange, perhaps I can fill in some blanks on the bird?"

With a glance at the display case, and another slower one at the three tikes up front, he nodded once.

"Where?"

"I'm sure the manager will lend is his office."

The old gentleman was, as it turned out, only too happy to do so. I do have a remarkable smile.

I didn't expect the Count to take a seat, but he dropped into the manager's big leather chair and slid into a natural loafing posture that put me in mind of sleeping tigers. I could imagine the man on a throne. The manager's office had a reasonably comfortable couch, which I occupied, and a bank of security monitors, all but three blanked, those showing the auction hall currently in use, the front lobby, and the loading dock behind the building.

"I was asked by an old associate to drop in here and keep an eye on the auction, to watch who was interested in the bird, who bid on it, and who won. It belonged to a pretty good horror writer named Harper, and appears in all his biographical photos. His books..."

"Richard Harper?"

"Yes."

"I read some of his early stuff. I figured him for a cacophone, with all the Strix shit he put in there. Thought he was sending smoke signals."

This man is a thug, possibly a monster, but he's not stupid.

"As far as I know, he was mortal, and unaffiliated. The bird might be coincidence. The world is complicated, and we see patterns in clouds, shapes in smoke. Sometimes those shapes are bird-shaped. It doesn't necessarily mean anything."

He grunted, and leaned back, pulling up his shirt. His torso was a pale palette darkened with black interwoven tattoo, done in a style I didn't recognize, but something about it seemed old, primitive. I imagined hours under bamboo needles, open pots of ink, a sacrament of pain. He hooked a thumb at the ribs on his right side, and there, worked into the surrounding pattern was the unmistakable silhouette of the black bird statue.

“I see the Sister whenever I’m back through the old place, and I get some fresh ink. It always ends up being important, but I don’t know how until I’m close. The ink itches and crawls under my skin depending on how close I am to the thing. I have to figure out why it’s important on my own, but you always get a little fucked over by magic. It doesn’t really make things easier, it just moves the work around.”

I let the fascination run unchecked across my face. If I thought I’d get the hand back with all its fingers, I’d have reached out to touch the Count’s intricate adornments.

The Count

This Felix guy was checking me out so hard, I didn’t know whether he was into ink, or just wanted to fuck. Whatever. He kept his hands to himself, so he got to keep his hands.

“The three up front are drakul, sworn to the Old Count’s Order, so that makes them my vassals, and that makes me responsible. I got the word they were digging into shit like the black bird, collecting it, researching it. Yeah, you shake your head. I know. Fuckin’ idiots, but they’re my fucking idiots, even if they don’t know it.”

The guy made a little shrug that was like every move he made—a careful and deliberate action that betrayed nothing. Guy like that must be used to playing people, charming people. The Count does not respond to shit like that. He tries another one of those fifty-dollar smiles on me, and he’s going to eat his own teeth.

He glances over at the flickering monitors, leans forward.

“Count, we have a problem.”

All three of the lit monitors were throwing nothing but static, and then people started screaming.

Felix moved like a greased rattlesnake, and had the office door open before I could cross the room. Fast little fucker. He was out into the lobby, and crossed to the auction hall, but fell back when he opened the door. The riot reek of CS gas, like a South Central summer. Felix clawed at his face and stumbled back towards me. He tried to say something. It sounded like “Gaahgh.”

“Yeah, I know. Gas.

The Count does not give a fuck about gas.

I left Felix to deal, and walked into the auction hall. It smelled like Army CS, old stuff though, so probably robbed from a National Guard armory. The Count does not weep. Teargas is nothing at all, except hard to see through. Shapes moved—mostly on the ground, or crawling towards the exits. Off to the left, where the merch is laid up for display, there’s a crash of wood and glass, and muffled laughter. The knife comes out, reversed so it lays against my forearm. If anybody is getting cut in this smoke, it’s going to be up close.

“You three shitass motherfuckers had best step up and stand down. You just got an explicit order from your liege, and that means I got all kinds of options if you don’t obey.”

In answer, somebody shot me in the chest, while somebody else rummaged around in the wreckage of the display case.

A voice from that direction, muffled like the laugh, “Got it!”

Another one, the other male this time, “He’s still up! He hasn’t moved!”

The second voice fired three more times, and got a pretty good center of mass grouping, and fucked my jacket up real bad.

Now, the Count is a man with options.

Lunge in fast, no finesse in this miasma—just take the shit down. Gun-hand caught between us, knife between radius and ulna, and then wrenched like a lever. The gun falls, and one of the bones snaps. Not one of my blood then. Ride him down, knee up and let him take my weight on his sternum. Under me, his ribs collapse, he vomits a jet of blood into the goggle-eye gas mask he wears, so I smash it with knife hilt and let the gas in.

The second male breaks a chair across my back, and it hurts a little. Heavy oak, and the kid hangs onto the jagged uprights off the chairback, holding the short wooden spike out like a ward against evil. He's got some steel in those sinews, so it takes a little close work to get him down like the first one, but once he's on the ground, he stomps as easy as his fellow. Legs, arms, sternum. Crack those joints, compress those organs. They'll both be able to drag themselves out of here, but if they're not careful, they'll have to break and reset those bones later when they're fed up.

Now, the woman.

Gone.

Fuck.

Felix

Sometimes, fair Felix moves too fast—an impulse to see what was happening before the Count saw my foolishness checked with tear gas, which, of all the horrible things that have happened to me, is one I hate the most. You simply must strip off your clothes afterwards, because they soak it up, and just patting your chest later can release enough to make eyes burn again.

As I fall back, trying to get a handle on instincts that would see me snarling and running, the Count stalks past, moving with the inevitability glaciers have when they're plunging into the sea. A million tons of ice, immobile for an age, suddenly crashing downwards.

Back across the lobby, I lean against the wall and watch the choking, weeping people spill out of the hall, and from inside, the sounds of wood breaking, and somebody pounding meat with a hammer.

Then the fire alarm goes off, and the clock starts ticking. I had no idea how quick Syracuse's emergency services were, but if this was like most cities, they'd be crackerjack with a call from the photogenic, recently revitalized historic area. Could be as little as three, if the station is close.

I took a moment, sifted the air for sirens.

No, so probably upwards on 10. No more than 20 on the outside, for certain. Need to sort the situation, and then get the fuck out.

Finally, a figure incongruous enough for even my burning eyes to ID as suspicious comes out of the smoke—a woman, gas mask, tire iron in one hand, the black bird in the other. The clothes mark her as the third of the idiot trio up front. With the gas-smash-grab routine, I wasn't sure whether the 'idiot' label was accurate anymore, or now doubly so. Time to do what I do best, and vanish.

Poof, I am not here. I am as a swirl in the smoke, unseen, unheard. Then behind her, and coming closer, and reaching out.

She turns, and the coils of gas following her from the hall are wings, they hook about her face, a cruel beak. There is a hunter's screech, but I hear it inside my mind, not with

my ears. But with eyes on fire, there's no crediting what blurry mirages I might see, yes? And with the fire alarm blasting, ears ringing... no. For a moment, her eyes throw catshine at me through the plastic goggles of her mask.

She catches me on the side of the head with the crowbar, but it's a clumsy blow and I just ride it. It doesn't split my scalp, but scraps over the top of my head as I roll it sideways, skewing my hair abominably. A moment of indecision, and I opt for something clever--snatching the mask off her face.

Beneath it, she's smiling beatifically, like the rapture of music or MDMA, and the smile doesn't fade at all even when the gas licks her eyes and they spasm and twitch shut. She coos at me, like a sleepy pigeon, and blindly tries to impale my face on the sharp hook-end of the crowbar.

The wild slashes drive me back, and she comes on. No time for the gentlemanly arts of self defense, so I let the old bastard instincts take over and my left JM Weston comes up and drives into the lady's groin. Kicking a woman in the groin is not a done thing for all kinds of reasons, but effectiveness as a dirty blow isn't one of them. There are few people not inconvenienced by having genitals assaulted by fashionable French footwear. I was obliged to see her gas-stung eyes snap open in shock, but that smile would not waver. The coo turned into something closer to a moan. I remembered the joke. How do you torture a masochist? What was the punchline? Something about puppies?

Then, the Count's massive arm was around her throat, and she was lifted two feet off the floor as he locked her up. She went limp in his arms, the crowbar clattering down. The count shook her like a baby with every word he spoke.

"You" shake "will" shake "fucking" shake "calm" shake "the" shake "fuck" shake "down!"

Her head flopped around like the neck was broken, but the smile never wavered even when I heard her collarbone break.

The crowbar fell, but the black bird she still held.

"Count!"

The head twisted, impossibly far, vertebrae cracked audible, separating, the smile opened into a maw filled with blood and needles, and snake-strike fast, she latched on to the Count's arm and worried her mouthful of stingers in deeper.

The big man roared. There's no other word. It wasn't a human sound. It was a sound from the back of a cave, the sound that told ancient man he'd picked the worst possible place to hide. He flung the woman away from him, and she pinwheeled through the air, to smash some of the hall's old oak paneling with her face. He had his leather coat off in a moment, and with his sleeveless shirt, the wound on his forearm was obvious.

It didn't look like a bite wound, but like something had chewed a ragged plug of flesh out, revealing the sickly wet twitch of muscle, the pearlescent white of tendon. The Count's lip curled, but there was no pain on that face. Just a growing realization, to match my own.

We both knew what that bite meant.

As one we turned to where the girl had hit the wall, and she was already up and running - the bird clutched close to her chest like a baby, her head lolling on its broken neck.

I looked back at the count. His eyes caught the light just so. He growled.

The Count

The Count owns his mistakes. It's what a man has to do. Should have gone for the spine with knife, but the trick with the broken neck was a new one, so cutting her spine might not have done much. Sometimes it takes years before the bill for a mistake comes true, other times the furies want their share immediately.

She gnawed through my coat, into my arm, and I heaved her clear, though she took a hunk of the Count's flesh with her, may she fucking choke on it.

Was she already taken? Maneuvering the other two, seeking the black bird because it was something that mattered to her kind? Or was it sleeping in the bird, and took her when she took it?

The venom hit, and the blood screamed.

I was too hot, burning up. The coat off, still too hot. The guy, whatever his name was, he was whispering at me, like I can fucking hear him talking so quiet over this fucking siren? I scream at him to speak the fuck up or better, shut the fuck up. The siren was getting into my head, and the guy kept mouthing like he was talking. Gut that shiny fucking prick.

I had him across the belly with the blade, before he fell, rolled, and leapt back fast as fuck. I went for him again, and he wasn't there. I screamed to deafen the siren, and swung around looking for him. I ached to destroy him, burned with the frustration of being unable to lay hands on him.

Then an easier target—the first guy I'd fucked up in the auction hall stumbled out, and he'd found his shiny little gun. He wasn't moving fast though. He wasn't vanishing out from under the knife.

He shot me a couple of more times, and then I was on him, and we went down hard again—this time though, I crushed him with my forearm, and then went to work with the knife, in and out, lungs, guts, split ribs, opened belly. Some resistance on the knifehand, looking back it's the guy, slick suit black at his belly where I'd cut him. Both hands, holding my killing arm. He was screaming something right in my face. Something important. Something...

"Dracula! You're Count fucking Dracula!"

It's an inherited title. There's responsibilities and obligations.

Motherfucking Noblesse Oblige.

Pride, or duty, or something in between comes up, and for a second it's stronger than the venom, and I get a handle on the red roar. Take stock.

There's hardly any life left in the meat under me, the kid drakul, now probably also a dupe. The scales might balance then, with this extra punishment, but I had to pull back now or I'd kill one of my own unjustly, and there's no wergild that would make that right.

"Get your fucking hands off me. I got it now."

Felix

The count's big knife was so sharp I hardly felt it until it slit my abdominal muscles, and everything spasmed. The blood carried me clear, kept me distant, and then while the count stood and mastered himself, the blood sealed my gut wound while I punched it closed.

"You sure you got it?"

I got a sharp nod.

“You know what she was?”

Another nod.

“She got away, carrying the black bird. And she bit you.”

No nod this time. Just a look which spoke volumes. The sort of volumes which would once have been banned for obscenity.

I sighed, perhaps a touch theatrically, as the buddy movie script we were reading seemed to demand.

“Well, let’s go get her.”

The Count used movement to keep a grip on control, and I was pressed to keep up with him. Out onto South Salina St., scan up and down. North was nothing, the usual early evening crowds, late-working suits heading out, the night crowd starting to wake up. South, people were starting to throng the Landmark (damn it, no Wicked tonight), and the screams and shocked shouts called out from that direction.

There.

She was moving fast for somebody with a broken neck, but clumsy. Her cockeyed perspective made her list right, and she kept running into people who’d first turn on her with anger, and then eye-wide shock. Some reached out to her, to be flung back as she lurched on.

Hell shit damn fuck, this was getting messy and public, and somehow, just somehow, I knew Voice and the old ones she spoke for were going to find a way to blame poor Felix.

The Count locked onto her as I did, and his expression missed being a grin by an epoch—a tooth-baring expression like that isn’t a sign of mirth when a T-Rex wears it.

But then the Count impressed me again with his control. He turned and said, “Get on!” and threw his leg over an enormous, brushed stainless steel motorcycle. A hundred grand custom-built juggernaut he’d left parked halfway on the sidewalk out front. The Count clearly is a man who does not give a fuck.

I felt like a little kid again, behind the Count’s mass, and straddling the bike that was too tall for me to touch the ground on either side. Next time, I’m getting my own bike. And then. Next time?

The engine sounds like the start of the glorious machine revolution, when they rise up and destroy humanity. The acceleration is pure agony as I tightened still-tender abs to stay in the saddle.

Outside, more sirens—the approach of fire and rescue, police—before the engine pitches up and obliterates every other noise in the universe.

What’s the Count’s move? We’ll be on the running girl in seconds. Is he planning to break hard, leap off? I got ready to back him, whatever the play.

I shouldn’t have bothered trying to anticipate him—the Count was thinking only in short straight lines. Stopping? Getting off? Pummeling? Much too complicated.

Run her the fuck down in plain view of a dozen witnesses?

Perfect plan.

The Count.

The trick to running somebody down on a bike is to lean back, pull up hard on the handlebars, so you ride over with the front wheel, but not so much you flip the bike. Ignore the instinct to brake, and roll throttle just before impact to shift weight to the back wheel.

It's still pretty fucking tricky, but this wasn't the first time I'd had to do it. The ceramic brakes justified the eight grand they cost, and Felix smashed hard against my back as we stopped.

The screaming people helped keep me focused, keep me on target. The runner was a mess of blood and there was some bone poking out here and there. Somebody started puking. Then she was up somehow, and what was left of her face was still smiling, but her right arm was a broken stick, and her expression only changed when she realized she didn't have the black bird anymore.

Felix had it.

She turned on him, and moved now like a collection of badly-cooperating separate parts instead of one whole body, only the fury of the smoke owl even kept the corpse moving in one direction. Felix held the statue out, let her see it, and when she was focused on it, he fired the fucking thing into the sidewalk hard enough to impress me and shatter the thing to splinters.

The corpse's scream frothed and bubbled, a bloody jet of foam and puke, chunks of her insides mixed into the spew. Felix curled a lip as it splashed over his very shiny shoes, and then the Count went to work.

Kick to the back of the legs, and down she goes, and then I just let myself off the leash completely. It comes with laughter, and a sick joy in destroying my own, a doubled joy—my own transgression killing the drakul (unclean and unredeemable she may be), a fierce hot pleasure, and the Other, the bloody infection, the venom, it aches to annihilate itself too, a cruel pleasure in destroying its own source. I break my knife blade stabbing it through her into the concrete, and resort to fists. Under me, the corpse shudders and goes still. From its wounds, smoke, the last air caught in it somewhere creaks out, a birdcall sound. My wounded arm throbs, and it smokes too, the two smokes blend, then, are gone.

The Count stands, and he is the Count again well and true.

What a fucking mess.

Felix

So now you know why I am unwelcome in Syracuse, New York. The Count was kind enough to give me a lift—at speed—away from the scene. Later, when we broke it down in the Count's temporary shipping container haven, despite the mess there just didn't seem like there was much else we could have done. He was still vague on the black bird, and what it meant. I think he knew more than he said, but then the Count usually does. The oddest thing about it all was how much I liked the enormous thug. I suppose he felt some affinity for me as well, because we exchanged phone numbers and some dead drop locations for emergencies. I found myself trusting him more than I'd trusted anyone in years. He was wide open, the Count. He had secret depths, but no secret motivations. Compared to swamp of deformed personalities and nested lies of my usual relationships, he was a harsh, cool wind off the plains.

When I put the battery back in my phone (17 missed calls, 8 increasingly furious voice messages, 24 texts, a dozen emails), I put him in my contacts list.

As Count Fucking Dracula.

There Are No Owls in Seattle

By Travis Stout

Running a city full of vampires is like herding cats.

No, strike that. It's like trying to herd cats in the middle of a tuna processing plant when the cats are hopped up on PCP and also on fire. So, when I tell you that I've finally corralled Seattle's biggest and baddest bloodsuckers into one room, I want you to appreciate the Sisyphean effort of the thing.

They're waiting for me in the Chinese Room at Smith Tower. I'm told the furniture was a gift from some Empress or another, but when I step off the elevator (manually operated, if you can believe that in this day and age), all I see is cheap banquet tables and dead men. I guess the ceiling's nice. I'm not an art guy. My youngest, Mackayla, is at my shoulder, a tiny brunette shadow scribbling notes in that little journal of hers.

If this was a shitty movie, this would be the point where murmured conversations would die out and the strings would start telling you "the tension is building, you should all be on the edge of your seats, you dumbfucks," but unlfe doesn't come with a soundtrack and you've got to have actual conversation going on for it to die ominously. This is more the carefully composed silence of three monsters who'd happily tear each others' throats out if one of them so much as sneezed.

In the back of my mind, the Beast stirs. Stretches. Unfolds. Tastes the air and whispers in my ear. "They all hate you."

No shit. They think I don't know about their adorable little nicknames for me. Prince Bastard. The Upjump. HRH, the Motherfucker. Thing is, I couldn't give less of a fuck. Let them think I'm a bastard. They're right. But you know what? Bastards win.

"Gentlemen. Ariel." I let them see teeth. I guess you could call it a smile.

"Your Grace." That's His Eminence, Cardinal Dupree. Creepy old fucker's about as ordained as I am royalty. Every time he takes a puff off that cigar, the cherry glows like the eye of a tiny, furious god and everybody leans just a little farther away from him. He pretends not to notice, just like he pretends not to notice the way his hand shakes when he brings the fire to his lips.

"I'll get right to it." Because I don't like being in a room with you fuckers any more than you do. "A few months ago, our associates at the port approached me with a business proposition."

That got Ariel to sit up and take notice. “And why exactly are you soliciting business at the port?” International shipping is Ariel’s turf.

“Because if they came to you with it, you’d just have to come to me for permission, I’d have to take my cut, and the whole thing would take three times as long. Think of me as your own personal efficiency advisor.” Sometimes I can’t resist poking the bear.

“Why don’t we hear what the offer is before we start the territorial pissing contests?”

Carew was insane, but sometimes he was the most reasonable of all of us. Either that, or he was the biggest pussy in the room. One of these nights I’d find out which.

“Anyways. Our friends in Vladivostok have what you might call a surplus on their hands. Kine that have seen too much, blood dolls whose owners have tired of them, that sort of thing.”

“And let me guess,” says Collins, and I nearly jump out of my skeleton. Somehow I always forget he’s in the room. Rumor has it he lives among the Kine—like, literally among them, every month or two he picks a new family and just makes his haven in the empty corners of their lives. “They’re generously offering to ship these walking Masquerade breaches to us to dispose of for them?”

“By the time they get here, they’re mind-wiped so thoroughly they don’t remember their own names. Over there, they’re missing persons. Over here, they’re just illegals. On top of the more obvious uses, the Russians are willing to cut us in on a larger percentage of our other operations.”

Dupree takes a big puff on that cigar, leans across the table toward me. Trying to intimidate me, and I hate that it’s working. The fire seems to fill my entire field of view. “It still seems like a risk to me. How can we be sure the Russians are even capable of that level of finesse?”

“Honestly, I don’t even think my people at the port will go for it,” Ariel chimes in. “Drugs, guns, luxury cars... that’s one thing. But all it takes is one pretty blonde girl on the evening news to turn this into a media and law-enforcement circus. Even if it’s not traced back to us, it could be terminally disruptive to our operations.” Carew and Collins don’t say anything, but I can see them nodding in agreement.

I can’t fucking believe it. They’re stonewalling me. Me. Someone’s behind this. One or two of them might go against me, but all of them? No. That’s as sure a sign of conspiracy as a clown car full of Freemasons. Well, that’s fine. I’ve got ways of getting answers.

There’s Mackayla and her remarkable affinity for bolt cutters, of course, but there’s other ways, too. Ways they don’t know about. I’ve got the questions. Not exactly a usual trick of my bloodline—crushing minds and ruling beasts, sure, but a good bastard always picks up a few unexpected tricks, so while they’re smiling those empty smiles at me, I reach down into the guts of my soul and poke the Beast with a sharp stick. It snarls and rattles the cage, but when I ask it, it answers.

Question: Who here can give me what I want?

The hidden one.

Interesting. And who in this room is the most afraid, hmm?

The fat priest.

Well, no shit Sherlock, he’s sucking fire into his lungs for giggles. Last question: What can hurt me the most right now?

The owls.

What. The. Fuck? No, that can't be right. There are no owls in Seattle. I've made damn sure of that. Sunk myself deep into debt with some particularly nasty fuckers to guarantee it. So let's try again. What can hurt me the most right now?

The owls.

They're all staring at me, expectant. They want to see the Prince rage, do the whole "you will rue the day you denied me" community theater bullshit vampires get off on. But if the owls are here—if the goddamn Strix made it into my fucking city—then for all I care they can go jerk off to Titus Andronicus. I remember the war in Transylvania back in the 18th century. I've seen what the owls can do. So, instead of chewing the scenery I just give them all a curt nod and sweep out of the room, thoughts of brainwashed Russians driven from my mind and Mackayla dogging my heels.

The elevator doors have barely closed before I turn on her. "I need you to find me a mortal occultist. Legitimate, not some bullshit con job with a head shawl and a fake gypsy name. Someone with the Sight, and I need them before dawn."

She's confused, and looking at the elevator operator like maybe he's a security risk, but whatever, I'll shamwow his brain when we get downstairs. "Uh, boss? If this is about the Russians, wouldn't it be easier to use one of ours?"

"No! No Kindred. Gotta be a breather, I can't stress that enough." The owls can hijack any dead thing they come across, and in case you haven't bothered hooking an EKG up to your neighborhood bloodsucker lately, we definitely qualify.

Mackayla's still giving me the "is he serious?" eyes, but she nods and makes a note of it in her little book. "You got it, boss. I'll have it for you by four."

We go our separate ways. She, off to hit the palm-readers; me, to stew. I dogleg it through downtown, doubling back and forth and back again, watching for birds and hobos whose eyes flash gold in the reflected sodium glare of streetlights. It looks quiet, but who can really be sure? There are no owls in Seattle, I remind myself.

It's nearly 2 am by the time I make it home. Home, at least for this decade, is a sprawling Victorian on Seattle's old Millionaire's Row. The servants and the dogs barely merit a second glance. Mortals all, given that extra kick of loyalty by blood and magic and a ridiculously good benefits package; they're not a vector for attack. Not by the owls at any rate.

2 am. Mackayla promised me a name by four. Plenty of time to let the juices stew. Now I'm going over the answers in my head, wondering what they mean. The hidden one can give me what I want. I assumed that was Collins, the creepy invisible bastard, but what if it's not? What if something else was hidden in that room? What exactly is Dupree afraid of? The owls.

The owls.

The motherfucking owls.

My brain's a dead hamster in a wheel. Not even running in circles, just quietly festering. Goddammit, why hasn't Mackayla called yet?

2:30. Fuck it. I head upstairs to the library, and there among the musty smell of moth-eaten paper and ink, I tear into my private collection. 300 years worth of reports, rumors, bullshit, and blasphemy; everything I've ever been able to find, in the old country and the new. Everything about the owls. Most of it's vague enough to be all but useless, but here and there a snippet that might help, that might not be the wishes of a terrified dead man praying his nemesis has at least

some weakness. They don't like running water, it seems. Or fire. Hell, none of us do, but some Icelandic Crone-worshiper with too many consonants in his name claimed that fire could trap one in whatever corpse it was riding at the time, could lock it in and burn it to nothing. Good to know.

My phone beeps, and I nearly fly out of my skin. 4 o'clock. Goddamn finally. I check the text, and sure enough, my youngest has come through again.

NATALIE WATSON. LIFELINES PALMISTRY AND TAROT. DAILY 4-11 PM.

There's an address in Ballard. Mackayla doesn't even ask if I want her to handle this.

Smart girl. One day she'll make a hell of a Prince. I'd be more proud except that odds are she'll do it by staking me out for the sun.

I'm sealed in my coffin before the first rays of the sun break over the Cascades. What can I say, in some things I'm a traditionalist. My dreams are a real treat. I dream about Transylvania, about the war between the Birds of Dis and the Kindred. We burned the possessed back then, too. Only this time, it's me bound to the stake, and standing around watching me burn are Dupree and Collins and Ariel and Mackayla—and their eyes are molten gold in the light reflected off the fire.

As soon as the sun sets, I'm awake again, like somebody flicked a switch from "corpse" to "walking, talking, parasitic corpse." For a minute, I can still feel the flames creeping up my body and I'm sure this is it, the owls found me and set fire to the house and this is how three centuries of existence ends. Then I rip the lid off the coffin, feel cool Seattle autumn in the air, and I realize that it's just the Beast fucking with me. Bastard.

At my order, Clarence brings the car around and it's off to Ballard and a palm-reader's shop for me. It's pretty much exactly what you'd expect: dingy strip mall, crystals over the door, neon sign of an eye in the window, faint smell of desperation and stupid people's money. But Mackayla says this woman's the real deal, and she's not the type to be wrong. All the same, I take a moment to push the blood around, waking up muscles and the withered jerky that passes for my internal organs these nights. My breath steams in the cold air, and everything suddenly feels uncomfortably warm. I remember the dream, and my damn traitor bastard of a skin actually crawls for a second. Then the crystal chimes are jingling and I'm walking into an "I became a pagan to piss off mommy and daddy" paradise. Watercolor prints of whimsical witches and unicorns on the walls, crystals and candles on every horizontal surface, bookshelves stuffed with dream interpretation books and guides to understanding aura colors. Seriously?

This place blows right past kitsch, screams through twee doing a buck twenty with an open bottle of tequila on the passenger seat, and wraps itself around a telephone pole somewhere in the vicinity of "you've got to be kidding me." I almost turn and walk right back out, track record or no, when the girl comes out of the back room (through a beaded curtain, naturally), takes one look at me, and freezes like a mouse in a raptor's shadow.

"Oh, holy shit."

Well, points for her. She can see through my counterfeit mortality, but she doesn't waste time going for the crosses or the holy water, so maybe she's actually got the gift and she's not a complete idiot. I remind myself to give Mackayla a bigger allowance.

"Relax, I'm not here for dinner. I'm here to hire you."

She doesn't come any closer, but she doesn't bolt, either. Like the shop, she's exactly what you'd expect. Dumpy, middle-aged, bangled and jangled with charms she probably got out of a Bradford Exchange catalog. "I've never done a reading for... one of you people. I don't even know if it works."

I let the “you people” slide. “I’m not here for a reading, Mrs. Watson. I need you to look into something for me. Something I can’t see.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand.” She’s still nervous, so I pull out a thick roll of hundreds and start peeling them off and dropping them on the table until the greed starts to outweigh the fear. Rank hath its privileges, as does owning the odd investment banker.

“I need you to poke around. Cast auguries, talk to spirits, read the bones, whatever it is you do. I want you to tell me if there are any owls in the city.”

“Owls? Like... at the zoo?” She’s still confused. How the hell does she not get this?

“Not literal owls. Spirits. Ghosts. Demons. Whatever the hell you call them. Maybe free-roaming, maybe wearing bodies. How long will it take?” I drop a few more bills on the table.

Either the money took care of her reservations or she’s finally figured out that asking me lots of questions is a good way to end up sealed in a barrel and dumped into the Sound.

“For the whole city? I... I don’t know, maybe... a week?”

“You’ve got five days, and there’s double that waiting for you if you pull it off.” I nod at the pile of bills, and her eyes nearly pop out of her head like champagne corks. “Send me a report at this address when it’s done.” A business card joins the cash. It’s a dummy address; an old tenement building in south Seattle with a letter drop and a conveniently leaky gas main. One of my guys collects the mail every week or so. “And of course it goes without saying that you don’t talk to anyone about this.”

She’s so dazed I don’t think I even have to put the mind-whammy on her. She just nods, her gaze bouncing from the cash to me to the cash again like some one of those perpetual-motion executive toys. I think she’s got the message.

So that’s one plate spinning. It’s time to find out what, exactly, Collins can give me. I know his haunts—hell, he and I planned my takeover of the city in the back rooms of most of them. If there’s anyone in this city I trust more than Mackayla, it’s him.

Assuming the owls haven’t gotten him.

Clarence drops me in Fremont, at one of those trendy little galleries where the Kine hang pictures of naked people on bicycles and call it art. It’s one of about a dozen Collins owns around the city, but he’ll be here tonight. Some new exhibit opening, I don’t know, *Even More Naked Dudes On Bikes*. Like I said. Not an art guy.

I guess the opening isn’t till later, because there’s no one in here. So, naturally Collins’s voice pops up right in my fucking ear. “Figured I might see you down here. Drink?”

I wave him off. Now’s not the time to feed and I’ve got no patience for pretending to sip locally-sourced organic whatever the fuck. “Somebody’s moving behind the scenes. I need to know who.” I’ve also got to play it close to the vest—if Collins is already jacked, no point in tipping the birds off. If he’s not, well... who’s to say he won’t be later?

“What, because of the Russia thing? Come on, you knew that was a bad idea when you brought it to us. What did you expect?”

“Forget the Russia thing! That... that was a sign, a symptom, not the disease. I need to know what you know.”

Collins looks at me, head tilted like a dog hearing one of those whistles. For a second, I wonder if he knows the same trick I do for sniffing out answers, and if he’s using it on me right now. Then he smiles, and what the hell am I thinking? Collins is my friend.

Unless the owls got him.

“Okay, look... maybe it’s nothing, but... you know Tate? Rabble-rouser, runs a lot of the gang activity in Burien? Well... word on the street is his guys are packing a lot of heat lately. Like, the kind of heat that usually comes packed in crates marked ‘flat-screen TVs,’ if you get my drift.”

I certainly did. Ariel controlled everything that came in through the port, and she was not exactly on good terms with Tate and his crew. On the other hand, this is exactly how the owls worked back in ‘38, turning our own kind against us like weapons. “Good to know. Watch yourself out there.”

Collins does that dog-head-tilt thing again. “You don’t seriously think she’s—?”

“I think I’d stay indoors the next few nights if I were you.”

On the way out of Collins’ gallery, I put in a call to Mackayla, tell her to grab Tate and take him someplace quiet so we can figure out just how badly we’re infiltrated. Then I have Clarence drive me downtown; Mackayla will need a few hours to ensure Tate’s compliance, and if he is playing host to one of the Strix, I damn sure want to be brimful of blood when I face him.

So, a couple of hours later I’m shoving some punk U-Dub kid who wouldn’t shut up about his thesis project into a cab when I get the text that Mackayla’s got Tate stashed at one of my safehouses on the east side. He hasn’t told Mackayla anything yet, but Mackayla, gifted though she is, doesn’t have my particular knacks.

Traffic on 520 means I don’t make it to the safehouse—a little 2-bedroom set well back off the street, screened by thick wisteria vines and Japanese maple—until after three. Mackayla greets me at the door, wiping her bolt cutters on a rag. I don’t ask where she got her particular talents, and she doesn’t ask me why when I tell her to do things like snatch a prominent Kindred and work him over for me. It’s a good arrangement.

Tate’s in a bad way. Shackled to a metal chair in the middle of the floor under a bare light bulb. Blood cascading from his mouth, soaking the front of his wife-beater. Looks like Mackayla went for the fangs. A traditionalist. I’m glad I ate recently, or all that blood would be clouding my judgment. As it is, the Beast is pacing its cage like a hyena that just scented an especially slow-witted toddler at the zoo. It knows what it wants, it just can’t quite figure out how to get it.

Mackayla follows me inside and takes up position off to the side. I grab a chair from the corner and set it in front of Tate, flipped around so I can straddle it. “Hi Tate.”

Tate makes a noise that’s something like “nngdflgflbl.”

“I know, I know. But see, here’s the thing. I need you to tell me about Ariel. And the owls.” Mackayla leans in slightly at that, and I remind myself she doesn’t know. Can’t know. Compartmentalization is the key.

Eventually Tate manages to form words. “Owls? Wha?” Perfect. This is a waste of time. Either the owls wrecked his brain, or he’s too out of it to put a coherent thought together. Good thing the Beast doesn’t give a shit.

I open the cage door, just a little. Just to let it get a little taste of Tate. Images swirl through my brain; Tate dancing on bloody puppet strings. Tate, taking something from Ariel and hiding it away. Fire and smoke, the sun glaring down and scouring Seattle to ash. Collins, smiling that “cleverer than you” smile. And the owls. Always the owls, barely real, barely discernible. Anyone else would miss them, but I can see their influence. They’re circling me like vultures, like the goddamn Tick-Tock Crocodile. They got a taste of me once before, and now they want the rest.

I rock back in the chair as the world snaps back into proper alignment. What the shit? How is Collins involved in this? Are we compromised even more than I thought? Damn, damn, damn. I have to get out of here. Have to think. Have to find a plan of attack. I leave Mackayla to deal with Tate—it's unfortunate, but if he's a pawn of the owls, he's a liability. She looks like she wants answers, but she doesn't ask and I don't volunteer. Clarence drives me back to the mansion, and I swear I can feel something following us, gliding on silent, smoky wings just above the glow of the streetlights. I need more information. I need the psychic woman, Watson, to find these things.

By the time I make it home, Ariel's there waiting for me. Under guard, of course—owl or not, she's the closest thing to a threat to me in the city. Only Collins at my back keeps her in check. "Word on the street is that Tate went off somewhere with your little offspring," she says in the coolly neutral tones of someone who knows exactly what's going on.

"Your concern is touching, but I've got it well in hand."

"I'm only concerned for you, my Prince. Your childe colluding with dangerous rabble-rousers could be a bad sign."

"You should be happy. You and Tate weren't exactly close." She picks up the past-tense, understands, purses her lips. She's thrown, and I seize on that moment of weakness, prising open the cracks in her armor and letting the Beast go ferreting for her secrets.

Fear. A handshake, teeth gleaming in what might be called a smile. Collins and Ariel. So, there's at least two of them. The fire again, and the owls fleeing from it, and I know what I have to do.

I don't even have to gesture—my guards are essentially a part of me at this point, so Ariel doesn't see it coming. She's fast, but she's not Carew fast, and the .45 slug basically turns her skull into a punch bowl.

"Take the body out back and burn it." The guard—Daverson? Davenport? I'm not sure—hops to.

So, that's one of the owls dealt with. Or will be once the body's burned. Now, there's the little matter of my old friend Collins. I don't much like it, but stopping another Transylvania is worth the life of one old friend. If Collins were himself, he'd understand. So I don't much hesitate when I unlock the phone and send the text to burner phones owned by every Kindred in the city. Well, every Kindred but one.

BY PRINCELY DECREE, A BLOOD HUNT IS HEREBY CALLED ON ALEXANDER COLLINS FOR THE CRIME OF HIGH TREASON. THE SENTENCE IS TO BE DEATH BY FIRE.

So much easier than keeping a Herald around.

Dawn is coming. I need to sleep.

The next night, of course, all Hell breaks loose. Dupree and Carew are demanding answers, and even Mackayla is looking at me like she's not so sure about me anymore. I keep feeding them the treason line and lock myself in my study, poring over every scrap of information I can find on the Birds of Dis. I need to be ready. Need to have a plan for when the one in Collins is taken care of.

It's three days before I get the word that somebody's got Collins, but the dumb sonofabitch decides to keep him intact. Thinks the Prince will reward him for bringing the traitor in... well, not alive exactly, but close enough. Clarence violates at least 23 traffic laws and comes close to setting a land speed record getting me there before the owl can get

loose. This stupid lick, some kid called Sikorsky, has Collins staked out and waiting in an old warehouse down by the port—seems poetic, somehow. Then again, judging from the smell this place was last used as a fish processing plant, so maybe not.

“That the guy?” Sikorsky’s tone is thick with wheedling, a dog cringing before its master.

“That’s the guy.” I debate pulling the stake out, explaining the whole thing, having a touching last moment with my friend. But fuck that. As long as he’s staked, the owl inside him can’t go anywhere. Sorry pal, them’s the breaks.

I uncap the gas can I brought in with me and dump it all over poor Collins. Take a few steps back—I’m no Dupree, and I’ll stand well back from the fire, thank you very much. Flick the lighter, toss it. Fwoomp.

“So, like, do I get a reward or—” That’s all Sikorsky gets out before I grab him by the neck and throw him right on top of Collins. It’d be just like an owl to jump bodies and laugh while I burn an old friend. His screams are very loud, and once they finally die, I slip the Beast’s leash just a little and ask it one more time what can hurt me the most.

The owls.

No. No, that’s not fucking possible. It’s fucking with me. Maybe the cocksucker has somehow developed a sense of humor. Try again. What can hurt me?

The owls.

It wasn’t Collins. How could it not be? Everything pointed to him. But the answer kept coming back the same, every time. What can hurt me? The owls. Unless... could there be more? Jesus Christ, it’s Transylvania all over again. I feel that blind, idiot panic rising, howling for me to get the fuck out right the fuck now. For once, I listen.

Clarence pulls the car right up to the front of the house, and I leave orders that anything reading less than 96 on the thermal goggles is a kill-on-sight. Inside before they can find me, past the dogwood and the wild rose and the quarter-million-dollar security system. Home. Safe. Time to prepare. It’s been five days. Did Hennessy check the dead drop? Stairs taken two at a time. Door opened with a bang—pile of envelopes on the desk. No return address on the top one, but it has to be from her. Answers from the psychic. Now, Mister Owl, we’ll see where you’re hiding.

Tearing paper, briefest sting of a paper cut. Half a second’s warning, I’m not alone. The stake is cool as it slips under my ribs. Frozen. A face swims into view.

Mackayla.

“Sorry boss. Nothing personal, it’s just that this whole paranoid-inquisitor schtick is making people twitchy. And, y’know, no offense, but I got no desire to go down with the ship. I let things go till Carew and Dupree have to put you down, and you just know I’d be on the housecleaning list too. Whatcha got there?”

Envelope plucked from my fingers, paper pulled out, scanned with vague disinterest.

“Huh. You’re a weird one, boss.” Paper drops to the floor. Desperate struggle to tell her. Kill me or don’t, but pay attention to the damn paper. Nothing. Just a thirsty ghost trapped in its own cadaver.

“Shame about this place. I always liked it. But fuck knows what kind of booby traps you might have left, you paranoid old bastard. Ah well. Don’t worry—I’ll read a very touching eulogy at your memorial.” Clap on the shoulder, overbalance, thunk of

dead weight hitting the floor. Square of light illuminates the paper beside my head. No salutation—she never knew my name. One simple sentence.

There are no owls in Seattle.

Receding footsteps. Stink of accelerant. Unmistakable whoomph. Vision narrows to a pinprick, tinged with red.

If I could, I might laugh.



Second Chance

By Eddy Webb

1. But Mostly of Owls

I was dreaming of shafts, of vanes, of the calamus and the rachis when I felt them pull the stake out of my chest. The rough wood snatched and dragged at my skin, and a large splinter stuck to the wound. My back ached from laying on a hard, cold surface. My stomach knotted and my mouth felt as dry as the desert. I could sense a thin trickle of blood diffused through my body. I was hungry. Not so hungry that I would have to murder someone, but hungry enough that it seemed like a really good idea. I opened my eyes, and the situation didn't get much better.

The meaty hands still holding the dripping wooden shaft were scarred and knobby, as was the bald face leering over them. Poor fucker clearly wasn't Embraced for his looks. Mirrored sunglasses covered his eyes, although it was hard to tell if this was a half-assed protection measure against Domination or a half-assed attempt to look intimidating. The worn, black trench coat hung loose as he leaned forward, revealing a knife in a scabbard at one hip and a pistol in a holster in the other. I pegged him as a Hound, and one who probably learned more from bad fiction than actual fighting.

The ceiling was gray concrete, and a single bulb swung right over my eyes. Glasses tossed the stake aside, and the bounce echoed hollowly in the room.

"Sit him up," a man said off to my right, and Glasses moved towards me again. I put my hand up to protest, but he grabbed me anyway and pulled me into a sitting position on the metal table. I noticed I was naked, and my pale skin was covered in small cuts and tiny wounds. I didn't go calmly before I was staked. Glasses grabbed my hair and pulled my head up to look.

The speaker sat in an ornate chair completely at odds with the sterile concrete room. Long, dark hair fell in waves to his shoulders, and his clean-shaven face was flawlessly beautiful. He brushed imaginary dust from the knee of suit trousers that looked simple, but probably cost more money than us mere plebes would ever see in one place. To be fair, the Invictus pin on his lapel may have biased me on that point. All hail our lord and master, the Prince.

Next to him stood a woman. She had blonde hair cut into short spikes, with long pink tips falling over one eye. She wore a black dress in a 50s style, sleeveless with a high scoop neck. One bare arm was covered in colorful tattoos, swirling images of cards, dice, and chance that danced as the light in the room swung back and forth. She leaned lightly on the Prince's chair, but with a regal grace that made her look like a punk rock queen, not a piece of arm candy. Her lipstick was as dark as her eyes, which stared at me with... what? Anger? Need? Probably just reading my aura, or maybe my mind. I dropped my eyes, closed my mind off reflexively, and started thinking about pointless trivia. There are more than 325 species of hummingbird in the world.

"My dear Master Davis," the Prince purred in soft European syllables as he steeped his fingers. "So good of you to join us."

My mouth felt like every drop of moisture was wrung out of it, but I licked my lips with a sandy tongue and croaked my voice into life. "I have to tell you, the service here is terrible. I'd like to speak to your manager." Even my voice felt cheap and undressed next to his. Fuck, I hate the Invictus.

I glanced up to look for a reaction, but all I got was a slight curl on the lips of the woman and a painful clench of Glasses' hand in my hair. The Prince turned and looked at the woman. "You did warn me he would be insolent, Dame Bury."

The female knight kept staring at me with her burning eyes. "I can handle a little insolence, Prince Kincaid. But we should ascertain how many of his memories survived torpor."

I knew that I should probably keep my mouth shut, but my hunger had me on a short fuse. I croaked again, a little stronger. "He is sitting right here. And he knows enough about Invictus titles to know that Dame Bury is being a little too informal with His Grace." I tried to spit to moisten my mouth, but all I could manage was the sound. "Let your dog know that I can hold my own fucking head up."

The light spun again as Glasses slammed my head against the table. A ringing sound started in my ear, but I didn't move as he pulled my head back up and sat me upright again. Kincaid put a hand out towards his thug and leaned forward to look at me more closely. I dropped my eyes as I kept cycling through random facts in my mind. Rome was the first city to reach a population of one million people.

"Do you remember why you are here, Master Davis? Do you recall what terrible choices in your Requiem led you to this unfortunate state?"

"I don't want to deprive you of the pleasure of telling me what a horrible Kindred I am."

His voice was calm, but I could hear the underlying bile in his words. "You are a disgusting pervert, Davis. A stalker of innocent Kindred. A vampire who revels too much in his enjoyment of vitae. A hoarder of information vital to the city's protection. A diablerist in intent, if not in deed. And yet so very, very careful about the details. Your Mekhet Primogen still insists that you haven't actually broken any of the Traditions."

He was goading me, trying to get me to react. I didn't let him. I could still feel the heavy splinter in my chest, and I used the pain to focus, to calm my rage. I reached up to try and pick at it, but another tug from Glasses stopped me. I dropped my hand, but kept my eyes away from everyone, using my peripheral vision.

"So, cut me loose or shove the phone pole back in my chest and let me sleep."

I could make out Kincaid's mouth twisting into a frown, and for a moment I felt his irritation cover me like a blanket. Little voices in the back of my head told me that I was being disrespectful, that I should be honored to be in the presence of such a great and wonderful vampire. Little voices that didn't sound like the ones I usually hear. His disapproval tried to wear me down, ease into my doubts and break my resolve, and after a moment of struggle I let it. I had made my point. I looked back up at him and tried for an expression that feigned calculated calm, but was probably just tired.

The Prince shifted again, leaning back in the chair as if to reassure himself. "I am trying very hard to offer you a rare chance at redemption, Master Davis. I do not offer such chances lightly."

I shrugged, which is hard to do when someone's holding your head by the hair. My words were cold and measured, as angry as I could make them under the artificial respect I was drowning in. "Look, Your Grace. You're not stupid. It's clear you don't like me, but you wouldn't have me up and about unless you saw profit in it. I've been beat up, insulted, and manipulated, and that's just in the past ten minutes. So, if it pleases you, I'd appreciate if we skip past the threats and gloating and get to the part where you make me a deal."

Yeah, I was trying to push his buttons. I've learned over the years that you never want a vampire to be too comfortable around you. If you keep them off-guard, make them constantly reassess you, they'll slip up and give you the advantage. Sometimes it goes bad, like when they end up trying to eat your face, but more often than not, getting inside a vampire's head is a good thing. And I was very good at getting into vampires' heads. Too bad it didn't work. Kincaid just smirked at me, before looking over to Bury. "He's good."

She nodded at him. "He is. He's also dangerous in many ways."

Kincaid made a dismissive gesture with his hands. "All Kindred are dangerous, Dame Knight."

"Not like him." She turned to look at me, and I dropped my eyes again. "He's... obsessive. In a way I haven't seen before."

Kincaid made a non-committal noise, and I could see him moving in the chair again. "Have you been having dreams while in torpor, Master Davis?"

I glanced up quickly before looking back down again. "Sure. Most Kindred do. That's not a crime yet."

"Over the past few nights, a number of Kindred... mainly of your clan... have had similar dreams. Dreams of birds, of feathers, of flying. But mostly of owls."

That made me look up in spite of myself, and I saw that the bastard was still smirking. Oh yeah, you fucker, you have my attention now. "You're talking about the Strix. You're spooked over a bogeyman from the ancient world?"

Bury spoke up, suddenly changing the direction of the conversation. "We staked you because you had located the resting place of an elder and were planning to diablerize her."

I put my hands up to protest, and Glasses clenched my hair again. I scowled in irritation. "Look, if this is going to go on for a while, can you at least call off the ape here so I can get control over my own neck again? I have trouble focusing when I'm constantly bouncing off of a table."

Kincaid considered me for a moment, and then nodded minutely to Glasses. I felt him let go of my hair suddenly, and my head fell forward for a moment before I regained control of my neck. I used the movement to slide off the edge of the table, taking one step towards Kincaid. To his credit, he didn't move, but Glasses suddenly appeared next to me, ready to grab my hair or whatever body part was available if needed.

The Prince casually motioned towards Bury. "My knight has the right of it. You were apprehended because she discovered you conspiring to diablerize Ivana Genovesi."

"Attempted," I said, stressing the word. "I don't see Genovesi here complaining."

"You know full well that she was hidden while in torpor, after an attack by the Strix years ago," Kincaid snapped. "She was hardly in a position to defend herself."

"That's a damned shame," I said, but my mind was still playing back what Kincaid had said. I snagged on a word. "Wait a minute, what do you mean 'was'?"

Bury stepped forward a little. I could have grabbed her if I wanted to. For all I knew, she wanted me to. "Sammie saw her walking around a few nights ago," she said, motioning to the Hound.

Glasses spoke up, his voice sounding like two rocks grinding together. "The same time the dreams started."

I turned to look at Sammie, my face reflected in his glasses. "Holy shit, it talks. Does it do any other tricks?"

Sammie's fists clenched, but Bury stepped over to him (and back out of my reach) to put a hand on his shoulder. "He's right, Master Davis. Genovesi shouldn't have woken up for another few years at least. We're concerned that the Strix may have possessed her."

"Did you get a look at her eyes in the dark?" I asked. Sammie grunted, and Bury translated with a shake of her head. I shrugged, feigning lack of interest. "Whatever. So where do I come in?"

Kincaid spoke up, and I turned to look over at him. "I have enough resources that I might be able to track her. However, we need a starting point for such a search. We can't randomly sweep the city endlessly in a vain hope of finding her, and we don't know where she settled for her torpor."

Everything clicked into place. "But I do."

"As you say. I am willing to change your punishment from years of torpor to simple banishment. If you find Genovesi, regardless of whether she is possessed by the Strix or not, you are free to take your horrid appetites to another court of Kindred who might tolerate them better. If not, you will return here and resume your punishment."

"I assume you're not going to let me wander around on my own."

Kincaid smirked again. He probably felt good now that he thought he had me over a barrel.

"Of course not. You will swear appropriate oaths to me. The oaths of the First Estate are not idle words to be discarded as a whim, however. They have real power."

I looked over at Sammie. "But you'll have your gorilla along, just in case the oath doesn't have quite that much power."

Bury stepped forward and gently clasped my chin, moving my face towards hers. Her fingers felt cool on my skin, and I got a whiff of her perfume. It reminded me of

plush couches and rose petals—sensual, but an artificial, carefully-staged sensuality. She looked me in the eyes, and when I dropped my gaze she smiled a little.

“I’m not much of a gorilla,” she said smoothly, “but I’m sure I can keep you in line.”

2. I Need To Feed

The oath was something in Latin that I could barely pronounce, let alone understand. Still, I repeated all the words and knelt and bled in all the right places, and I could feel a tight sensation in my chest for a moment before it dissipated. Shortly after I tried to talk to Kincaid, but he dismissed me with a wave and walked off, already forgetting me.

Bury informed me that the oath essentially said that I would be compelled to come right back here the moment I knew where Genovesi was, and that any attempt to stray from my oath-bound mission would do unspecified bad things to me. That was fine with me—I wasn’t worried about bad things.

Once I was doing spitting out Latin like broken teeth, Kincaid left, taking his goon with him and leaving me with Bury. She led me out of the room, and we walked in silence down a series of twisty corridors, all alike, until she opened one of the doors. Inside was a bedroom tastefully decorated in black and red, no window, with a bathroom to one side and a black gym bag on the bed. Inside the bag was a towel and a change of clothes: turtleneck, slacks, socks, boxers, loafers, wallet, all in black. The wallet had a hundred bucks in cash, but nothing else.

I took a long time using the shower, idly picking splinters out of my chest and scrubbing off as much of my incarceration as I could. I had enough blood to heal over the wound, but I would need to feed soon. I didn’t bother to wear a towel when I came back out to dress. Bury didn’t seem to mind—she leaned against the open doorway and looked me up and down appreciatively while I dressed.

“It’s nice to see you cleaned up.”

“I bet,” I snarled. “Now you can enjoy getting me dirty all over again.”

Either she missed something or I did, because instead of getting indignant, her lips split into a sensual smile. “Maybe we should wait on that until we’re out of the Prince’s mansion.” She glanced at one of the walls, and tapped her ear as she did so. The walls have ears.

I nodded like I knew what she was talking about, and tried to put some pieces together while I finished dressing. Clearly, I was missing some facts from before I got a stake shoved into my chest. During the interrogation, Bury was acting like she knew me, but this exchange made me wonder if it was more complex than the relationship between a cop and a felon. Were we secret allies? Friends? Lovers? Clearly the Prince didn’t know what was up—hence her little show in the dungeon and her paranoia now—but what benefit was she getting from me? I pulled the turtleneck over my head and abandoned that line of thought. I was too hungry and too far in the deep end to sort it out right now.

“I need to feed,” I said once I finished, tossing the gym bag in the corner. I didn’t have any more need of it.

She took a step back and waved a hand at the hallway, clearing a path for me. “Then let’s get you something.”

We walked side-by-side through an equally identical set of corridors until we finally arrived at a pair of heavy doors. Next to the doors stood a man in a boring business suit,

a boring short haircut, and a very interesting bulge under one arm. His stiff posture and roving eyes helped me peg him as a guard. Bury walked over to talk quietly with him, and I had enough time to glance around. Aside from being as expensively decorated as the rest of the house that I've seen, I noticed that the lack of windows continued even out here. It seems His Grace did not like sunlight, or people looking in on him. It means he was more than a little paranoid, which means he was more than a little dangerous.

I looked back to Bury, who was opening the doors and stepping outside. The cool night air flowed in, and I made myself inhale, enjoying the sensual pleasure of it filling my lungs. Outside, the well-manicured trees were turning orange and gold, but none of the leaves touched the ground. Two more copies of the door guard walked around the yard. Near the door where I stood was a carefully-tended gravel driveway of small white stones that curved in both directions out beyond the tree line.

A pair of lights sprung up around the left curve, and I could just make out a red sports car pulling around to where we stood. It was thick-bodied with a heavy black stripe on the hood, and it rumbled with power. American. I wanted to sneer, but I had no idea why, so I kept my face neutral.

The car stopped in front of us, and I could make out the word "Camaro" on the side. The lights stayed on as the driver's side door opened, and a third copy of the guard stepped out to hand Bury a plastic fob with quick precision before stepping inside. She took the fob and slid into the driver's seat.

I opened the passenger-side door and entered myself. Screens blazed and numbers glowed all over like an elegantly-designed spaceship. There wasn't even a keyhole—just a button marked "Start/Stop." A part of me knew that this was a new car, but another part of me was afraid of this much progress. I barely recognized this as a car anymore.

"A Camaro?" I asked, trying to push the unease out of my mind.

She smiled and pulled down the driveway faster than she should have. "You were one of the few people that got the joke," she said.

I weighed this carefully. I had no idea what "joke" she was referring to, and I could tell that pretending to understand was going to trip me up. Probably sooner rather than later. Seeing as I was only useful to her, and thus to the Prince, because of what I knew, it could be just as dangerous to reveal my total ignorance. But the reality is that I didn't know how much I didn't know. Fuck it. I took a gamble.

"I don't get it now," I said, keeping my voice neutral as I stared out the window to avoid looking into her eyes. "Zar" was the name for malevolent spirits in Ethiopia.

"No? Dead Milkmen? 'Bitchin' Camero'?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. No idea."

She sighed. "I was afraid the torpor would mix you up some. How much do you remember?"

I watched as the dark trees finally made way to a gatehouse and a heavy fence. More guard clones wandered around. "Enough to get the job done, if that's what you mean."

"Nothing about... us?"

I glanced at her. She was putting a white plastic card back in a small compartment above her head, and the gate was slowly swinging open. She was pointedly staring ahead at the road, avoiding looking at me.

"I know that you're important to me," I said.

She nodded, but I could see a brief look of relief wash over her face in the harsh lights from the dashboard. She revved the engine loud, and the car leapt out onto the street.

"Good," she said. "That's really good."

I looked out the window some more, and decided to take a gamble. Keeping my voice level, I said "You knew, didn't you?"

"About what?"

"About my plans. Before."

She was silent for a long time. I glanced over at her, wondering if maybe I had misread the situation. She rolled through a light as she said "Yes."

It was quiet, like a confession.

I nodded. "How did you keep them from finding out?"

She looked at me for a moment before turning back to the road. "You don't remember your abduction." It wasn't a question, but I pretended that it was.

"No. Too much violence and turmoil, I expect."

"I..." She stopped at the next stop sign, and I could see her hands shaking a little on the steering wheel. "They were too close, and there wasn't time. I... I was the one who staked you, to buy you time."

"To buy us time, you mean."

The car still sat at the intersection. No cars were visible anywhere around us, but still it sat there, engine purring. She turned to look at me, a tear of blood sliding down her face.

"I would have ended my own Requiem if I thought it would have saved you, because I lo..." She choked on the word, and started again. "Every night since, I was so afraid that you would wake up hating me, cursing me, wanting me dead. I think this is worse." She absently rubbed at her eye and started the car again.

The smear of blood made my stomach gurgle. I looked out the window again. "I should hunt," I said.

3. The Moment of Peace

The stripper sat in my lap, her head lulling back like a puppet with cut strings. Her reflection in the glass tabletop floated on a smear that vaguely resembled a man. Her muscles relaxed, and I licked the punctures on her neck closed. Eve caressed the stripper's skin while she talked.

Her name was Evelyn Bury, but she liked it when I called her Eve, and I liked it when she called me Vick. She was Embraced because her sire was a musician, and he thought she was too. Really, the only thing she was good at was hurting people, emotionally and physically, and so she left her sire in the Circle of the Crone to sign up with the Invictus. Maybe the benefits for being a knight are better than those of being a witch, but I didn't ask. She's fast and good at attracting attention, both of which help her as a glorified bodyguard for important members of the First Estate who are too important to take care of themselves.

We met a year ago, when I started watching her. It wasn't sexual, at least at first. She said once we got to know each other, I would talk to her about how I love to watch other vampires when they think they're all alone, because that way I could find out what they really were, not the barely-contained civility displayed in the court. It sounded like something I would say, and she certainly wasn't painful to watch. Her ferocious temper and spontaneous violence were probably just as lovely as her sensual curves and colorful tattoo sleeves. When His Royal Majesty called me a pervert, I guess he wasn't too far wrong.

It turned out that Eve was tired of taking orders from Kindred still shaking the ashes from the Roman Empire off their shoes. As much as she liked watching someone's nose crunch under her fist, she wanted to be the vampire sitting in the comfortable chair and ordering other people to do violent acts.

But over and over again, it was the same song: you're too young, your blood isn't potent enough, wait your turn, do your time, one day you'll be lucky and some elder will get killed. She was an all-American, 21st-century girl, though: she wanted to skip to the good part. Like all the tattoos on her arm showed, she wanted to make her own luck.

I suppose I was that young once, but it's hard for me to believe it.

She says that I told her some information about an old vampire that went to torpor a long time ago. I told her then that I needed help getting into the place, someone to watch my back while I stole something from her. In exchange, she could have whatever blood was left in dearly departed Genovesi's immortal frame.

I slid the unconscious stripper unceremoniously from my lap, where her head hit the carpet with a dull thud. I ignored her.

"And we got found out."

"Before we even started. I didn't tell them." She looked straight at me as she said it, ice blue eyes waiting for me to gaze into her soul or read her thoughts or something. I didn't bother—at this point she had given me enough rope to hang her with if I wanted to.

"You've given me quite a loaded gun, Eve."

"I trust you, Vick. I have to trust someone, or I'll go crazy."

I noticed I was playing with the stripper's hair. I let my hand continue what it was doing.

"It's pretty crazy to put a future diablerist in charge of a condemned one. I should go back to the Prince right now and tell him you're the one who drank Genovesi dry."

She nodded. "You should. But you won't."

"Why not?"

Eve touched my hand, the one playing with the stripper's hair, and pulled it into her lap. "Because we can still do it. We can piece together your memories, find Genovesi, take her soul and... whatever else you wanted from her, and skip town. We can be nomads for a year or so, and then find a new city to set up shop in."

"I'm not a big camping guy. I like the city."

"Whatever you want, Vick. But I'm not leaving you again, and I won't let them take you from me."

I leaned over and kissed her softly on the lips. She tasted like strawberries and copper.

"All right. We'll talk tomorrow. The sun will be up soon."

She drove me to the poor part of town, where ancient apartment buildings leaned towards each other and an intact window frame was as rare as gold. We hurtled into an underground parking garage that was completely empty, and parked by a staircase with a sturdy fire door. She slipped her hand into mine as we walked down the stairs into a basement, which had been converted into a large and tastefully appointed living space. I didn't get much chance to look around before Eve's mouth was on mine, her body pushing me to the floor. Eventually I felt a bed under us, somewhere amidst the discarded clothes and the feeling of smooth, cool skin on mine. I noticed that her tattoos were all over her body, a mosaic of shamrocks and dice and cards on pale flesh.

She drank my blood before the daysleep took me, and for the first time since I was unstaked, I felt something inside of me go still. I enjoyed the moment of peace in Eve's arms. I only looked into her eyes once, and all I saw there was love and trust.

4. Trust

When I woke the next evening, the bed sheets were covered in blood, cold gore sticking to me as I tried to peel myself off. In the open floor plan of the apartment, I could see Eve sitting on the couch. Her hair was wet, and she was wearing a silk robe short enough that I could see the dragon on her thigh start to make the turn towards her stomach as it clutched a tiger in its claws. On her crossed legs she balanced a black Moleskine notebook, writing something down. As I disentangled myself from the crime scene I was sleeping in and walked over to her, she smiled up at me.

"Sorry about your bed," I muttered.

"Thankfully the bank accounts of the Invictus keep me well-supplied with fresh sheets," she said, her lips pulling into a lazy smile of amusement and satisfaction. "The shower's over there."

I turned and walked over to the door indicated, one of the few sets of walls in her space. The bathroom was as tasteful and bland as the rest of her apartment, but the thick towels on the rack were clean and dry, and the water in the shower ran hot. I stood in there for a while, letting the blistering water work on the gummy blood, and tried to put my thoughts in order.

One: Evelyn Bury, Knight of the Invictus, says she was my accomplice when I was sniffing around Genovesi.

Two: She drank my blood last night. It's possible that she's bound to me.

Three: I have no idea if I've drunk her blood before. I was careful not to drink it last night.

I searched my feelings to see if I felt any particular affection for her. I dug around for a moment, but all I felt was the same numbness I had when I was unstaked in Kincaid's basement. What is it with vampires and basements anyhow? I let the stray thought go and got back to compiling information.

Four: Kincaid doesn't know about the relationship we had, or doesn't care. Actually, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like the latter. He was arrogant, sure, but he didn't strike me as stupid, and he had to at least suspect that Bury betraying me had the potential of being a double-bluff. Given that he was able to administer the blood oath himself, and was quick to do it, he might use them a lot to insure loyalty. Or he might have blackmail on her. Or she might be blood bound to him, which would explain why she was so free with drinking my blood.

5: Can I trust Eve?

I started to scrub at a few stubborn spots on my skin. I didn't get where I was by trusting vampires, but there was a certain earnest passion in Eve that would be hard to fake.

Granted, it's possible that she was faking it, but I couldn't find the angle. Assuming that she was Kincaid's dupe, he already has me on a clock and a leash rolled into one. Plus, he's the fucking Prince, and I'm a convicted criminal, so he can call a Blood Hunt on me whenever he decides that I offend his sensibilities. Fuck, for all I know he'll do that anyway as soon as I turned this supposed Strix-possessed elder over to him. There's no point in manufacturing a relationship with his Knight on top of all of that. When you've got four aces, it's pointless to risk cheating to give yourself a fifth. I decided to take Eve at face value, which gave me one less thing to worry about for the moment.

I checked my chest again under the running water. The skin was smooth and unmarked, and the edges of my hunger were blunted from last night's feeding, even if I did spend some of it on entertainment. I scrubbed the remaining stubborn patches of blood off and got out of the shower.

When I left the bathroom, I saw my clothes thrown in a pile next to the door. Eve had dressed as well, this time in faded blue jeans, black boots, and a white t-shirt with "Minor Threat" stretched across her breasts. I grabbed the clothes and dressed on the couch while Eve showed me her notebook. "I wrote down everything I could remember of our past discussions about Genovesi's location. Maybe it will spark something."

I looked over her notes. Her handwriting was neat and precise, like an architect's labels on a blueprint. The information, however, was a disordered mess of random bits and facts hazily recalled. Eve produced a map of the city from somewhere, and we sat down with the notebook and the map and carefully eliminated as much ground as we could. After a couple of hours, we had narrowed the possibilities down to half the city.

"That's progress," I snorted, tossing the notebook on the map irritably.

"It would help if you just told me where she was," Eve said, putting a hand to her lower back and stretching. I heard a soft popping sound, but I turned away from her. If she was stretching for my benefit, I wasn't in the mood.

"I told you, it's not that simple. Besides, if I just knew where she was, wouldn't your damned Invictus oath force me to take you there?"

The lengthy pause after I said it caused me to turn back just as she was smothering some sort of retort, trying to wipe her emotions off of her face. It wasn't working.

"It's not my oath," she said. Her voice tried for flat and emotionless, but only managed to get as far as clipped and brittle before the bitterness leaked out.

I started building an angry response of my own in my head, but I decided to let go, and it fell apart. I needed her to see this through.

"Fine. I just don't like wearing a leash, that's all."

Her face softened, as did her voice. "I know. And I know it has to be hard working through the Fog of Ages. Don't you remember anything?"

I looked back at the map, not saying anything. I asked a different question instead. "How did Kincaid know that Genovesi was walking around?"

Eve shrugged. "Sammie saw her walking around."

"Where? In what location? What was she wearing? How did she look?"

"Fuck, I don't know, Vick. Do you want me to call Sammie and ask?"

I stood up and started pacing, rolling my head from side to side as I thought. "My point is that the whole thing is vague. Genovesi had been in torpor for decades, which is why I targeted her originally. The other Kindred barely knew her. How would some brainless Hound be able to recognize her, and why would Kincaid accept him at his word?" I pointed to Eve. "Role-play with me. You're a Prince, and I'm your Hound. I come up to you and tell you that the old-as-shit elder you thought was asleep is walking around. Does that seem odd to you?"

She leaned back on the couch and put her fingers to her lips, thinking. I noticed that her body language shifted from an unconscious sensual poise to one that was more genuinely relaxed. "Sure, now that you mention it. Why didn't she say or do something? The Predator's Taint alone would at least let her know he was there."

I nodded. "So you decide to verify the story. Assume you check his mind, find out he's telling the truth, and so on. What next?"

"Well, it's important, but not important enough to drop everything I'm doing. So I get some help."

I stopped in front of her. "You don't check out the scene yourself?"

She shook her hair, multi-colored spikes flopping back and forth. "Hell no. If the story turns out to be a fake, I burn Sammie. If it's real, it's potentially my ass on the line. I can always get a new Hound, but I can't get a new Requiem." She stopped. "How is this helping us find Genovesi, though? I mean, we know Kincaid's a manipulative prick. There's no need to rehash it."

I poked at the map, where I had drawn a circle a while ago, surrounded by Xs as we marked off blocks that didn't fit the notes. "You said this is the spot that Sammie saw Genovesi. But none of it fits the information we have, and there isn't much reason for an elder who just woke up to go far from where she's hidden."

"Not true. She would be hungry, need to feed."

"But there's a juicy vampire standing right there. If you're hungry enough that you're going far from your place of safety, you're not going to worry too much about transgressing against the Prince's man. You're going to want blood in any way possible."

She sat forward, looking at the map again. "Okay, she's not hungry. Maybe she really is set up near that area. Maybe our info is wrong."

"It was right enough to get me staked."

That made an uncomfortable silence. Eve kept looking at the map as an excuse not to look at me. After a moment, her eyes focused and she started looking at other parts of the map. "So what if she wasn't there at all?"

I waved to her in a "keep going" motion, and she continued. "Think about it: the timing is perfect to get the Prince spooked. Dreams of owls plus suddenly active elders gets powerful people thinking about stories of the Strix. If she showed up a few nights earlier, or a few nights later, the connection might never have been made."

I nodded, and leaned over to draw an X through the circle. "I agree. So, now what?"

She started to speak, stopped, and then leaned back into the sofa with a sigh. "We need to confront Sammie."

“My oath was very specific, remember? I need to find Genovesi and report back to the Prince. I can’t take any detours. Besides, if we find Genovesi, we’ll be able to prove or disprove Sammie’s story more easily.”

“Great. So we’re back to searching slightly less than half the city.”

I leaned over the map again, and drew a circle around an old church just outside the outskirts of town. “We’ll search here.”

Eve craned her neck to look. “St. George’s Church? Why there?”

“It’s out of the way, but near people, at least during service. There’s a graveyard nearby for easy disposal of bodies. It has funerary services attached to it, so corpses coming and going aren’t going to attract attention. Plus, it’s old enough and far enough from town that the street names were based on the names of the families who used to live there.”

She crinkled up her forehead at me, and then picked up the map to stare at the area I circled. Her eyes widened.

“Son of a bitch,” she murmured. “It’s off Genovesi Avenue.”

6. Slay the Dragon

The road that led up to the church seemed to have more rocks and holes than dirt, and the Camaro’s suspension found every one of them. We both buckled our seatbelts to avoid slamming our heads on the roof, while her stereo blithely played “Nazi Punks Fuck Off” amidst the cacophony. The church itself looked less like the Gothic domicile of a slumbering monster, and more like a tired farmhouse that had some stained glass windows put in. The walls were the gray of old, tired wood, untouched by paint. Light shone through the windows, spraying the ground in a soft kaleidoscope of tiny colored points. There were no cars outside or shadows moving inside, and a single light hung over the front door.

I squinted to get a better look as we started to pull up to the front. “This looks like....” I started.

Suddenly, Eve yanked the wheel hard to the left, and the car bounced off the vague suggestion of a road and into the high, unkempt grass. At the same moment I heard a loud cracking sound, and the corner of the windshield turned into a spider web.

“Gunfire!” she yelled, as we bounced around inside the cabin. I nodded, unbuckled my seatbelt, opened the door, and threw myself out of the car.

I tried to curl up as much as possible as my body found all of the rocks that the Camaro missed. They ripped at my flesh and tried to crush my bones, but I ignored them. When I rolled to a stop an eternity later, I unfolded on the ground, rolled onto my belly, and looked around, sharpening my senses.

At the corner of the church, I could see a muzzle flash and heard a crack that nearly blew out my eardrums. I quickly shut down my enhanced senses, but not before I noticed a figure peek around the corner, crouched in the shadows as it took aim on the lights of the Camaro. One of the headlights winked out with a smashing sound, and the car stopped. I looked to my right, and I barely made out a second figure lurking around the back of the church, its head moving back and forth near where I was crouched.

In retrospect, it might have been a good idea to bring a gun with me. Eve probably had one. I pushed the regret from my mind and slithered forward, away from the lights and closer to the second figure searching the ground. As I moved, I pulled the shadows

over me, obfuscating my progress towards my target. My victim. I might not have a weapon, but the night was very dark, and I could be very quiet.

I passed under one of the windows as I heard another gunshot, to my left and a little behind me. I stopped, keeping myself as still as possible. My prey instinctively looked towards the shot, and I used the momentary distraction to lunge. The warm body fell under me, and I could feel the hard curves of an athletic woman. My eyes snapped into focus, and I could see she was wearing a police uniform, fighting to bring her hand up so she could aim her pistol at my face.

I knocked the weapon out of her hand contemptuously, and stared into her eyes. She stared back, hard, but after a moment her eyes widened in recognition, and then horror.

“It’s you,” she gasped.

I leaned down and ripped her throat out with my fangs. I didn’t have any interest in what she was about to say. Besides, I wanted her blood.

By the time she was done twitching, I heard two more gunshots in short succession. Blood dripping from my chin, I pulled myself off the corpse and stalked over to where I had knocked the pistol. Filling my fist with it, I scanned the area around me.

“Vick?” Eve called out. I felt anger bubble up at her—keep quiet, you fucking idiot—but I shoved it down. In all likelihood she had taken out the second assailant and was trying to assess the situation. I still wasn’t used to being a team player. I tried to wipe as much of the blood off my face as I could with my sleeve, and muttered, “Here.”

She blurred around the corner with inhuman speed, ducking and aiming a pistol at me moments before she realized who I was. Okay, maybe she wasn’t a complete idiot. I feigned a casual stance, slid my newly-acquired pistol’s safety on, and tucked it into the back of my pants.

Eve stood and did the same before looking me over. “You look like shit,” she said.

“You say the nicest things,” I muttered. “Are we going to do this or what?”

“No, I mean....” She drifted off, motioning to encompass my entire body. “Why haven’t you healed yourself? You’ve clearly have the reserves for it.”

I looked down at myself. Dozens of gashes covered my body, gaping like tiny red mouths. A distant part of me understood that I was in pain and damaged, but didn’t consider it important. I still didn’t, but she had a point, and I was gorged on blood. I used some of my stolen vitae to force all of the gashes closed. “Better?” I said.

She nodded, and looked at the woman’s mangled body behind me. “Male cop on my side. No cruiser, though, and the uniform looked like it hadn’t been washed in a long time. Plus he looked like nobody had been in the driver’s seat for a long time, if you know what I mean.”

I nodded. “Old ghouls. I’m guessing the uniforms are fake, or stolen. Give off an air of authority, especially in the middle of nowhere. People aren’t likely to ask too many questions about cops.”

“They didn’t ask us too many questions, either.”

I walked past her towards the front door. “Something’s changed. They were waiting for us, or someone like us. We need to find out why.”

She jogged up next to me while I stared at the front of the church. On either side of the door were two stained glass windows, each depicting a knight in armor fighting a fire-breathing dragon. Eve was studying the door itself. “Think it’s trapped?” she asked.

“You’re the knight,” I said laconically. “Aren’t you supposed to kick down the door to slay the dragon?”

She glanced over at the windows and rolled her eyes. “My shining armor is a bit tarnished these days,” she said. “Seriously, what kinds of traps should we expect?”

I stepped forward and kicked at the door, burning some more of my stolen life to add extra strength to the kick. Kicking down a door isn’t as easy as everyone thinks it is, but I hit it with the force of a jackhammer. The wood around the door handle splintered, and the slab swung open on creaky hinges.

“None so far,” I said. I walked inside.

The church itself looked as plain inside as it did on the outside. Several bulbs hung from the ceiling, casting heavy shadows in the corners of the nave. Simple wooden pews sat in two orderly rows, the seats worn shiny from years of parishioners sitting on them and pretending to listen to whatever sermon the priest droned on about. There was a worn podium at the front with a simple wooden cross affixed to the front. Behind it was a heavy-looking altar that looked to be made of white marble, with a few unlit candlesticks and decorations on top of it. It looked like the altar and the windows were the church’s only luxuries. Two doors sat against the back wall, one in each corner.

I noticed Eve was still talking to me. “It’s a wonder that your Requiem has lasted this long,” she was saying.

“You don’t get to be a notorious criminal without taking some risks,” I said mildly, sharpening my senses again as I looked over the place. “Where do you think she’s hidden?”

Eve shrugged. “She’s old enough to think that being under the altar is the last place anyone would look. Old Kindred still have funny notions about how mortals view religious sanctity.” She looked around. “I’m more worried about how little protection there seems to be here.”

I walked past the altar to the door on the left, and opened it. A set of unlit stairs descended into the gloom. “Lots of land out here, so there’s plenty of room to expand underground.”

With my heightened sight I was able to barely make out a flashlight sitting on a small shelf halfway down the stairs. I picked up the light, and flicked it on. The beam immediately stabbed out into the darkness — the batteries were still good — and I could see that the stairs turned and started a second flight down.

What followed felt like years of walking down stairs and through rough-hewn tunnels, but was probably more like twenty minutes. Every once in a while we stumbled across the corpses of dogs and mortals in the hallways, drained of blood—murdered guardians. After the third pile of corpses, Eve leaned down and checked the wounds. “Looks like Genovesi was hungry coming out,” she said.

“Or someone else was hungry coming in,” I said, and kept walking.

Finally the hallways came to an end in a cavern or a roughly-carved room. It was wide enough for the two of us, and in the center of it was an honest-to-god casket right out of Dracula, faded velvet splashed with dried blood. In the center of the casket was an old stake, covered in blood and a pile of thick, mealy ash.

“Is that...?” Eve whispered, but I waved her to silence and leaned forward to pick up the stake before she could. The emotional impressions on the stake were still strong, but

I wasn't surprised by what I found there. I knew these were Genovesi's remains. I knew that she had been killed. And I knew who did it.

"We have to get back," I said suddenly, shoving the stake in a pocket. "The Strix is here, but it's not in Genovesi." I walked past Eve back into the tunnels.

She jogged a little to keep up with me. "Wait, where are you going? What's going on? Where is Genovesi?"

I spoke to her over my shoulder. "Genovesi's dead. Get Sammie, and have him meet us at the Prince's house. It's time to wrap up all these loose ends."

7. A Fantastic Tale

Here I was again, back where I started. The same concrete room, the same actors, the same single light swinging softly in the center of the room. Even the stake that had been sitting in my chest was still lying discarded on the floor. Kincaid and Sammie watched me as I picked up the stake and casually handed it to Eve.

"Well, Master Davis? Do you have something for me?"

Suddenly I was tired of it all. I didn't want to spend time explaining things to this well-dressed penis. I didn't want to be the detective, spelling out who did it and how. I wanted to be out of that room, free to do what I want, free to be who I was. I put a lid on all that anger and sat casually on the metal table, my hands gripping the edge. The surface was colder than I remembered.

"Your oath demanded that I come back here as soon as I knew where Genovesi was. Now I know."

The Prince raised an eyebrow in mock surprise. "Do you? Where is she?"

I crossed my arms and began. "I knew something was wrong when I heard your Hound's story about how he saw her...."

Kincaid suddenly slammed a fist down on the arm of his chair. "I do not have the patience to sit in audience of your parlor-room detective antics. Tell me where the Strix is."

I shrugged. "Genovesi is dead. Sammie killed her, and the Strix possessed him."

Sammie snarled and moved, faster than I expected. As soon as I finished the sentence his hands were around my throat, his nails turning into claws as they dug into my flesh. Eve was just a second behind him, and I felt the tremor of the stake going through his back as he held on to me. The glasses fell from his eyes, and I could see the surprise and fury written there.

Eve and I peeled him off me and laid him on the table. The whole time Kincaid sat, silently watching us, trying to add this new detail into an equation that could still add up to political profit for him and the Invictus. Finally, once we had the Hound secured, Kincaid spoke.

"Perhaps I was hasty in disregarding your attempted explanation of the situation. Please continue."

I tried to smile casually, but there were probably too many teeth in it. "You might not want to take my word for it. Better if your knight tells the story."

Kincaid raised the eyebrow again, but this time the surprise was sincere. "Oh? You were willing to tell the story before."

“Before your Hound wasn’t sitting on your table with a tree in his back. Now he is. A lot more of your political clout is on the line, and I expect the First Estate will be eager to tear apart some outsider’s story. Harder to disagree with a knight’s testimony. She’ll tell it.”

The Prince paused for a moment, and then nodded. “A shrewd point. Dame Bury, enlighten me.”

Eve told the whole story. She explained how I knew Sammie’s story was bullshit the moment I heard it, that he couldn’t have seen her when he said he did. She explained how we figured out where Genovesi was buried, and how someone killed all of her guardians, except for the two up top who were probably off-shift until they came back to find the carnage. They probably didn’t have enough brains left to do much more than fulfill their last directive: guard the church. She explained how Sammie was probably possessed by the Strix the entire time, in order to have the strength to do all that damage, and how Genovesi wasn’t quite Roman Empire old, but certainly old enough to have pissed off the Strix at some point in her past. She explained how the Strix probably had some way of evading truth-detection powers, which is how Sammie was able to get people spooked and looking in all the wrong directions while he could keep working whatever his spooky owl spirit plans were. She explained how all of this was the truth to the best of her ability, which wasn’t entirely a lie—she didn’t try to find out if I was lying or not, but she also didn’t have any way to figure that out even if she wanted to. She rolled it all out, exactly as we discussed it. All according to plan.

During the explanation Kincaid stared at Sammie, his eyes growing colder and harder as he listened. I could tell that he didn’t want to believe it, but the facts fit together just well enough that he couldn’t take the risk. I expect Sammie was going to experience a lot of torture in the next few weeks while they sorted out his real motivations. Maybe I should have felt bad for the guy, but I didn’t. He was an asshole.

After Eve was done, Kincaid spoke. “This is a fantastic tale you have spun, but there is just enough interesting details within it that I see the value of inquiring further. However, Master Davis, you will understand if I ask Dame Bury to detail you until our inquiry is complete.”

I stood up off the table and took a step towards Kincaid, pointing a finger at him. “No. We had a deal—I bring you the info on Genovesi, and I walk. I brought you her murderer and the Strix as a bonus. If you don’t cut me loose right fucking now, I’ll make sure the rest of your Primogen hear about how the Invictus only honor deals that benefit themselves.”

On cue, Eve spoke up. “With all due respect, Your Grace, Master Davis has a point. While I am your sworn vassal, I would not be able to lie to the rest of the Invictus if asked about your conduct.”

Kincaid snarled, but more at her than at me. “I am the head of the Inner Circle, child. The Invictus do nothing without my leave.”

Eve didn’t flinch. “We profess to be a meritocracy, Your Grace. I believe that should you be shown to be dishonorable, others will take advantage of that weakness.”

“And letting filthy perverts and attempted diablerists walk free will make me appear to be strong and wise, hm? I suppose that is how you would run my court, knight?”

The courtesies were falling out of Kincaid’s speech like loose bricks in a condemned house, but Eve kept her calm and stared him down. “These are not my desires, Your Grace. These are the desires of the First Estate.”

Kincaid snarled again, but she had him, and he knew it. If she planned to stick around, I'm sure Kincaid would make her life a living hell over the next several years for the insult, but she didn't care and neither did I. Kincaid made some noises about me staying in the custody of his knight for 24 hours, just in case I was needed to delivery my testimony to his Primogen, and I said I would think about it. With that, the Prince dismissed us from his presence, and we made our way back to Eve's basement.

I fingered the stake in my pocket as she opened the door and let me in. I had one more thing I had to do.

"I admit, I never would have pegged Sammie as a diablerist," she said as she locked the door.

I watched her back as I spoke. "There's a reason for that," I said calmly. "He didn't do it."

She turned around and looked at me in surprise. "What? Then who..."

I plunged the stake into her broken heart, and she fell like a puppet with cut strings. Her arms were sprawled all over the floor, tattoos covered in her self-made luck as her eyes were wide with surprise.

I debated telling her. I could have told her how I wasn't Vick Davis at all. I could have told her I was the one possessed by the Strix, how I was able to ignore the stake in my chest. I could have told her how I came back for a second chance to punish Genovesi for her crimes several centuries ago. I could have told her how I rose in this Mekhet's body and killed Genovesi, and then planted the false memory in Sammie's mind when he stumbled across me. I could have told her how I snuck back into the Prince's haven and waited for him to hire me to investigate my own crime. I could have told her how the oath was pointless, how I knew Genovesi's whereabouts the moment I swore it, how everything since then was just to get her to act as my advocate, how I did it all just to fuck with the local vampires who dared to believe themselves superior.

I could have told her that love was a lie.

Instead I went through her kitchen and found a box of matches and some cleansing liquids marked "flammable." I doused her in the fluids and ran a trail of them to the door before opening it. I got ready to light a match, but I stopped for a moment, looking at her. Instead, I shut off all of the lights, so that the room was plunged into pitch blackness. I leaned down close to her, and whispered in her ear. "You were the only one who could have looked into my eyes in total darkness. You were the only one who could have seen the gleam in my eyes. And you ignored it."

I remembered the look of betrayal and pain in her eyes as I set fire to her. And I still treasure that look to this very night.

About the Authors

- ☛ **Benjamin Baugh** has written for Vampire the Requiem, and other RPG lines, including his *Ennie*-nominated game *Monsters and Other Childish Things*. Writing has been training for fatherhood, as one of the duties of a father is to fill children's lives with phantasmagorical lies. Ben lives in Athens GA with a tolerant wife, cunning daughters, sleepy dogs, and a cat who should have known better.
- ☛ **Joseph Carriker** is a Southern boy who found his home in the Pacific Northwest. He's a writer, an old-fashioned hoodoo and a damned fine cook if he does say so himself. He lives in Portland, OR, with his partners A.J. and Chillos.
- ☛ **Joshua Alan Doetsch** was grown from an experimental pumpkin patch by Monsanto scientists in a top secret biotech project known only as "Agent Orange." He was genetically designed, honed, and perfected to do only two things: write stories and strangle kittens. Please, please encourage his writing career at joshuadoetsch.com.
- ☛ **Wood Ingham** makes his living as a performance poet. He was most recently Artist in Residence at Swansea University. [facebook.com/Howard.david.ingham](https://www.facebook.com/Howard.david.ingham)
- ☛ **Myranda Kalis** (an alias she uses to protect her relatively innocent husband and children) has been writing incessantly since the age of twelve, honing her skills as a slinger of verbiage on bad space opera and progressing from there almost directly into the sort of horror you can't tell your mother about. She currently lives in southeastern Pennsylvania.
- ☛ **Orrin A. Loria** is a freelance writer and editor, and a former Content Developer for EVE Online. This is her second contribution to the World of Darkness. She currently lives in Maryland with her partner, Chris, and too many books.
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- ☛ **Travis Stout** is a writer and game designer in Montreal. He probably spends too much time thinking about goblins and wizards and zombies for his own good, but has somehow conned people into paying him to do so, so who is he to judge?
- ☛ **Eddy Webb** (with a “y,” thank you) is an award-winning writer and game designer. He has worked on over 100 products, including *Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition*. Today he designs content for the *World of Darkness* MMO, as well as continuing to freelance. He lives a sitcom life with his wife, his roommate, a supervillain cat, and two affably stupid pugs.
- ☛ **Chuck Wendig** is a novelist, screenwriter, and game designer. He blogs about writing, food, and the madness of toddlers at terribleminds.com.
- ☛ **Audrey Whitman** is a writer and game designer who works on books about Martians, vampires, and the gangs of New York. Plainly she needs to focus.





Blood and Smoke

The Star Chronicles

What would you do
if today was the last day
of your life?

It's the kind of question
you never answer honestly
until it's too late.

Until the last day of your life was yesterday,
until you wake up in a stranger's bedroom
with a hunger like fire.

One of the graced,
the cursed,
the beautiful,
the damned.

ONE OF US.

You belong to the night, now,
to the streetlights and the concrete
and the howl of sirens.

To the glitter and the gore.
To a world of want and need and kill.
Welcome to the first night of your life.

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?

FALL 2013

CURSED NECROPOLIS: WASHINGTON D.C.



COMING SOON

THE GOD-MACHINE CHRONICLE



Available Now!

the Strix chronicle anthology

We are like you. We live in your cities, we laugh at your jokes, we share your good times and your bad ones. We meet you in clubs and back alleys, at glamorous parties and dive bars. We need you, to sate our endless hunger. We are your Kindred.

They are the smoke and the darkness, things that could have been you or us, creatures of hunger that humanity stole the night from. They are the Strix.

This anthology chronicles our struggle, and unveils the schemes and atrocities of Kindred and Strix alike. It includes:

- ☠ “Four Years, Old John”: Greg Stolze shows us how the two most powerful vampires in Chicago came together in the shadow of the Strix.
- ☠ “Second Chance”: Eddy Webb tells a story of trust and betrayal, as a vampire is raised to solve a savage mystery.
- ☠ “Playing House”: Audrey Whitman reveals that the devil you know and the devil you don’t might be one and the same.
- ☠ “Watching”: Orrin Loria introduces us to the Sheriff, who sees everything. But there’s one person even the city’s most well-connected vampire may not suspect.
- ☠ “Lullay”: Joshua Alan Doetsch weaves the tale of a surrogate father and his very dangerous little girl. But what happens when a fairy tale beast comes knocking?

