

TALES OF THE DARK ERAS



Edited by Matt McElroy



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Hoarse

Chronicles of Darkness (450 B.C.E.)

Howard Ingham

He is still there, desiccated, old; the hill once empty now covered in greenery, olive trees and grapevines, ivy and figs and oranges, fertile, lush, wild, but also somehow wrong, like a newly-painted fresco, the colours of the black grapes and blacker olives rich and full and flat. All these different kinds of foliage co-existing too close to each other, as if placed here to be painted, an artist's arrangement.

I am hungry, but I do not pick the fruit. It is too ripe; some of it has gone to rot on the tree. The lush colours betray an unhealthiness, an unwholesomeness.

Under a weeping tree, cross-legged, his robes long since rotted away, he sits. Bones have long ago warped and twisted, have become wood and vine under mottled bark-like skin that carries the scars and splits and bore-holes of an old, old plant. Ivy wraps itself around his leg; three pale wildflowers grow from a split in the skin on his arm, red-spotted ants crawl in and out and over his tiny prune-shriveled penis, his abdomen their nest.

One hand has become melded to the knee on which it rests, cemented with moss and deep, furry mold that fills this clearing with a metallic, nauseating odor. The stench coats the back of my mouth, squats on my tongue, and makes me want to spit. Patches of it are all over the ground here. Some of it is already on my sandals.

His skull is elongated somehow, asymmetrical, the hairless dome bumpy. Eyelids lashless, concave, so deeply set under a heavy forehead, furious and pained. One cheekbone somehow crushed and flattened, the other rising like a blade. His brown skin is tight against it over a tracery of deep vertical wrinkles, the jaw pushed to one side, the wide, thin-lipped mouth fringed with deep crevasses, wrinkles like the bottom of the sea.

I leaned over the side of the quinquereme that brought me here for much of the journey, the Carthaginians curious that I should care about anything other than the contents of the ship, watching as the sun lit up the water beneath me farther than I could imagine, down into deep black ridges of nothingness, beside what looked like the ruins of temples and palaces, at the silvery grey fish of terrible size, their only inhabitants now.

The Carthaginians asked why I should come here, what there could be here on this coastline. Nineveh, I said, and the Captain looked at me, squinting, then shrugged and went back to his work, my gold jingling at his waist, a corrective to those who would offer advice as to the advisability of visiting the ruins.

Nineveh is gone.

I travelled through its ruins, burned, no sign of humans. It must have been a place in its time. I clambered over cyclopean columns, now broken in two across the back of a rise, their once-bright painted zigzags broken now like the stonework; I stopped for water, picking up two pieces of a pot, turning them in my hands to see if perhaps once they had fitted together.

I found a skull, half-buried. I didn't touch it.

It had so much power, so much fear attached to it, this place. Once Nineveh leached the wealth of the world, her armies hosts of fork-bearded demons in gleaming helms and breastplates whose spears impaled the brave and the weak alike, who took women and children and youth in chains to live in bondage.

Nineveh was power used for self, it was wealth grasped and gathered and kept in storehouses, it was strength without conscience. It was the greatest city in the world, and like all the greatest cities in the world there have ever been, it turned to dust. It took the Babylonians and Medes, the Persians and the Chaldaeans, even the barbarian Scythians and Cimmerians, all banded together — no matter how much hate they shared, they hated Nineveh more — and in a single night they sacked the place, carried its women and children off in chains and its cattle on ropes.

They were merciful, this mismatched host of civilised men and barbarians. The Prophet who yet sits here, who bore witness to it, can attest to that. He is not representative of any of those peoples. His people, had they been present, would have murdered everyone, innocent or no, would have slaughtered the animals and burnt them, would have left the gold where it lay. Nineveh yet persists in some small diluted way in the blood of the Medes and the Babylonians, the Persians and Chaldaeans, its art treasures and books stolen but preserved, and so an influence on their thought. Nineveh is remembered.

This man would have preferred to have seen the place obliterated. Removed from the annals of the ages.

I stand here, the odor sickening me, the sight of him, man become twisted branch and soil and nest somehow twisting in my gut. I have no choice but to be here and I cannot deny that. The arbitrary systems of the world have brought me here to listen.

What questions will he answer? What words will he give? What words from a century-old corpse?

I sit, my back against a tree, wrists on knees, head bowed now, facing him, the Prophet. I dreamed that terrible twisted face, too old for even the hair that once grew on its chin. I dreamed that twisted mouth.


It is night now, and in the dark a faint phosphorescence surrounds the Prophet's body, the only light here, greenish, unhealthy. A slight judder takes the body, a shiver so faint I wonder if I imagined it. A second now, a parting of the twisted lips, an exhalation, a small cloud of phosphorescent spores.

I jump up, find myself kneeling on the moldy ground before him, the mold crushing under my knees, soaking my robe. He judders a third time.

He begins to speak, in Aramaic, his voice like a tree forming words, from somewhere deep within an ancient, hollow, rotted out body, as if I am not here — I wonder, does he speak at night when no one is here to listen?

"I was fishing, I was fishing, and the torrent of the waves subsided, and it was violence and it was fear for the Wheel rose from the ocean before my boat and turned





and turned the sea and the rushing of the Sky-Wheel and its paddles of bronze and wood spoke to me and lifted me from my boat into the gray cold sky, so gray, so cold, so high, and I turned with the Wheel and when the Wheel released me I was changed. And I cared not for the fish that yet filled my net, and did not trim the sails, and yet still it bore me to the shore and my son came running for me on the shore as if to embrace me and I dashed the boy aside and walked forth. And I did cry out hoarse and full of fury that the people here were doomed for they had sacrificed corn and not the hot blood of the kine, the goat and the lamb, and I did cry out hoarse, and full of fury that the God of our fathers was angered and that He would kill them all, yeah even to the last child and the crying of my son did disturb me not, for the Wheel, the smaller Wheel that the Greater Wheel had placed inside my heart twisted me and turned me, and I was a Prophet.”

“The Sea People came with their spears of iron that very night and killed them all, every last one, my wife and child and all the people, even mine, and burned that shoreline village and I cried out hoarse for the Great Machinery of this roiling Earth had turned me into a machine of meat and voice and I could do no other.”

“And I walked, and my feet did imprint their mark on the earth so sticky with the blood of man and woman and child, and I came at length to the shore that I had come to having been remade by the Wheel and the Name, and I walked into the field, and let my body fall onto the earth and rot among the soil.”

The Prophet pauses. This is not the tale I was sent to hear, and this is not the story of the fate of Nineveh. I did not dream this. I rock back on my heels. I am about to say something, but the old, old voice resumes.

“And I waited and decayed.”

“I was threshing corn.”

He is contradicting himself.

“As I cast the grains around, the air became host to a great threshing flail on a contraption of wheels and rope that beat me until I was bloody and cut open, and then changed me inside. And outside I was flesh and inside I was woven corn, and I left the threshing floor behind and hoarse and full of fury I proclaimed that the King and his foreign wife were wrong to make the peace between our nations and to make the peace between our God and theirs, for Baal was not a God the Great Machineries of the World would tolerate.”

“And I stood upon Mount Carmel and fifty of the prophets of the corn-god stood and sang around a great painted altar and hoarse, I cruelly mocked them: *Maybe your God is asleep. Maybe your god has gone away. Maybe he shits.*”

“And they sang and chanted and danced and cut themselves so that the blood splattered across the painted altar and played their drums and flutes and tambourines and no fire came to consume the slaughtered goat.”

“When they collapsed, exhausted, I built a stack of stones and dug a trench around it, and I poured water over the flesh of the goat and the stones so that the trench was full, and then I cried out, hoarse and full of fury, and the fire came from above and below, for the Great Machineries of the World had decreed that it would, and the sacrifice was consumed, and then the stones were reduced to ash, and then the water itself was lapped from the trench and consumed in a great cloud of steam.”

“And on that day beneath the setting sun I cried out, hoarse and full of fury, and the people who watched were changed for a time, and they fell upon the fifty prophets of Baal who lay exhausted and defeated and tore them to pieces with teeth and fingers; and the war began anew.”

“The King vowed that he would have me dead and I retreated into the wilderness, and there among the rocks and sand I died, and the ravens pecked on my flesh.”

“Time passed. And I was tending the flocks at the edge of the desert, and a Prophet with holes pecked in his flesh came out of the desert and he commanded me to follow in a voice that was hoarse and full of fury, and I followed out of fear and wonder. He came to a river and he told me that he was called away and I was called away too, and I trembled, for his voice was hoarse and full of fury.”

“And as we walked, the corpse of the Prophet and I, there came a roaring flame and a rushing wind, and a chariot, wreathed in fire, came down and swept the Prophet away, and the flames scorched me inside and out and, a bolt from the wheel of the chariot lodged itself in my heart, and when the fire was gone, my flesh that had been burnt away grew back and I went out and proclaimed, hoarse. Full of fury.”

“Some children ran behind me as I walked, and they began to mock the baldness of my head and the stiffness of my walk; and I turned and cursed them, and called beasts from the forest nearby, bears, two, to bound down the hill, snarling, frothing, enraged by the twisting of my curse in their brains, and hungry for the flesh of the young, and the beasts mauled and devoured them and they screamed pitifully and I felt no blow to my conscience, for I was a man of integrity and my integrity was unbroken.”

“And I healed a general of an enemy king and gave his leprosy to my own servant, and I cried out and then I was gone, and I decayed.


He seems closer to me now. I can feel the Prophet’s breath on my face, like an opened tomb, like the smell of mold and worms is a cloud around my face. I begin to feel nauseous again, feel the soft ground lurching beneath me. I steady myself. Every sentence is an exclamation, an accusation. A malediction on a series of lives.

“I was alone in the mountains, and a Throne appeared, and the Throne was surrounded by four wheels, and the wheels were fringed with eyes, and by each wheel was a living creature, or an unliving creature, and each had six wings and four faces and they sang in tongues, and I knew they were the Dominions; and the Figure in the Throne was too bright to see, but I looked, and my eyes dried in their sockets and shriveled and were consumed. And the Occupant of the Throne reached down and replaced my eyes and remade me and I felt my soul crushed as in a fist.”

“And then the Throne was gone and I was changed and I cast aside my garment and naked I went down to the city and stood outside, and hoarse and full of fury I declared doom to the city, and lay on the ground and shat on the ground and burnt my shit to show them what awaited them.”

“And when I was done, I travelled to a valley where a great battle had been fought, and the men left unburied. All through, scattered, were dry bones, dry like the stones. And I stood in the Valley of the Dry Bones. A voice said, ‘Can these bones walk again?’ and I cried out, hoarse, and told them to hear the word given by the spinning wheels of the world, and the bones arose and the flesh grew like leather and lichen, and connected





the dry bones, and they rasped and howled, these dry bones, and took up the green-tarnished spears and knives and rushed out of the valley, howling and rasping; they brought judgment down on the city and feasted on the people and sent them the way of my shit, breathing fear and terror and driving them to a place of tears and sorrow, hollow-eyed, and I danced naked among them and cried out, hoarse and full of fury.”

“And I walked to the sea, and into the sea, and let the fish nibble my flesh until only bones were left and they were scattered on the ocean floor amongst the algae and the creeping things that were eaten by other creatures, and I died.”

I am withdrawing across the clearing, so very slowly now, but the rasping voice continues to declaim. The Prophet’s face seems ever closer, the narrow black lips writhing like threadworms over those dark brown teeth, the shriveled tongue twitching, clattering, creaking.

“I was asleep and the Voice came to me in the night, and the Voice told me to go to Nineveh. I was afraid, I was afraid for Nineveh is an evil place where the powerful pass judgment on the weak, because they can, and I said, do You wish to bring destruction to Nineveh, and the Voice said, no, the city must be saved, must be made one with the Engines of the World, be one of the Spinning Wheels of the World, and I said, but Nineveh is a place of evil, and the armies of Nineveh ride out and wreak destruction on innocent and guilty alike, and I will not go, for to offer mercy to Nineveh is an outrage.”

“And the Voice said, you must go, and I said, no, I would not, and the Voice said I must go, and straight away I got out of my bed and packed a bundle with some bread and some cheese and some money, and there and then I walked the ten miles to Joppa and I went to the harbour, and as the sun rose, I found a ship bound for distant Tarshish, for I would not disobey the voice, and Tarshish is as far from Nineveh as the West is from the East. And the captain saw the money I had and asked no questions.”

“But you cannot run from the Engines that Control the Earth; the Wheels and the Grindstones, the Mills and the Sails, and two weeks from Joppa a piece of the Voice took root in the ship and the tiller would not turn, and the oars rebelled, and a storm blew up. I stood on the deck and stared at the sky and saw that the clouds had formed the shapes of wheels, and I knew that the Voice had pursued me, but I would rather die than serve the Voice.”

“The captain and the mate called the men beneath and said, this storm is not a natural storm. We will draw lots to see with whom the gods are angry. And I stood and I said, there is no need, for I am the one whom the storm pursues, and you must cast me into the sea to drown, for the Voice has no argument with you, and I would rather die than fall into Its grasp. And the captain and the mate turned to stare at me with a strange look in their eyes, but one of the sailors said, we need a sacrifice to the sea, we do, and several of the men said yes, and I said again, cast me into the sea, and none of you will die, and I will take upon myself the responsibility for the curse of sacrificing flesh to the sea. And I gave the captain my gold and begged him a third time, and then he believed me.”

“So two of the men took me, one at my feet, one at my hands, and they flung me as far as they could into the sea and I felt the water take me, and the last I saw was the storm cease the instant I hit the water. I let the water take me, let my robes drag me down, wished to drown.”

“Beneath me a shadow arose, something huge and fierce, a fish bigger than the ship that had cast me away, and I sank and it rose and its maw engulfed me and the oblivion of water left me and I felt its teeth on my body. It chewed me.”

“I died in agony. My blood mingled with the sea water and I was bitten near in two, and my skull crushed, and I remained conscious. And in mulch and shreds and splinters I lay in the creature’s stomach, conscious still, aware that the Voice was there, ensuring my pain, my punishment, and I longed for the beast to digest me for nothing and shit me out. But in my consciousness, even as I felt the Voice clawing at the edges of my mind, I denied it. I would not obey it. I would not allow it to control me. And I knew that if I was the Prophet, I was not as the Prophet had been, for I did not let myself be ruled, I would not be annihilated by the Grinding Wheels of the World, I would not allow myself to be its puppet as the Prophet had been before.”

This is not the story I expected. I look into the eyes of the Prophet, see, I think, a sadness of sorts. An anguish. The dried out body judders again, the head twitches to one side, as if he struggles to repeat the next.

“The agony ended abruptly; the movement of the fish, also. And then a surging around me, a shuddering wave, and the leviathan, beached, vomited me out on to the shore of Nineveh. I was mangled but whole, held together with weed and shell, foul of breath, rotten of skin, dripping with brine and bile. And one foot moved before the other and against what will I had I walked, I walked, into the city of Nineveh.”

“Now Nineveh was three days’ walk across, but I had fought without ceasing since the fish had vomited me on the beach, and I stopped before a day was out and I stood in the marketplace, with the panic of the people around me at the apparition I had become and I cried out, so hoarse, a voice I did not recognise as my own, and I pronounced judgment on this place that had brought so much misery to the world, that had stolen from the poor and had trodden on the weak, this place that had added the cities of the world to its sin of empire, I declared judgment on Nineveh. Nineveh will be destroyed, I said, and I was a thing, made of the detritus of a body eaten and half digested, and they believed me, and panic ensued.”

“And I withdrew.”

He is quiet for a moment. The smell of the mold is thicker than ever, the phosphorescence around him brighter.

“It did not work.”

The syllables slow, low, resentful.

“It did not work.”


An anger now, an anguish. A rising moan.

“It! Did! Not! Work!”

And the Prophet lets out a scream both low and piercing, and his head shakes from side to side. I have to cover my ears, but the scream persists, and the noise is too much. I black out, keel over to the side, and when I come to my senses, lying on my side, the side of my face coated in the mold, the stink of it coating the inside of my nostrils, he has already resumed his story.

“...argued with the Voice, screamed and shouted at it, but the Voice had bade me sit here and watch as the city of Nineveh, in its repentance and fear, readied its engines of war in the name of the Wheeled Engines of the Everything and Ever, ready to spread misery, ready to expand and bring war. And at the behest of the Voice. For I had made them afraid, I, the apparition. I, the walking one, the half-eaten one.”





“And the Voice mocked me, said, did I not care for the children and the animals of Nineveh, and I cursed the Voice as a liar, but my body was dead and still now, and the vine that had been placed over me on a makeshift frame of cane by a terrified Ninevite in obeisance, the vine had died now, and as I watched Nineveh prepare for war, the sun dried me, hardened me and I stayed here on the top of the hill.”

“They would not touch me. But they knew I watched. They planted an olive grove around me. Olives and figs, oranges and grapes. All together. All the trees they could find.”

“And here I am in this lush decay, surrounded by the metallic smell of the mold, the lush unwholesome sweetness of unpicked fruit in a grove that no one will visit. Here I am in the rot, realising why I am here, the thing that drove me here; knowing that the Prophet must finish the story. A panic takes me, and every part of me desires to go away, but all I can do is drag myself to the edge of the grove and prop my body against a tree, and wonder why I cannot breathe now, why my chest feels so tight.”

“And Nineveh spread its misery across the world, spread its tyranny, conquered and slew and gave its children the spoils, and I could only sit and listen, conscious, always conscious, conscious and mad, and alone, and knowing at least that I was the Prophet, and that no one would see me here or come to find me, and because of that, there would be no other Prophet.”

“No. Other. Prophet!”

He almost screams those words, and his face turns to look directly at me, and slimy gobbets of ancient mold-covered phlegm hit my face with the force of his words, the force of the realisation of the sin I have committed, the fate that awaits me.

“When the Babylonians and the Medes, the Persians and the Chaldaeans, even the barbarian Scythians and Cimmerians banded together to destroy Nineveh, even they avoided the Grove of Fecund Rot, knowing it without having been told to be a cursed place. Even the great empires and the barbarian kings knew. Even they had the will to know. Even they knew!”

It is an accusation. I want to say, it wasn't my fault, I came because of a dream, because I was forced to come here, but I know it was my curiosity as much as anything else and I cannot say a thing because the vines are growing around my arms now and sending roots into my skin, and the mold has coated the inside of my mouth and my nostrils and the bags of my lungs and my chest is too tight to speak.

“You now, you are a dupe of the Voice. You came to be my final punishment, that my revenge on the Engines of the World might be proven worthless. You will not let me rest, poor fool. You will take my soul into yours as the Prophet always has and I will scream with all these others, Nathan and Elijah, Elisha and Ezekiel and Jonah and the others who have been the Prophet. You have denied me solitude. You allow the Voice to persist.”

He moans, He lets out a wet rattle. His body begins to crumble, and as it dissolves into the fecund decay of the grove, I choke one final time, and my body, corrupted, filled with mold, begins to be remade from the inside as if the mold is forming into wheels and grindstones, Engines of the World. I scream, and understand that I am all of these stories. And then understanding is denied me forever, and only obedience is mine.

I shamble to my feet and as I walk out of the grove into the world to prophesy, I scream out a curse on the world, hoarse, full of fury.

Bone and Gold

Mage: the Awakening (330-320 B.C.E.)

Malcolm Sheppard

War is groaning.

We remember the screams of the fray, hurled spears and swift-stabbing swords, but a man can only exert his full strength for a few dozen breaths before he must shuffle back and fight with grimaces and shouts alone, until his vitality returns. As battles progress, soldiers take longer pauses between assaults. They pant beside horses under the relentless sun. The purr of exhaustion rattles from their lips. And of course, they weep. That is war's true music, nothing so much as a hard day's work by a thousand of the lowest slaves. Labor and terror.

Today the groaning belonged to one side, populated by Greeks, Persians, Egyptians and others, bound to the service of our Warlord. With five comrades I pulled our earth-laden pallet, ropes over our shoulders and shields ahead. We growled out our steps, like in the marching drills. As we six pulled, six more pushed the pallet from behind, and together we were one of four units, an entire lochos of the army, made of survivors and ill-tempered men, suited to the riskiest work. We were building a ramp.


The defenders of Pir Sar knew exactly where to aim their arrows, but they lacked coordination and enthusiasm, argued after each volley, and warned us of the next with early, scattered shots that gave us time to hide behind shields, javelin-scarred stones and the sturdy dead.

Yet men died. An arrow caught Phillipos under his ear, sending him straight to breathless, open-eyed sleep. A javelin took Argyros in the chest while he straightened one of the shields we'd planted to shelter us. He gurgled and rolled down black, tamped dirt. Stray missiles danced down the growing earthwork until the sun touched the mountains. By the day's last volley, fatigue had conquered all terror. I sat in my shield's long shadow to break out water and dried figs.

Phokas crawled to me, holding up a bit of bread. We traded half portions with each other. "Who wants to die hungry?" he said. "Even if you wanted to think of some fine fuck from your youth or pray your last, hunger would throw ox shanks and olives into your dreams and wine to wash it down. Petty things." Then he ate: three bites.

"I don't know what I'd want to think while I died." An arrow struck my shield. It sounded like rain on an old roof. "It's a distraction."





“Theophanes, you really know how to make me feel like a brother.”

“I hated my brother.”

Phokas squeezed my arm and laughed, just like when I met him, after they’d made our lochos out of the remnants of two others. He’d invited me to his tent then. I knew he wanted to take honor from me like I was a staring, frightened boy.

The volley struck: long, black, killing raindrops.

I pressed my heel against his belly. A little kick would send him over the shield. He’d get rained on. “Think of death so nobly, and you’ll want it,” I said. “It’ll tempt you to make mistakes.”

“Yet the gods hate cowards.” He wound my forearm into his armpit. I forgot he was a strong wrestler. He could rip my elbow out of joint with a shrug.

I let go first. “They hate heroes too.”

We fled after the meal was done.



After night’s cool mercy, dawn hid in wine-colored clouds. We could be swift and comfortable. By noon, the ramp was fit to carry one catapult at a time. Pir Sar sent a sortie: over a hundred in a crooked line, dispersed by rocky terrain on the spur that held their fortress. We twenty-four set a phalanx on smooth earth of our own making. My shield touched Ariston’s; our spears wheeled into place, Greeks together.

Athenian strategy, Spartan muscle, even Persian iron — conquered Persian iron. Oh yes. I yelled “Ha-Oh!” with the rest, and thrust at the first wave in a single beat, creating upon the ground that storm the Asians failed to summon with ill-timed arrows. There’s much to love about battle, in the little techniques: shifting to the overhand grip so, when you thrust with a spear, the weight of a skewered body doesn’t wrench you forward. Stamping the ground twice, to advance as one force. We made a line of corpses for the rest to cross, but they thought better of it, hid behind rocks and harassed us with javelins. If a man shook his cramped shield arm they’d cast fast for the opening. We could only wait; advancing to the rocks would break our formation. We were back to the groaning war. Twenty-four warriors became twenty, sixteen, then eleven.

They saw our Horse Companions before we heard their crashing hooves, coming up from behind. We jumped aside for them. The Warlord was with them, set apart by a white high-crested helmet and his black horse, called Ox-Head.

Later they’d drink to their victory, omitting talk of we eleven on the ramp. Catapults loosened the enemy walls enough that enemy archers could no longer safely shoot from its vantage. The spur was ours. Even camp followers scurried up to loot the dead.

One of them turned a body over with a practiced yank to the hip. She knelt and stared at the dead man’s ruined face with the strange blue eyes of the Alinas. She ignored the sharp sword at his side. She was alone, and that was unusual, too. Followers usually worked in families, or beside soldiers who were their lovers, masters, or relatives.

Phokas must have noticed this. He swaggered over. “His things are mine,” he said to her. “I killed him on the ramp.”

“Take them.” She spoke calmly, in a Persian accent.



“I will!” said Phokas. “I can be generous. What can I give you? You haven’t even loosened his linen.”

“Nothing.” She stood and flexed her fingers singly, in a peculiar order. I glanced at my sword hand for a moment. When I looked up again, I was a dozen paces closer between them. Yet they ignored me.

“You won’t find anything on him that I can’t give you, though with more warmth.” He laughed at his own wit and crouched like a wrestler.

“You’re going to enslave me,” she said. “I’m not your enemy.”

He reached out to her, but my left hand intercepted his. I pulled; my sword entered his belly upward, from below the cuirass. I didn’t remember the thrust, but the end of it: failing tension in his arm, wetness on my legs from his blood. Yet I worried that he’d scream, so I put the next strike through his lung, entering from the notch of the collarbone. He made a soft sound, like a bubbling stream.

The noise carried my thoughts to an absurd place: a memory of Thebes. I’d visited with my mother and her family. We went to get my brother married, but really spent most of our time visiting famous places. I was very young.

We stopped at a spring. “Herakles came here,” said my mother. “He killed his family, but washed the blood away. So the gods gave him a new purpose. The water still tastes like blood.” I took a sip. Salt. Iron.

My brother elbowed me. “Ghosts love unburnt blood,” he said. “They suck it up like that and talk to the living.” That gave me nightmares for a year.

The spring sounded like Phokas’ death, so even as I dragged his body to a cliff’s edge I thought of those dreams, where pale men and women drank by a blood-filled trench.

The woman was with me. “I’m Maya,” she said and, as if to complete the introduction, she pushed his legs over the edge. The rest of his body followed.


“I can’t pay you to keep this secret,” I said.

“You’re not going to kill me, since you did it to save me. Nor will I abandon the army. My uncle lives near Vitasta — the Hydaspes in your language, where Zeus-Ammon must go to open the gates of the East. I don’t want to travel alone. I can reassure you with my service,” she said. She made a peculiar gesture and touched my arm. I felt as if it connected two pieces of a torn scroll, which when read together revealed my weakness, my shame. What else could I do?

• • •

After the battle of the ramp, they reassigned four of the eleven survivors to the pike men. It would have been five, but they found Phokas dead, presumed slain by one of the Pir Sar soldiers found beside him. We six were scraps, camped at the edge of the army. That gave us a certain amount of liberty.

Once we marched past the forest threshold, the days followed a routine. Maya washed when she could, started our fire and cooked a little, as camp followers always do. Our commander, Nikon the horseman, warned us to keep the “thieves and whores” at a distance, but she slipped back as soon as he trotted away. She was obviously with me, but on the



second night Phaidros grabbed her dark hair and murmured some Athenian aphorism. I flung a stone at his head, knocked him down and ground my forearm against his throat.

She watched me sleep, protecting me from the weakness I knew she'd discovered in me. Yet it went unsaid until some nights later, after we blundered into Porus' scouts. The skirmish was short; we slew them all, but my blood still rushed and my eyes refused to close.

"He was a rich farmer from some Spartan-ruled town," I said. "He had money and wanted to be my mentor. What could my parents do? My brother wasn't sending anything back. He wanted me to give him my thighs. I stabbed him in the knee with his eating knife and ran home."

Maya smiled, her lips blackened by night.

"My parents had to give his money back and of course my father whipped me, but he smiled when it was done. He'd been somebody's boy. So he said, 'I'll tell you how it is between men and women like he would have, so you don't shame yourself.'"

"What did you think of that?" Maya flexed and laced her fingers in the dark. I saw a bird's skull, then a spreading tree made of her fingers.

"It disgusted me. Fucking. That's what Paris wanted in the stories? I had no urge for it. I never wanted a boy for myself, either. The Warlord demanded his levy. I volunteered. That way I wouldn't have to get married and, by then, I was strong enough to resist anyone who wanted me to be their boy."

"Yet here I am, in your tent," she said.

"You really do come from beyond the Hydaspes, don't you? Everyone knows that if you can't put a boy or woman under you, you're not a man. They'd let me die on the fighting line. I'm bad luck."

So, she let them believe I was her man, for both of us. That lie wrote the play of our days.

At war, sudden quiet and strange, soft footfalls can stir you, but with Maya I slept as if behind city walls. A dozen nights on the march I was sleeping thus, when her strong hand squeezed my forearm.

"Your linothorax and sword," she whispered. "Bring them."

We stepped into the damp night. My sword caught the edge of our rain-soaked tent, sending a gout of water up, then down like drumbeats on the hide, but it didn't rouse anyone.

Maya frowned. "I saw my uncle pass by," she said. "I caught his eye, but he ran off. I think he might be in trouble. We need to find him."

"Find him yourself. They'd torture me for desertion."

"You'll be back before muster. I need your protection! Who knows why he ran?"

"Indeed." I turned back to the tent.

"So brave!" she hissed. "I should let the others know about your useless cock so they can expect the same."

I slapped her with my scabbarded sword; she spat blood at my face and smiled like a wrestler who'd found the opponent's weakest joint.



The dark flattened everything. A black mound could be a far off hill, or a thorny brush that clawed my sandals.

“Stick to the big trees,” said Maya. “The small ones have low branches. That means citraki.”

“What?”

“Big cats. They jump down.”

We followed a sinking moon through the brush, until I stepped on stone as smooth as a Babylonian palace floor. Moonlight struck a raised dais, scrawled with complex designs. An old naked man slumped in the middle. His white beard touched his navel, and his hair hung in thick ropes. Fresh wounds shone black on his arms, ragged and shallow: not cat’s claws.

Two men crawled around him on all fours, sure-footed as dogs in that posture. They wore scraps of rotten finery. Painted elephants swung from stained rags.

“My uncle!” Maya whispered. “Those are his captors. Kill them!”

“Those men are unarmed.”

“No!” She smacked my back hard. The sound echoed. The men turned. They had scarred faces and pointed teeth, and bounded to me like beasts.

They opened their ruined mouths and impossibly, sang like young men, steady and solemn as Egyptian hymns. The words gripped me like a god’s command: *Remember? This is the language you heard before you were born.* Yet every syllable slipped past memory. I followed these shadows of words inside myself, through what the learned call the House of Memory, so far from my body the bite felt distant and small: a superficial sting and trickle on my leg.

Another voice crashed into me like a wave, knocking me back to my body and full pain. I shook the mutilated man off my thigh and screamed when his mouth tore a round wound open. I hopped forward and took his heart with my sword. The other one still sang, but the liquid wail that had summoned me back continued, and stole the words’ power.

He scuttled to my left. I knew this game: the halting end of battle when an enemy, deprived of his weapon, wished to grapple and gouge, but he needed to pass my sword’s reach. I stabbed whatever he presented — arm, face, chest — and he weakened, giving me leave to kill him with thrust through the eye socket.


My wound burned. The old man laughed and stood, loose-limbed as a dancer.

“That bite looks bad.” He’d been sitting on a bag, and brought it with him. “They only used their nails to play with me, you see? They respect me.” He rummaged through the bag and produced a chunk of moss, a slab of old honey and a few unidentifiable plants and scraps. He passed them to Maya without looking. “You know what to do,” he said. “I assume you want him warm and breathing for the trip back?”

“Yes.” She took the honey in her mouth to warm it and ground the moss in her fingers.

“I can’t stay,” I said.





“I know what generals do,” said the old man. “We’ve a few around here. No gods among them, though. That was another age. How lucky you must be, to be led by the living aspect of thunder!”

“Zeus-Ammon? That isn’t for us Greeks. He uses it for people who want to be ruled by gods. Our heroes came from long ago too. They’re our ancestors.”

Maya applied the wet poultice, tying in on with a rag from one of the dead, bestial men. The wound cooled. I realized how giddy the pain had made me when it went away and hated the treated wound more, for depriving me of agony’s strength.

“Then we’re the same, Theophanes.” The old man put his things back in the bag and hummed.

“How do you know my name? What’s yours?”

“Call me Naga. You must have missed it. The Hungry Ones hurt you worse than you realize. You kept forgetting what we told you, or staring at the moon while Maya and I talked. It’s really quite irritating.”

“You’re her uncle?”

“You might use that word. As I was trying to say, you have Herakles and we have Arjuna. These god-people hold the world with one strong hand but always raise the other skyward, so the greater divinities can drag them across destiny. If the gods pull against the world, they rip heroes in half. What does that tell you?”

“They have to let go. The gods are always stronger than the world.”

“Yes. Like Herakles in Thebes. That scared you as a child but you mastered the lesson. See, Maya? He’s smart and strong. What challenges await him, I wonder?”

Naga reached into his bag again and drew a gold coin. It was twenty drachmas by weight, at least. Instead of a face, it bore the dais’s knotted design. “For you, monster slayer,” he said. “For passing the test.”

“I killed men.”

“They all start as men,” said Naga. “Then come the myths.”

• • •

My leg didn’t even have a scar. I slept too deeply and woke from a clod of dirt, hurled at my face by laughing Androkles. Nikon rode over the hill while I straightened my panoply and lined up for inspection. *I must have dreamed*, I thought.

He spotted the problem from his horse: “What’s wrong with your sword?”

I offered it up, scabbard and all, and saw the hilt was scabbed with blood. Nikon snatched it up and with a too-forceful tug against the caked gore, pulled the blade forth.

“Filthy,” he said, exposing each blood-flecked side to the sun. “And this is the Warlord’s xiphos. It bears the stamp of his smith. It only becomes yours when you replace its grip and guard with those bought by plunder.”

“I’m ashamed, Lord Companion.”

“You’re lochagos of this remnant band, aren’t you?” He sheathed my sword and threw it a little short. I had to lunge to catch it.



“No Lord Companion — I mean, I don’t know. We haven’t been assigned new duties since the siege.”

“We sort of organize ourselves,” said Androkles, smirking.

“You southern shit-eaters think you know everything, don’t you? Philosophy. Poetry. Everything except how to win wars. That’s why you’re talking to a Macedonian on a horse, isn’t it?” Nikon slapped his mount’s neck. “But you can punish Theophanes Athenian style, mob to mob. I assumed he was in charge because I heard he disciplined a man — you, with the scar on your face.” He waved at Phaidros then, who stepped forward.

“Scarred one? If you and whatever gang you throw together beat Theophanes until he begs for mercy, you get to be lochagos. After you settle this matter — and clean your weapons! — muster to the right of the pike men.”

Off he rode. Phaidros huddled with Androkles and Hesiod the Spartan. The Egyptian Hesiod (this wasn’t his name, but as close as we could say) averted his eyes when I looked to him. Lysandros sat on his bundled tent drinking from his skin, a neutral spectator.

So the three allies advanced with Phaidros forward, at the point of the Delta. “You’re always tired from fucking that woman, Theo,” he said. “None of us are on your side. Give up now. I’ll slap you around a bit to show Nikon we did something, but that’ll end it.”

“You’ll order me to my death when we hit that river. Come on.”

When you fight a gang both sides know that to win, you need to beat the leader. But there’s a quandary: if the gang protects its chieftain they all but admit that he isn’t fit to lead, but if they expose him he might fall, and destroy their will to fight. That’s the rule in these little bouts for honor but not in true battles, where enemies are nothing but meat to butcher.


Phaidros stepped in with a swinging kick for my leg. Pain rushed up the seam between muscles on my outer thigh. I pitched forward; he met my nose with the bottom of his palm. The blow filled my eyes with tears. Blind, I felt his ally’s arms tightening around my waist.

I chose butchery.

When men fight for status they hold back the worst blows, so the loser survives to submit. I applied the ethos of war instead. I found Phaidros’ face with my hands, gathered his lip and cheek flesh in my fist and pulled, just as the grappler threw me down. Flesh tore free.

Spartan Hesiod had been the wrestler at my waist, but he scrambled up and out of reach as soon as he heard Phaidros howl. I wiped my eyes and stood. Phaidros thrashed in the black earth, hands on his face. Androkles ripped the corner from his cloak and dropped to his knees, to staunch the wound. I couldn’t see how bad it was, but I held a strip of flesh as wide as an obol.

I threw it aside. “I saved his life,” I said. “He’s too badly hurt, so they’ll leave him behind. As for the rest of you: The man wants us on the far side of the pike phalanxes. They expect us to die harassing Porus’ flanking cavalry.”



“I’m glad you won!” Said Lysander. “Not only are we a man down, but you gave such an inspiring speech!” He stood and took another swig from his skin.

“You don’t understand. That’s Nikon’s plan. In mine, we get to live. Now one of you Hesiods go polish my sword.”



The Warlord addressed us from atop great black Ox-Head. The horse stared at me when he trotted past, its eyes the color of noonday water.

He didn’t say anything in particular. Fight. Conquer. Officers told us what we really needed to know. King Porus’ army massed on the other side of the rain-swollen Hydaspes, expecting us. The Warlord had already sent General Krateros ahead with most of the army, to make a show of finding some way to cross. But we’d separated from them and moved east, to cross by night while Porus minded the wrong force.

“Make for the trees,” I said to the men. “The pike men will be too slow to catch us. When the enemy comes, we’ll hide. We’ll cast a few javelins at stray soldiers and regroup with survivors in the end, to make it look as if we were there all along.”

The sun retreated and officers summoned us alongside other remnant groups, commanding us to bring scrap wood, worn tents, and straw. We all knew we were expected to die; they didn’t even bother merging us into a true lochos. At the riverbank, a one-eyed craftsman told us how to turn our garbage into rafts. We worked without torches and when we were done, an officer struck me in the back with a rod and hissed, “Go!” He pointed out into the dark, where I could see the outline of a real boat, holding the pike men.

Egyptian Hesiod was an excellent boatman and soon led us past the others. As soon as we landed on the other side we ran for the trees.

We walked for an hour in the forest’s darkness, looking for torches, listening for foreign whispers. There was nothing; we’d truly surprised them. I didn’t know where to go. If the Warlord won while we stayed in the woods, we’d be killed for desertion. If Porus won, we were fugitive foes, heads fit to decorate victory pikes. I said as much to Lysandros.

“Now we can be surprised by the manner of our deaths,” he whispered. “I don’t think this is an improvement.”

“We need to find our phalanxes,” I said. I led us toward a moonbeam and the sound of water. At least we could drink our fill and get a good look at the stars. Soon our feet splashed across a rocky stream, where the moonlight illuminated great, strange boulders, carved with uncountable deep lines. They flexed as if breathing. I remembered the ruins, the old man and the singing cannibals. As I walked forward, they rumbled and stretched out.

The men shouted, but I was lost in the House of Memory, heedless of their words. Horns thundered and white daggers appeared in the dark.

Elephants. But their shadows and ivory were already upon me. Full night came again.



Black reigned for a timeless age, followed by the color of dawn and new roses. I blinked at the light and it became Maya, looking down. "You've been hurt," she said.

"The others?" I smelled roast pig.

"Perhaps they joined the main force downriver."

"I don't feel much. How bad can it be?" Out of sight, someone shook a metal rattle.

"A man can be hurt so badly, the body stops warning him with pain." A drop of sweat fell from one of her stray curls, into my mouth. The rattle stopped. "One of them put a tusk through the side and threw you against a tree. You hit your head; it's filling with the blood meant for your limbs."

"That's why my hands and feet feel numb."

"That blood was going to crush your brain from the inside," she said. "I had to cut a hole in your skull to drain it." She produced a rough, tiny golden bowl. I saw traces of the strange designs from my coin and knew the rattle had been a hammer, beating it into shape.

"Now I cover the hole," said Maya. "Gold keeps away fevers."

"Will I die?"

"Just let me sing and hold very, very still."

• • •

We walked along tigers' trails. I insisted on cleaning my sword and panoply, so we didn't leave until the sun slew morning shadows. Maya tied her skirts to walk and scowled at the sky, drinking from her gourd. "I want to make it by nightfall," she said, gesturing at my clean sword. "Now you might have to use it." She wiped sweat from her brow. I felt no discomfort.

She moved ahead at a chaotic pace, sprinting across clearings and fallen logs, but I saw her bare calves twitch. She grew tired and fell back to join my steady march. After another hour she held my shoulder to keep up, and after two more said, "I'm exhausted from the work of remaking you. You'll have to carry me."

"In this heat? I'd drop after an hour or two." I said it even though my brow was dry. I felt no need for water.

She made a peculiar gesture and the sun jumped west. I felt her weight on my back. Her head rested on my right shoulder. She snored. The land had changed. I must have been carrying her for half the day, relying on some secret strength. My wineskin was still heavy.


"Theophanes."

It was native Greek, spoken like a man talking with water in his mouth. I shook my shoulders. Maya opened her eyes and let herself down.

I turned; it was Androkles. He was naked and white as sacred ashes, except where blood flowed from his mouth in deep gouts. The red stain met a second mouth: a cut in his belly from which intestines erupted, like a meal of raw snakes. They danced across the ground when he walked. I had dreamed of such men as a child, after the spring in Thebes.

"How did you find me?" I drew my sword but it felt ridiculous, somehow.





“It was easier by day,” he said. “Is it day? The air is full of mist. I’ve come to tell you: you can come back. I confessed everything to Nikon. He struck me with the butt of his lance, but that was the end of it.” I glanced at his belly wound again.

Maya whispered to herself and fixed her eyes on Androkles at last, while whispering some mysterious syllable. Then she turned to me: “What do you see?”

“A ghost.”

“Yes.” She threw a rain-sodden branch at Androkles. It sank into his chest without leaving a mark, and I heard it clatter behind him.

I slid my finger across the top of my head until it tapped the edge of the gold. There was no pain. “It’s the wound, isn’t it? Senses emanate from the brain, so when it’s injured we see false things.”

“Come back,” said Androkles. “Come back. Come back. We muster at the River of Hate now.” He stretched like an image in water, taller, and twisted. I looked up, but so did Maya.

“No, she said. “It’s not your wound.” She raised her hands and sang the sound of crashing waves. I remembered it from the ruins and the old man, when it protected me.

• • •

“Am I a ghost?”

“You have a body, don’t you?”

“Am I alive?”

“You speak and think.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You wouldn’t understand the answer.”

“I’m not in pain.”

“Good.”

“My heart doesn’t beat.”

• • •

Only I stood. The others squatted around a fire I had no need for. They were naked and long-haired like ascetics, but some of them toyed with signs of wealth. The oldest, the man Naga from the ruin, carried a golden scepter shaped like a cobra.

Maya prostrated herself before him. He favored her with an iron-eyed glance. “I remember our argument,” he said. “You believed those Greeks. Aristotle. Plato. You studied their philosophy.”

“Yes,” she said. “If thought exists without attachments, then all our investigations into the passions of others are distractions. We can take the short path, through pure reason.”

“So I challenged you to find a passionless, rational man.” He grinned. “You brought him.”

She stood and touched my arm as she had only once before, after we threw down Phokas’ body. “He’s a soldier without loyalties,” she said. “He maimed and murdered



comrades them as swiftly as enemy soldiers but out of necessity, never hate. He outlived war-bands because he could abandon them without regret. He didn't care about plunder. He felt no lust and, to his people, that made him weak. I studied him, posing as his lover." Fire danced across her eyes.

I summoned images from the House of Memory: Phokas, our first meeting. But when I tried to speak, my tongue seemed pinned to my mouth.

"Now he thinks he saved me from one of his own. Theophanes, do you truly remember running to my side? Drawing your sword? No. You followed my will. I bade you to perform actions that were acceptable to you, and you assumed you moved from your own desires. That's why I let go after the first blow — the second was yours.

"Without greed, lust or animosity, I believed a man such as yourself would cleave to absolute reason. But you maintain one attachment: to your identity as a soldier, against death, against being ruled. I've enslaved you to your lust for freedom. Thus, the desire to escape attachments is an attachment itself."

Naga straightened himself, eyes hard, a teacher ennobled by his student's understanding.

• • •

I see ghosts because I am a ghost, but bound in flesh, bone, and gold. Incorruptible as an Egyptian corpse, I served Naga's band over generations. I saw death's gray invade Maya's hair; I put the torch to her after her final stillness. One of her sons wept; the other ate her burned flesh. They carved her bones into wands.

She made me a slave to teach their sect that even the desire for freedom could bind someone to the world, away from the enlightenment they sought. Perhaps she believed her spells would eventually destroy the urge with me and leave some purely rational creature. No. I hid it deep.

I found sanctuary through inaction. I saw their enemies' ghost-spies but said nothing. By then I was an old relic, dragged across centuries, my purpose and abilities forgotten. I rested in the box they built for me, ignoring massacres and duels across decades of slow, groaning war, until I counted three nights of silence, and knew they'd lost. I stepped forth and walked among dying fires and dog-eaten corpses, free.

Thus it has been for ages since, across new nations and cities of glass. I've come to you, sorcerer, because Maya was right. Freedom is a terrible attachment; it demands that I discover a purpose for my days but there have been too many. I was made from strong spells. End them. Cast me from this flesh so I can muster alongside other dead warriors, down by the River of Hate.



Unmanned

Beast: the Primordial (830-840 C.E.)

Pete Woodworth

Ulf the Beardless leaned over the side and trailed his hand in the water, letting the icy shock wake him up, savoring the intensity of the feeling. As pre-battle rituals went, it might not have seemed like much, but it steadied his nerves and so he kept it. His hand no longer shook before a raid as it once had, it was true, but the habit had remained even so.

Next to him, Karl snorted, shaking his massive head, his long blonde locks tied back with a leather thong and streaked with gray like clouds across a sunset. “You’ll lose a finger, boy,” Karl rumbled, not dropping a stroke on the rhythm, his huge shoulders rising and falling as regularly as the tides. The exchange was a ritual as familiar as Ulf touching the water or Knut giving his axe six strokes on each side with a whetstone six times the night before the raid.

“What’s got it this time?” Ulf grinned back.

Karl screwed up his face, thinking. “Giant eel,” he said at last, nodding his head as though he had spoken solemn prophecy instead of straight out of his hairy arse. “Right up out of the rocks, nip it off like—” and he snapped his teeth together with a loud clack, grinning broadly.

Ulf raised his hand from the water, and shook the drops free. They fell to the deck in big splotches, looked darker against the wood, almost like blood. It might’ve been an omen, but Ulf wasn’t the one for omens. Alva was the one who threw the runes and pulled on Fate’s threads. Ulf preferred to speak with steel. It was straightforward. “You’re full of it, old man.”

Karl managed a shrug, still not losing any rhythm. “I’ve had enough time to be. You mark me, boy. All you young bucks start off empty as a drinking horn on feast day morning, but before you know it you’ll be filled with piss like the rest of us.”

Geir piped up, ready as always to skewer his favorite target. “You fill your horn with piss?” The little man cackled at his own wit, a sound that had been grating to Ulf the first time he heard it, but it since grown on him, much like the screech of a whetstone had first seemed unbearably jarring, but since became a lullaby. Though he had four winters on Ulf, Geir was definitely the runt of their particular litter, and was quick to snap because of it.

“No! You know what I—” Karl choked off, fuming, the other men laughing as red bloomed on his cheeks and spread to his neck. It looked almost like a slit throat in slow motion, and Ulf frowned. He wasn’t one for omens, but there was such a thing as being dense about it, too. Ulf looked up, and Alva was staring at him from under the edge of his hood where he sat, as apart from the others as one could be on a ship this size. When their eyes met, the changeling winked his blue one, the green one alight with mischief.

Seers.

“It would taste about the same as Olav’s brews,” Alva half-said, half-sang in that too-high voice of his. Though the remark was intended as joke, Ulf could see some of the men tense, and while most managed a laugh it was muted at best. A muted laugh was better than nothing, given their purpose and the dark deeds that made it necessary, but Ulf watched carefully all the same.

Though he’d bested Steinar in the holmgang and thus had been formally cleared of the accusation of ergi, or unmanliness, Alva continued to be reserved, even borderline effeminate in manner, dressing with casual androgyny. The fact that he quietly continued to practice seidr didn’t help either, but Ulf knew that didn’t stop the villagers from seeking out Alva’s little hut in the forest when they needed a blessing called...or a curse laid.


Still, if it hadn’t been for Ulf’s insistence — and their own burning desire for anything to get them their vengeance — there was no way the men would have agreed to bring the sorcerer with them. Ulf was no great reader of hearts, but it didn’t take much skill to see the disapproval and quiet fury on the faces of the villagers as Alva came aboard.

They had no way of knowing Alva’s true nature, of course, any more than Ulf’s. All they knew was a few years back the young, strong, girl-crazy Alva they knew had been replaced seemingly from nowhere with this brooding, secretive, sorcerous stranger. Which was close to the truth, as it happened, except the other way around: Alva had been stolen away to a strange realm when he was young, subjected to cruel magic and changed into something not quite human.

It was the impostor left in his place that had been the pride of his parents, and who was returned to little more than a pile of broken sticks and severed threads when Ulf learned the truth. Alva, the true Alva, had been Ulf’s friend ever since. There is a certain kinship to be found in knowing someone else who with a secret nature, after all, and if refusing to disown Alva meant the men muttered ergi at Ulf behind his back, well, they didn’t know the half of what they were saying. All of which made bringing Alva on this particular raid all the more important, in fact.

Two of Ulf’s brood had perished in the last three months while he was away reaving, each death coinciding with a brutal raid by Black Eirik Ivarrson. Massacres, really, not raids, elders and children put to death alongside the fallen warriors, with only a few lucky survivors escaping to tell the tale each time. Still, one such death in the brood might have been misfortune — Sigurd had been prone to arrogance, trusting his dragon’s blood to keep him safe — but when Alva received the dream-vision of Astrid’s death and the burning of her village, that sealed it. Alva might be many things, but his dreams were truer than oaths.





So with vengeance at heart, Ulf and his men sailed for Black Eirik's shores, grief and fury grinding their desires to bloody sharpness the entire way. Even gluttoned before the trip, the Devouring Wolf that stalked the emptiness where Ulf's soul had been paced restlessly the entire voyage, leaving men sweating and crying out in the dreams as it ran through its stores and went hunting. Ulf consoled himself knowing it would feed again, soon, and smiled his sharp toothed grin at the thought of the blood and fear to come.

The men were still teasing Karl, verbally taunting him in a circle like a bull in a corral, and Ulf was about to add a little of his own wit to the exchange when the fog ahead parted enough for the shadows of land to show through. Ulf's Hunger stirred at the sight. "Thor's piss," he said. "We're here."

"Blasphemy," clucked Old Snorre, though more from reflex than true reproach.

"You sure, chief?" Karl asked. From some of the other men the title might have seemed like a taunt, given Ulf's young age. But Karl had been one of the first to fall in line, once he saw Ulf fight (and once the Devouring Wolf stalked the lands of his dreams). He didn't change easy, but when he did, he changed solid. "I don't see any watch fires."

Geir spat. "Cocky fucks." The others murmured in agreement, but there was an edge to it and no mistake. Black Eirik's deeds filled a half-dozen songs, after all, and being a damn fool didn't feature in any of them. Not to mention that him or one of his company had killed not one, but two of the Children. Hunger though the Devouring Wolf might, Ulf's mother always said caution was a shield that seldom cracked, and this looked like one of those times it might be best to find shelter accordingly.

"We make for the south landing," Ulf said, affirming the earlier plan. "Quiet, fast. Oh, and bloody." He grinned as they chuckling, thinking of the feast to come. "Very bloody."

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"We spotted a ship landing at Serpent's Cove," Gunnar said, the old scout sparing a curt nod in place of the bow most men would have given. Some of the thanes exchanged glances at that, but Eirik didn't mind. A scout that cared for manners more than observation was little use. "Maybe twenty aboard, I'd say."

"Not much of a challenge," Bjorn growled. "Damn Geats never learn, do they?"

Eirik held up his hand to stop the inevitable round of insults and boasted threats. "Maybe they don't, but we do. I'll have no innocent blood shed for their spite. Gnute, take five of your men and clear the village, lead everyone who won't wield a weapon to the holding in the hills." Gnute looked like he was about to protest, then saw Eirik's expression and bowed his agreement before heading out the door, grabbing men as he went.

"Ambush?" Gunnar asked. Eirik nodded. The old scout herded the others out, dragging Bjorn by the arm when he didn't take the hint. Eirik could see the confusion in the young man's eyes, wondering why they wouldn't simply crush the invaders in a straightforward fight. Even though it was simply prudence, he'd see the move of the villagers as a form of cowardice.



What Bjorn didn't know, of course, was that Eirik would have cleared the whole village if he could, warriors and all. Faced what was coming alone. The final one of *them* was coming, he could feel it. He'd killed the first one too quickly, unnerved by seeing its true nature, but the second had lingered for hours before it expired, and he'd learned much from it before at last caving its head in.

None of this had been what he wanted.

The raids had been part of a simple plan, one Eirik had taken no small care devising. A last excursion leading to a good death facing worthy enemies, before the herbs could no longer hide his failing muscles and shaking hands. The way a true jarl should die, the way he had always imagined he *would* die, and yet for all the steel songs and close calls in the bloody business, none of the cuts quite snipped his thread. The Geats were perhaps not the fiercest folk, not in many years, but the rivalry was an old one and there would be honor in that, not to mention thinking of the reprisals that would be carried out in his name afterward.


On the voyage over, he'd reviewed his life trying to imagine what they'd say when he was gone, tugging at the threads of his life like a weaver checking her work. Eirik felt he'd been a good jarl to his people, generous with his plunder and fair with his justice, brutal when it was called for, but never when it wasn't. If he'd struggled with fidelity here and there, well, no man was made to be perfect, where they? And, anyway, those were secrets damn few of his men knew, and certainly none would be telling, not after the song of his tragic-but-glorious death was composed.

The first raid, though, that had been a pathetic exercise. After so many years wondering if the next battle would be his last, it was a strange and bitter disappointment to find no one he deserved his life. It had to be perfect, or at least not embarrassing, but none of the enemy had been worth it. At least, not until the creature emerged, a dragon in the shape of a man, spitting fire like the legends of old. Those men not burned down where they stood had panicked and fled for the ships, but not Eirik. Maybe it was because he was so ready for his death that he didn't feel the same fear; instead, seeing the monster in human form in front of him had sparked some of that rage he'd felt of old.

A few moments later, as his shield burned to embers and the creature lay hacked and bleeding at his feet, his triumph had turned to ice water in his veins as he realized he'd missed perhaps the greatest chance for a glorious death he could have possibly imagined. The frustration he felt at that moment was so great he thought he might have shattered like steel dunked too hot in the trough, and later on he admitted to himself that had been the main reason he'd ordered the rest of the village butchered. Not his proudest moment, but then, they'd been the ones sheltering the creature, hadn't they? It was justice of a sort, when you looked at it that way. At least he told himself as much.

Then a thought occurred: if the Geats had concealed one such creature, might they not conceal another? So another raid was planned, and as he looked over the charts it seemed as if his hand was naturally drawn to a particular village, as though it called to him. Instead of a contemplative resignation, he felt something like the same thrill he had when he was a young man raiding: if there was another such creature, he could die like a hero of legend, facing down the impossible.

But, though he faced another creature as his instincts had warned him, this one was easier than the first. It seemed like every trick it had was so obvious to him, and while



his men might have recounted the tales of his prowess with wide eyes, it left him feeling even more frustrated and hollow than the last kill. He'd let this one linger, though, taken his time in carving her, practically begging to know if there was another of her kind, if that one would be any greater challenge.

If only he could finally die the death he deserved.

There was, the creature at last spit at him, venomous blood bubbling on her lips as she bled and steamed from the torturer's cuts, but away and out of his reach. No matter, Eirik thought, as he rammed his sword through its forehead and ordered the rest of the survivors to receive the same. His men were already anxious to be home after such a pair of strange incidents and, anyway, the same instinct that guided him to the last one told him the last monster would seek him out soon enough. There were worse deaths than to die defending your home, after all.

From somewhere outside, he heard the low voices of the men making ready, and distantly he felt some sorrow that it was likely a number of them would die when the creature and its human thralls attacked. They were no match for the beast, after all, not like he was, but at least they would be granted a glorious death, the sort he still so desperately craved. Part of him envied them, in fact, and wondered if he might not join their ranks tonight...or if this monster would be as much of a disappointment as the others had turned out to be.

Eirik reached for his sword, but when he tried to pick it up his hand spasmed and it fell from his shaking, nerveless fingers. He glanced around, but no one had seen the disgrace and, with an effort that curled his lips back from his teeth and set the tendons taut in his neck, he forced his hand to wrap around the hilt and lift the blade. He held it out at arm's length, the sword shaking so much it might have been dancing, and willed his body to obey him. Hours passed, or so it seemed, but at last it slowed, steadied, and was something close to the grip of the warrior he'd been when he was young.

"Let it be tonight," Eirik said, the words close to a prayer, studying his face in the blade. When he was confident the weakness had passed, he donned his cloak and strode out to meet his death, hoping it would not cost another village before it came.

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"Ambush," Alva said, in the same tone of voice another man might have commented on the weather. Ulf had suspected as much, they all had as they approached the village — it was too dark, too quiet, too obviously a trap. But Alva's announcement wasn't speculation; Ulf knew that tone. It was certainty, of the sort only the fae and their loose grasp on time seemed to possess.

"Chief?" Karl asked Ulf, the uncertainty making his deep voice sound oddly high. It was a single word, but the question wrapped around it was plain enough. Go on, or go back? They weren't in the village proper, not quite. Unless Black Eirik and his men had somehow already managed to circle around behind them, which Ulf's senses deemed unlikely, the way back to boat would still be clear.

But the Hunger of the Devouring Wolf would not be denied.

"Go back to the boat," Ulf said. He pointed to Alva, who was munching on an apple like a child at a fair. "Alva and I will leave them something to think about, then double



back and be gone before they know what hit them. Make ready to get underway in a hurry, and if you don't hear the horn soon, leave. Understood?"

The men looked at each other. "Chief—" Geir began, grabbing the short straw as always, but Ulf let the Devouring Wolf show in his eyes, just for a moment, and the men backed off, turning back for the ship with little more than a few muttered luck wishes and some dark looks at Alva, as though anything that happened to Ulf would be the changeling's fault. Normally Ulf wouldn't be so aggressive with his own men, but the Hunger was on him, and it didn't care for argument.

Besides, this way he wouldn't have to hold back, and now he didn't need to anymore.

When he was sure the men were out of earshot, Ulf shook like a dog coming from the rain, feeling the presence of the Devouring Wolf engulf him like stepping into deep shadow, the strength and speed flowing into his limbs, his teeth hungry for flesh and the fear that sweetened it. He looked to Alva and grinned, all pointed teeth in the darkness. "For Astrid?"

Alva cast off his human façade like a player discarding a mask, revealing the wizened visage of his true nature. Ulf was one of the few who'd seen the network of scars that crossed Alva's body, twining and intersecting to form all manner of arcane designs as well as serving as testaments to the inhuman brutality of the so-called Fair Folk. "And Sigurd."

"Let's make this quick, then. Go in quiet." Alva nodded and fished his runes out of his pouch, placing them on a nearby tree in the shape of a door. As he touched the bark, the stones glowed a soft blue and stayed fixed where he put them, until the door was complete and space inside the stones vanished, revealing the sideways place Alva called the Hedge. It wasn't Ulf's favorite means of travel, but it did give them a wonderful element of surprise, and that was good enough. It was time to hunt.


To feed.



Ulf burst from the Hedge between two buildings, howling, and cut down one of a pair of men in front of him who'd been waiting at the mouth of alley, their eyes on the village square. To his credit, the other man — a boy, really — didn't freeze or bolt, but raised his axe and leapt immediately to fight. He didn't even hear the boy's war cry, though, as he caught the accompanying wild axe swing with his shield. He felt the blade bite into the soft wood and twisted it out of the boy's hands with the ease of long practice. His foe had just a moment to look surprised before Ulf's own following stroke caught him right under the ribs, parting the simple leather jerkin and drawing a spurt of dark blood as he pulled the axe free.

"Wha—" The boy coughed and gripped his side as he sank to his knees, drawing in breath to shout as the pain hit him, but Ulf planted a boot on his chest and kicked him onto his back, not even stopping for the mercy stroke as he burst through the door and out into the village proper. The scent of blood was all around him, and most of it needed shedding still.

"Eirik! Come on out, you son of a whore!" Ulf yelled, the noise causing men to spill out from houses all around, bristling with spears and swords and axes like quills



on a boar. Ulf bared his teeth in a feral smile and charged the nearest group; their own shouts were dying and eyes bulging white in the gloom as they watched the shadow of the Devouring Wolf rise up around Ulf.

At the last moment, the nearest man winced and ducked behind his shield, leaving Ulf free to hack his legs out from under him. He fell howling, one leg severed and the other attached by little more than gristle, tangling the spearman beside him as the man launched a thrust at Ulf. The point scraped off his shoulder as Ulf ducked under it, punching his sword into the man's stomach, and ripping it free in a savage sideways slash that ripped him nearly in half.

Behind him, Ulf heard the roar of flame as Alva loosed his sorcery on the others, some men shouting as they broke and ran for cover, while others simply screaming as the hungry flames devoured them. Another man stepped up with his face contorted in rage, perhaps having just seen a brother fall, his heavy hammer whistling down. With no room to dodge it, Ulf took the hit square the shoulder, felt the bone crack and his shield arm go useless.

The man's whoop of triumph was short-lived, though, as Ulf laughed away the pain, cutting back at neck height, even as the shield slipped from his grip. His enemy hopped back awkwardly, narrowly escaping the blade, swinging the hammer wildly to create some distance as Ulf closed in. Through sheer blind luck, one swing caught Ulf on the jaw, knocked it sideways with a crack, but the Devouring Wolf was with him. Ulf just stepped back, took his jaw, and slid it slowly back into place, watching the man's eyes go wider as the broken bones knit and the cuts scabbed and healed right in front of him.

"No," the man said, almost whispering, the hammer dropping almost as if he'd forgotten it as Ulf calmly rotated his fresh-healed shoulder and grinned through bloody teeth. Ulf didn't bother to pick up his shield, just flexed his fingers, feeling the Devouring Wolf's talons as he did so.

"Yes," Ulf replied, and chopped down, deep into the man's neck and cracking his collarbone, the blood coming in torrents. The Devouring Wolf feasted on the surge of fear as what men remained nearby and unburnt lost their nerve and bolted. The rush of the emotions was so strong, so pure, that Ulf didn't feel the axe blow right away.

Or, rather, it didn't feel like a near killing strike, just a hard blow, like an overeager comrade slapping him on the back. It wasn't until his chain shifted, half slipping off and dark with blood, when Ulf first realized the armor had been neatly severed at the back.

"Disappointing," Eirik grunted, wrenching the blade free of the ruined armor, sending Ulf staggering a few steps away. Dark blood and white bone showed through the ragged wound, but unlike the broken shoulder or shattered jaw he'd watched the creature recover from, this injury would not heal nearly so easily.

"Black Eirik." Ulf showed a mouthful of bloody teeth; it was a smile and a threat. The wound in his back burned, but refused to knit as the others did and, in a grim moment, Ulf realized how tough Sigurd and wily Astrid might have been brought down. Eirik didn't smell like kin, didn't smell like anything special, but a bad arrow still pierces the eye. "Have this coming." Ulf's armor was all wrong, though, wrecked, and so slowly, painfully, he started pulling it off, his eyes not leaving Eirik.

“Ulf the Beardless,” Eirik sighed. “A boy, but still, with your reputation I expected better.” He looked over at Alva, and Eirik’s lip turned up in a sneer. “And you brought your pet deviant. Amazing. I didn’t believe it when they told me you actually kept company with this man-lover.”

“Fire-throwing man-lover,” Alva corrected mildly.

“I’ll deal with you in a moment,” Eirik said, turning back to Ulf as the last of the armor clattered to the ground. “As soon as I finish with...” He trailed off, not immediately comprehending what he was seeing. Ulf’s otherwise bared and bloody chest was bound tight with bandages, and for a moment Eirik wondered how Ulf had managed to wrap them so quickly. Then he realized they weren’t bandages, but bindings, and true recognition dawned at last. “But you’re—”

“Better than you deserve,” Ulf finished for him, then spat a mouthful of blood. Everything hurt and the edges of his vision were dark, but the fear and revulsion on Eirik’s face was like a feast to the starving. Ulf dropped his weapon, flexed hands that were at once claws. His strength wasn’t what it was, but as the horror mounted, he felt it might be enough.

“No,” Eirik said. That calm certainty of his moment had fled, and in shock he realized his hand was shaking, worse than ever. Ulf saw it too, and the bitch actually had the gall to laugh, a bubbling sound with that terrible wound. Anger flared, but strength did not follow, leaving his voice shaking. “Not like this. Not to a woman and a queer!”

“Born to it, worked for it, cast out of it — we’re all men here.” Ulf stepped forward, claws raised, the Devouring Wolf looming large over his shoulder. Eirik raised the axe, but it shook so badly Ulf brushed it aside almost casually, leaned in close enough to smell the fear on his breath. “If you manage to die like one, anyway.”

Eirik took a breath to reply, but the air went out of him at once, and when he looked down he saw Ulf pulling his hand out of his gut, blood and entrails rushing out with it. He groaned, tried once more to speak, but found just blood coming up. Then, somehow he was on his back, and everything seemed immensely cold and far away. All of this, he thought, gazing into the black, which seemed as he stared to be the only thing coming closer. All of this, and a woman ends it.

If there was more to the thought, he never found it.

“Dead?” Alva asked, walking up next to Ulf and looking down at Eirik’s corpse.


“Think so,” Ulf managed through gritted teeth. “Bit of a problem if he isn’t.”

“Nah,” Alva said. He put his arm out to steady Ulf, who sagged against him with a little sound of pain. He was the only one who ever heard that sound, and rather liked the trust. “I had him. He had nothing for the flames.”

“Says you,” Ulf grunted. His vision was starting to fade out again, so he dug his nails into his palm to focus it again. “He did something with that axe, though. S’not healing right.” Ulf looked up at Alva. “Can you mend it?”

“I can try,” Alva said. He said a quick blessing, tugged on the strands. The blood slowed, stopped, but the cut itself still looked angry and refused to knit. Alva frowned. “You’re right. He did do something. You’ll live, but this may take a bit. We need to go, before his other men find their balls and return. Can you walk?”





Ulf's vision had brightened a bit, though the pain of the wound still felt like a smith quenching a blade in his back. "Think so. Well enough to get back to the ship, anyway." An old thought crossed his mind. "I need to cover up first, though. Find me a tunic or something—"

"Ulf," Alva interrupted. "They know."

"What?" Ulf's eyes went wide. "What do you mean, they know?"

"It's not that big a village," Alva explained patiently. Together they limped out of the village, trailing dark blood behind them. "And besides, you're on a boat with them for days at a time. You're clever, it's true, and that's why they don't mind so much. You don't rub their faces in it." He paused. "Well, that and you haven't lost a battle, plus the fact that you scare the piss out of 'em as well. But really, did you think they were that blind?"

"No," Ulf said, and on saying it realized it was true. "I guess I just thought, well, I thought they'd say something."

"Would you, in their boots?" Alva laughed.

Ulf joined in the laughter, though each breath felt like a knife in the ribs. "Definitely not." They walked in silence for a while, but then the laughter bubbled up out of Ulf again, raw and painful but unstoppable. "That's good," Ulf said, grinning with bloody teeth. "No more pretending, then. About anything."

"Anything?" Alva asked. Her voice was mild, but her words were heavy with meaning.

"Anything." Ulf and the Devouring Wolf within him growled, low and hungry. "Now we hunt for real."

Dry Spell

Vampire: the Requiem (1587-1593 C.E.)

Renee Ritchie

I truly thought I was on time.

The Ieldra's court started at midnight proper. I thought I had traveled swiftly enough to arrive in time, especially when I spotted Bishop's Gate as I passed the crest of the hill and heard no calling of the hours from the watchmen. The scents of the city wafted on the summer night breeze, caressing my skin and prompting memories of my last visit to my Gwendolyn at Gropecunt Lane. The faintest remnants of rich, coppery flavor from my last meal lingered on my tongue, and the rumbling in my chest reminded me how many nights passed since that meal. The guards at the gate, once imperceptible, scurried along the parapets like ants.

"Twelve of the clock!" the guard called, "and all's well!"

In hindsight, I must have lingered to long on the thoughts of Gwendolyn.


I gathered my thoughts to assess how I could minimize this problem. I could close the distance by half with a few moments of concentration and exertion. Only a few pinpricks of campfires dotted the countryside, far enough away from the main road that those who tend the flames would not notice. The slight hunger pangs would grow, but with all of London before me, they would be sated before the night was out.

The burst of speed set zephyr's wings to my feet. The breeze became a gust buffeting my face, and the shadows of the nighttime countryside blurred into featureless black. Falcons, horses, and wolves could not touch me; I became the wind itself. In moments like this, I sing wordless praises to my sire and his sire, all the way down to the first of my line, for surely, there must be a source to the font of miracles residing in my body. The Lance can keep their damnation; reveling in the power in my Blood, I am more than any god of mortals could ever plan or conceive.

The Beast within me roared, demanding more. More speed. More blood. More darkness until even the torches of the city are blotted out.

Of course, I did not see the old woman sprawled out across the road. When I stumbled over her, I heard and felt bones crack. I landed face-first, scraping along the packed dirt a fair distance, but not so far away that I could not hear her wails of pain. As I scrambled to my feet, I smelled her blood before I actually saw her.





She appeared as nothing more than a pile of rags in the road, but the darkening puddle in the dirt and the filthy, gnarled feet proved otherwise. The rattling cough might have killed her before the summer ended, let alone the injury she sustained. She tried to push herself up, but the coughing knocked her right back down again. She tried to dig her gnarled fingers into the dirt and drag herself, but even that proved fruitless. A careless horse or a sudden breeze could have snuffed her out. I could smell death encroaching on her, a thread of chilled rot in the blood spilled on the ground.

And still, the Beast demanded that I drink. *Drink deep. Show no mercy. Sate yourself and move on.*

I picked her up, her body as effortless to carry as if she were the pile of rags I originally thought her to be. Only through dumb luck did my fangs find her neck instead of biting into a mouthful of clothes in my haste. The coursing blood grew cold even as it touched my tongue, but what little life remained shuddered through me and crawled into my limbs like relentlessly overgrown vines.

Memories not my own invaded my mind: the crone in my arms as a maid in the fields, chased by something just outside my vision. The sound of hooves followed, the scent of dirt, sex, and blood, the sound of tearing linen, and a woman's voice chanting solemnly in a language unknown to me. The chanting sounded familiar, and that thing I could not see was watching. It might still be watching now.

More, my Beast demanded, even as the wound ran dry.

Even if I wished to let her go, it was too late. There was no mercy in this embrace. The Kiss sedated her, but her whimpers betrayed that she knew she would not survive. I crushed her body to me, and her bones creaked and snapped once more.

It took every mote of will I had to toss the carcass aside before death dragged me down with her. She lay broken and desiccated on the side of the road. Her eyes stared heavenward, bulging and unblinking. Her cracked lips moved in a final whimper that sounded like a name, but even now, I am unsure. That incomprehensible sound shot ice up my spine, and my first instinct — to run — took hold, sending me right up to Bishop's Gate at my full speed.

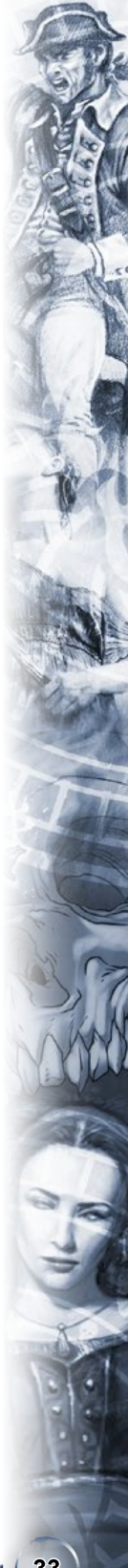
As the guards' faces turned from boredom to alertness to terror, the empty ache in my belly intensified, as if I had not supped at all. The speed required to silence them as well as the alarum taxed my appetite to the fullest, and draining them all only barely made the effort worth it. If I had left it unchecked, the Ieldra and her Cynn would have consigned them to a worse fate and I would meet the sun. Better those poor sods than me.

London awaited, and I vowed to end this night satisfied.

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“For crimes against the state and the pacts of our safety and contaminating the masses upon whom we feed, Abbot Nathaniel Pendleton is hereby condemned to Final Death, to be carried out immediately. Court is adjourned.”

While not the most ideal words to hear upon returning to court, that utterance confirmed that I was, indeed, home, if nearly an hour late. The Ieldra's voice filled the court chamber as only hers could: placid, but brimming with power, even when bored.



The rustle of her heavy velvet skirts along the floor struck my ears more deeply than the Abbot's shouted protests and the resulting scuffle.

Harald elbowed me brusquely, returning my attention to my more immediate surroundings instead of the presence of the Ieldra. The Haunt grinned at me, his teeth crisscrossing each other in a fight for dominance in his own mouth. "Oi, some fancy tricks she's learned there, eh?"

"Trick. Yes. Serpents," I mumbled. My gaze wandered back to the high table where the Ieldra, seated at the center of the table, greeted a few richly dressed courtiers. Caedmon sat to her left, fretting with the long robes of office and glaring sidelong as Richard Bitheway introduced those courtiers to the Ieldra personally. One of Caedmon's arms protectively encircled an earthenware vessel with a bit of ash smeared on its lip and handle.

"If that answer pleases you, sir," Harald replied, his voice a little louder and more pointed than it needed to be. "Good to have you home, lad, but I'm afraid this conversation is more business than pleasure, so your full attention is requested."

Harald reinforced his message by gripping my arm with surprising power and flashing those wayward teeth once more.

"The Ieldra would like to see *you*, sir. Says it's important."

The old woman I'd killed on the way into the city flashed before my memory, and the gnawing sensation in the pit of my stomach, a quiet but persistent presence throughout the proceedings, made its presence known once more.

I followed Harald obediently rather than resisting, and his vicious grip loosened as we approached the high table. The Ieldra politely nodded along to whatever honeyed words spilled forth from Bitheway's companion, but her eyes moved to me, and I felt the cold of winter in my spine once more. Her conversation partner's gaze shifted as well, narrowing to scrutinize my mean-looking garb and unremarkable face. I dipped my head in the deference the nobility prefers, and the delicate flower held a handkerchief to his face.


"Leave us," the Ieldra said. I felt Harald back away behind me in quick steps. Caedmon and Richard both looked at me askance, but did as the lady bid. Caedmon collected the urn that surely carried the remains of his wayward abbot, and Richard escorted his fellows toward the center of the room, speaking to them in stilted French.

"Sit," the Ieldra requested, gesturing to the empty chair to her right. I nodded once more and took the offered seat. My tongue darted out unbidden to lick my burning lips, and my gaze drifted to the cup before her on the table that I was certain was not there before. Her lips curled into a catlike smile.

"I hear you had a bit of a feast on your way in, Mister Starling," she began, raising the cup to her lips, and the vitae within stained them red. It was all I could do to not stare at them, but her eyes remained on mine. "Would that explain your tardiness? Normally, you are so punctual."

I swallowed hard, then nodded once more. "Yes, my lady," I murmured. "It was a bit of clumsiness on my part, and I am truly sorry for any inconvenience—"

"And you still hunger." Her tone grew sharper than the blade on my hip, and the ice in my spine melted, turning to water in my bowels. Were I still mortal, the reek of shit would have given me away.



“Worry not,” she continued with a resigned sigh. “I know this hunger is not your own. Your plight is by no means common, though it has happened before. Normally, it does not even come to my attention, and if the poor afflicted soul survives the night, the condition may fade over time, but more frequently, it takes root so deeply that his ravenous hunger forces a more final solution.”

I am not a man to pray, but as the Ieldra explained, my mind concocted supplications to the Almighty, the God of the Jews, and all spirits the Weihan Cynn revered to spare me. “Am I entirely lost, m’lady?” I managed to reply.

“Not in the least.” She rolled her eyes. “You are lucky. Some of my allies were looking for that same woman to levy the same fate on her that you did by accident. They can alleviate it. Your payment to me for this is to deliver a small gift, which you will fetch from Cicely Rowe. Bring it to the Lodenstane, intact, before you kill again from your hunger. The recipient will be waiting there for you. One of my daughters will accompany you to ensure the proper forms are followed, but you must be the one to deliver it. Return to me before dawn with whatever they give you. You have my word that nothing in your delivery includes a command or request for its recipient to kill you upon delivery.”

I nodded, and I could feel my body relax and uncoil as she spoke the words required by the Post’s rules to allow me to accept the task. “Of course, my lady. As is right and proper.”

The Ieldra raised her hand, palm up, and then Gwendolyn approached, as if waiting in the wings at the Globe. Her milk-white skin and golden hair were the stuff of sonnets, even in life. When I left London, she still breathed and reveled in the sun warming her face. Now, the warmth that livened her bosom, a warmth I relished in moments of quiet between travels, was gone. She clasped the Ieldra’s extended hand, but when her eyes alighted on me, her sweet lips, once ruddy with kisses but now pale, parted in a startled gasp. “You! You’re...” she began, and a hint of girlish trembling made her clutch the box tighter.

The Ieldra’s smile spread, and she brought Gwendolyn’s hand to her lips, kissing the girl’s fingers gently to soothe her. Still, Gwendolyn stared at me in horror.

“I know she was a favorite of yours,” the Ieldra explained to me. “And for good reason. But she was mine long before she was ever yours. Remember that. She will go with you. You’ve taken good care of her before. I expect nothing less from you now.”

With a gentle push to the small of her back, the Ieldra guided Gwendolyn to me, and I could not help but open my arms to her. My fangs pierced my tongue as I recalled the taste of her from many a visit to her bed. My Beast roared in fury in my chest, especially as Gwendolyn recoiled from the offered embrace.

“Go, both of you,” the Ieldra commanded. “Time is precious. To fail is to commit treason. But I would advise getting a proper meal beforehand.” The knowing smile on her lips as she turned away set my teeth to gnashing behind tightly closed lips.

I snatched Gwendolyn’s hand and practically dragged her behind me as I left the hall.

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“Why didn’t you tell me?!” Gwendolyn blurted out the moment we were alone, for at least some definition of the word. The nearly empty streets were the private chambers she found suitable for our intimate discussions. She had the good sense to at least look around with a more scrutinizing gaze to ensure no unwelcome listeners were present, but perhaps she had forgotten that people lived in the buildings flanking the street.

“For God’s sake, woman, hold your tongue!” I shot back, the fire in my chest from the frenzy threatening to burst forth. “This is neither the time nor the place.”

“Since when do you care about time or place, Mister Starling?” she retorted, repeating a name I had never used with her in a contemptuous voice that I never would have ascribed to her. “Especially when you—”

Once again, I found myself compelled to preternatural speed, covering her mouth before she said another word. My other hand moved to her throat, though we both knew it would do her no harm. “Not. Another. Word,” I ordered. “Not until I’ve fed. Then you’ll have your answers. Is that clear?”

Her blue eyes grew wide with terror that it broke my heart to see, much less cause. She nodded vigorously a few times, and I found the wherewithal to gently release her. The empty streets bore no witness, but it also bore no fruit. “Where is everyone?” I muttered, looking for any sign of life.

“Curfews,” Gwendolyn replied meekly, the fire in her voice and her spirit extinguished. “There’s plague about, sir. Set in over the winter. The theaters are all closed. We might catch a cart closer to the docks, or we could try our luck at the pits, but there’s no telling what might come up there. And...” She trailed off, her eyes lowering to her feet.

“...yes?” I heard more malice in my voice than I intended.

Gwendolyn pursed her lips and furrowed her brow. “There’s a chance it could spread through feeding.”

I groaned in frustration. “Is that why the abbot got executed?”


Gwendolyn shook her head. “No. Worse. He was Embracing those he fed from to steer clear of the disease. It does work, but the tax on his soul was too high, and he slaked his appetites on one of the Cynn when he did not possess the force of will to continue his predations.”

“‘Predations’ is an awfully big word for a whore.” The moment the words flew, I regretted them. Gwendolyn may have been a whore, but she was my whore. I cursed the hunger that cut my temper and my wit even shorter. “...I mean...” I turned to apologize, but found myself alone in the street. The damned girl vanished on me.

I looked around for her, narrowing my eyes to pierce through illusions of nothingness, looking for the signs of life about me. I heard the chattering of rats, a gossiping housewife or two, and the miserable moans of the sick. No immediate danger laid itself bare to me.

While this should have been a comfort, I felt a growl rise in my throat. Too much had changed since I had left. If certain death in the guise of this gnawing hunger and the Ieldra’s sisters and spies wouldn’t follow me out of London, I would have set myself right back on the road. I gritted my teeth to retain some semblance of calm and barked out, “All right! I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have said that. Can we move on from this? Please? It’s not getting any darker out.”





“You’ve got an awfully small mind for anyone, much less a Shadow and a traveler,” Gwendolyn shot back from behind me. When I turned to face her, her grin was wickedly playful. The last time I saw that expression on her face, she did something to me that made me blush like a virgin. “Mother told me if I don’t help you, you’ll be hungry forever, and we’ll have to put you down. Saying you’re sorry is not quite enough, I’m afraid.”

I bit back my pride and the coursing tide of curses I wanted to levy on her and her whole line. “Fine. How can I make amends?”

She adjusted her sleeve, baring the inside of her wrist. “Here. Maybe this will stave the hunger off for a bit until we get you properly sorted.”

My capacity for thought at that moment was only sufficient to drag us both to an alcove off the street where we would not be seen. I hoisted her up onto a nearby barrel and went straight for the neck. Her legs wrapped around me, just like old times, and her thighs felt warm and supple against my hips.

She giggled and gasped in my ear, but too soon, she tapped my shoulder. “That’s enough for now. Can’t have us both ravenous.” She leaned in and licked the vitae on my lips. “Clean me up now. Not getting any darker.” Still, as the Beast curled up in my chest, sated for the moment, I took my time to lick the wound clean.

“So,” I murmured against her neck. “Cicely.”

“We’re already on the way,” Gwendolyn replied, lowering her legs and sliding back down to earth off the barrel. “We can get you something when we get closer, if you can hold out. Come along.”

As she led me back out to the street, I smiled, following. “Clever girl,” I heard myself mumble somewhere along the way.



Cicely Rowe runs the best drinking establishments in town, but even she felt the sting of the plague in her purse and her pride. The tavern where we were to meet her was half-empty and carried the lingering reek of rot and death, with the only revelry coming from a small band of noblemen. A few poor souls huddled in a corner bore the telltale buboes and tired faces of the afflicted, terrified to sleep in case they would not wake again. Only one showed no signs of illness, a tired old man with no flagon in front of him. He seemed more content to simply watch the people drink. None spoke to them, not even the pockmarked man who brought them drink and took their last coins. “Survivor,” Gwendolyn explained in a hushed whisper, ordering a couple of ales to help us blend in. Her vitae steadied my nerves, but I felt ill prepared for any dangers that might have arisen. I needed to feed again, and quickly.

The finely dressed brute at the edge of the revels had been leering at Gwendolyn since we came in. She sidled a little closer to me, but as she opened her mouth to speak once more in confidential tones, he approached and shoved one meaty shoulder between us, nearly blotting Gwendolyn from view completely. Fortunately for him, he could not see me lick my chops like a wolf in winter.

“Hello, love,” he slurred. “You’re looking fresh and fair as ever. How’s your blessed mother?”

“She keeps her own counsel,” Gwendolyn replied. “As should you.”

“Oh, so is that how it is,” he growled at her, leaning in too close. “Well, it’s not me that’s asking, love, so a proper answer best be forthcoming.”

“Bloody hell...” I muttered. This one was one of Cicely’s ill-mannered men, which meant I probably shouldn’t drink my fill of him. Probably. Even if he asked for it.

He turned to face me and leaned in, spittle flecking my face as he spoke. “Is there a problem, sir?” he asked defiantly. A vein throbbed in his neck, and I could taste his sweat, and my stomach felt like an interminable void. Poor sod didn’t just ask; he begged for it.

“Yes,” I growled in his face and lunged forward, sinking my fangs into him. The brute nearly doubled me in size, but he toppled over as I pounced on him. I latched onto him like a leech, sucking out the poison of his choleric humor into nourishment for himself.

It was not enough. I could feel him dying under me as I gulped down every last drop he contained. The sound of it coursing into me roared in my ears, drowning out the screams and the scuffling around me as the tavern emptied. All I saw was red.

• • •

When my senses returned, heavy irons pinned my wrists to the wall behind me and weighed down my ankles. Weak candlelight feebly fought back the shadows in the room. The scent of blood that rose from me reminded me of my breathing days and fresh-baked bread from a bakery just before dawn.

“I understand the loss, Miss Rowe, but I’m afraid you do not quite comprehend the situation,” Gwendolyn’s voice explained in a too-gentle tone.

“The situation is, girl, that your man robbed me of my dear Thomas,” Cicely retorted hotly, and I heard the thump of something heavy on a table. “Mister Starling will not benefit from that which he stole from me, and that is that. I know you care for him, love, but he’s not himself. He can sleep it off.”


I shifted my feet and my ankles in my instruments of bondage and squinted to get a better look at myself. I was soaked in blood; my clothes were still damp, but stiffening quickly as they dried. The tiny, dimly lit room barely fit a table, a bed, and a chest or two along with the three of us within. And a clock. A little more than half past three, if I read the face of it right. How much time had I lost?

“But my mother’s orders—” Gwendolyn began to protest.

“By order of the Ieldra,” I cut in, raising my voice as loud as I could, “I come requesting an item from Miss Cicely Rowe, to be passed along with full faith and protection of the Gallows Post, with a full report to be delivered by myself to the Ieldra before dawn. Failure in this pursuit is treason, and this detention is aiding and abetting the treasonous.”

Cicely turned to look at me in horror. If the color could drain from her face, it would. She bolted from her seat and wasted no time unlocking the shackles, producing the key from her bodice and bending down to use it. “Stupid girl,” she muttered. “Why didn’t she say so...”





Gwendolyn glared at Cicely's prodigious backside, then moved to help me to my feet. "The least you can do is get him some fresh clothes," she shot back petulantly.

"And the gift I'm to fetch from you," I added.

Cicely scowled and whirled around, all skirts and bluster, to open one of the chests, producing a small box. She offered it to me with both hands. "You're lucky this is official business, or I'd set you to watch the sunrise. I'll fetch you fresh clothes, but it may take some time. Sit tight."

I glanced at the clock as she bustled out. Nearly quarter to four. I gritted my teeth and did my best to retain what little patience I had left by stripping off the ruined clothes, pacing the short length of the floor, and clenching and unclenching my fists. Cicely had taken more than her due, and I could feel it.

Gwendolyn sighed and pushed her golden locks aside, baring her neck. "Go on, then," she murmured. "You need it."

I should have said no, should have pushed her away. Instead, I fell on her again, drinking deep to lull the near-frenzied Beast in my chest to slumber once more. She held me close and hummed a soft lullaby. Even with the strain in her voice, the melody was sweet and soothing. I managed to stop myself before I drained her dry and clutched her to me, which was how Cicely found us when she returned with the clothes. She waited just long enough for me to put them on before tossing us back out onto the street again.

• • •

Gwendolyn took my hand and led me through the streets to get us back to Candlewick Street, where the Lodenstane sat. A quarter of the way there, I slipped my hand free and took the lead, sneaking through alleys and courtyards I used as shortcuts when I was last in London. Praise to all that is holy that they all remained intact, and the only time lost was helping Gwendolyn over a single fence. I pushed her up and over it, by the plushiest part of her, and vowed to take her for myself for a night or three when all of this was said and done.

The sky had not yet begun to pale when we arrived. I kept my eyes open for any sign of our contact, even without a single inkling of what to look for. With the empty streets, however, the process of elimination would prove more fruitful than not.

Sure enough, a squat, round man came down the street toward us. His unnaturally smooth gait only faltered at a slight dip in the road, as if he rolled along the ground more than walked. I inched closer to Gwendolyn, ready to intervene if his intentions turned violent. Normally, such round plumpness would awaken my appetite, and while I did feel a little rumble, he did not, for lack of a better term, smell like food. His clothing, while threadbare, was remarkably clean and even appeared to bear a light sheen like polished metal. A belt loaded down with pouches barely stayed in place around his girth.

Gwendolyn, foolish girl, pushed past me and approached the marble of a man, exclaiming "Mr. Moonstone!" and wrapping her arms around him in a fond embrace. I clenched everything I could clench to bite back the grumbles of jealousy.

"Gwendolyn! Lovely to see you again, my dear!" Mr. Moonstone replied with a hearty chuckle and far too much cheer.

“Thank you so much for helping. Mother sends her gratitude. Mr. Moonstone, this is Mr. Starling.” Gwendolyn gestured to me, and I felt myself compelled to offer a deep, courtly bow, presenting the box as I did so.

The disdain rolled off the little man in waves. “Mr. Starling. That cannot be your real name, sir.”

“No more than your real name is Mr. Moonstone,” I replied, looking up at him while holding that low bow. “Sir.”

Mr. Moonstone folded his arms and huffed indignantly, and Gwendolyn rolled her eyes. “If you are both quite finished?” she chimed in. Mr. Moonstone cleared his throat, and I felt my joints loosen, allowing me to stand upright once more.

I offered the box to him again. He took it with a pudgy hand, but had to turn to the side to reach it properly, as if his arms were too short to pass his own girth. He opened it gingerly, producing a rolled-up piece of parchment. He unrolled it, quickly scanning whatever was written on it, then rolled it up with surprising rapidity.

“Oh, a *true* name! Excellent. Tell the lady that the Blood Court will do as she bids, and this undesirable will trouble her no more.” Poor sod, whoever it was.

Gwendolyn nodded solemnly. “And now, for Mr. Starling?” She gestured to me.

Mr. Moonstone cocked his head at me, studying me carefully. “Ate something that didn’t agree with you, hmm?” he asked, adjusting his belt. “Tell me more.”

“It was an old woman,” I explained. “She had strange memories that I could see when I drank from here. She mentioned a name, but I can’t immediately recall it... something like...” The sound that came from my lips confounded my senses; I had no idea what I spoke, and thought I could not remember, but clearly, some corner of my brain, or the remnant’s of the woman’s blood within me, kept the name for just such an occasion.

Mr. Moonstone’s round face stretched to an oval in his shock. “...yes. Yes. I know exactly how to fix this, but it’s costly.” He scrambled to reach into one of the pouches on his belt and produced a small clear egg decorated with gold filigree and containing a length of string, a translucent green rock, and a feather from some small bird.


“Swallow this whole,” he instructed. “Now. Afterward, you will need to drink the blood of someone you consider kin.”

I took the bauble, which seemed so much larger in his hand. With him, it looked like a hen’s egg, which I never would have been able to swallow. In my hand, it was the size of a robin’s egg. I felt my Beast lash out from my bowels to my throat, and I nearly shattered the delicate thing as I shoved it into my mouth.

I felt it crumble into tiny pieces as it made its way down past my throat, and little shards embedded themselves in my innards. My blood coursed through me like fire to heal the tiny cuts, draining me completely dry. The Beast roared to life and took the fore, and once more, I saw red.

I snarled and growled, then gagged and coughed. The searing pain dropped me to my hands and knees, and a small lump forced its way up from bowels to throat. Mr. Moonstone rushed to my side and grabbed my jaw with a stone-like grip, holding my mouth open. He reached into my mouth and pulled out the egg, whole and intact, and





much larger; the bauble filled my mouth completely as it emerged from my throat. He held it aloft with a smile, the outside covered with gore and the inside packed tight with bloody string, stones, and feathers.

“Ah, there she is. All of her. You’ll be safe now if you drink the kin’s blood before dawn. Off you pop.”

And with that, he bounced down the street the way he came, as if thrown from the spot.

I was only dimly aware of Gwendolyn’s arms around me, clutching me to her breast. “It’s all right,” she said in a soothing voice. “I am here.”

I descended on the poor girl like a ravenous wolf right in the middle of the street. Her pale skin grew cadaverous white as the sky lightened around us. When I finally had a clear enough mind to pull away, she lay limp against me. I gathered her up and rose to my feet, moving as quickly through the streets as I could to reach the Ieldra.

• • •

The Ieldra’s eyebrow arched delicately as I recounted the events that brought her back to her door. I did not let Gwendolyn go, clutching her to me. She could keep her own feet, if only just, but I would not let her fall. She had already suffered so much at my hands.

“You have done well, all things considered. Rest here for the day, both of you, but at dusk, your business is concluded in London. Take the girl and go. I will not see you here in my court again.”

“But m’lady—” I began to protest.

“Feed the girl, then tuck yourselves in,” she repeated. “At dusk, I do not wish to see either of you here, nor will you wish to be here. Now do as I command.”

She turned to leave, and a servant led Gwendolyn and me to a single windowless room with a tiny cot. He slammed the door unceremoniously behind us, but did not lock the door.

I laid her out on the cot first, then curled up next to her on the floor. I pierced my wrist with my fangs and pressed it to her parted lips. Gwendolyn suckled from me slowly as the sun rose fully in the sky.

“I am so sorry, my love,” I murmured as my eyes fell closed.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” she replied with a wan smile. “Now you are mine, just like I wanted.” She then closed her eyes and drifted off to a peaceful slumber.

She was right. Three drinks: in the alley, at Cicely’s, then at the Lodenstane.

“Six of the clock!” the guard called outside, “and all’s well!”

Sleep weighed down my tongue before I could curse her name.

Of Ravens and Roses

Changeling: the Lost (1600-1700 C.E.)

Jess Hartley

Au Printemps

Belle's dress was perfection. So fine was the silk, even beneath twelve-fold layers, movement offered a hint of her graceful limbs beneath the fabric, a feature even the most open-minded noble of King Louis' court would have found scandalous.

But she was no noblewoman to be bound and fettered by faux modesty. She was La Belle Fleur, the darling of Paris, and whispers of impropriety only added to her fame.


The Festival of Flowers marked the beginning of the Parisian season. Guests wore masks to heighten the chances of forming new acquaintances (romantic or otherwise) that might develop over the coming year. In truth, however, little was hidden. None, for example, would look upon Bellefleur's golden mask, delicately crafted to perfectly mirror her lustrous locks, and mistake her for anyone else in Christendom. And as Paris' premiere courtesan, that was exactly as she wanted it to be.

Her companion for the evening was a doddering marquis, who'd paid dearly for the privilege of escorting her to such a prestigious event. Like many of her companions, his interest in Belle far exceeded her expertise in the bedroom. It was Belle's charm that had made her the toast of the town; her wit and wisdom, both sharp as rapiers, which kept her living in the lap of luxury.

They arrived after the festivities had begun, but not so late as to appear insulting to their host. Standing at the landing, as the herald announced their arrival, Belle rested a delicate hand upon her companion's sleeve, and posed for a moment longer than completely necessary. Admiring stares washed over them, a sea of jealousy that justified the marquis' investment in her time. While she was, in literal terms, his hired help for the evening, they both knew the power in their relationship was in her hands. Her presence gave him a level of social respect that his inherited money or lands would never equal. His breath quickened at the attention, a reaction even her risqué gown had not summoned forth from him.

"Belle!" A twittering soprano called out from one corner of the crowded room, where a cluster of young courtiers gathered in a small circle. A painted and powdered lad, slim and lithe as a girl of twelve and dressed all in lilac, sashayed through the onlookers in her direction.





“Oh, my precious Belle, you’ve come at last! I don’t know that I could have survived another moment if you hadn’t arrived.”

The fop dropped into the most elaborate of bows, so low that his powdered wig practically swept the floor before the newly arrived couple. He remained, doubled over and yet somehow making the gesture look elegant, until Belle began introductions.

“My Lord, may I present Etienne Bonheur, a... charming... young man of my acquaintance. Etienne? Lord Charles, Marquis d’Albert. My companion for the evening.”

Etienne rose with the grace of a ballerina. “Enchanté, Marquis d’Albert, truly an honor...” He turned to Belle, clutching her hand. “Please, my darling, you must come with me.”

Bellefleur turned to the marquis, and leaned in to brand his cheek with her rose-tinted kiss. He reached up, almost touching the place where her lips had colored his skin, then pulled his portly hand away so as to not mar her mark.

“Forgive me, my dear? I won’t be but a moment,” she lied, knowing her companion expected nothing less.

Etienne dropped another courtly bow to the marquis. “You don’t mind, do you, m’lord? I swear I wouldn’t if it weren’t a matter of life or death...” As they slipped away, Etienne continued under his breath. “Or boredom, which, as I’m sure you’ll agree, is by far a worse fate.”

Belle allowed Etienne to lead her through the party, swirling her through a progression of dancers at the center of the ballroom, before hopping out of the intertwining array of couples on the far side of the room. Etienne snatched a pair of champagne flutes from the tray of a liveried servant, handing one to Bellefleur before escorting her to the next room.

A flock of brightly hued courtiers had nested together here, their pageantry only dulled by a single, silent, silver-haired man in a dove grey mask. Their attention focused on a young woman at the center of the circle wearing a mask of yellow feathers crafted in the guise of a goldfinch.

The finch-woman squared her shoulders and gestured broadly making an oversized sign of the cross in front of her.

The rest of the circle began making guesses as to who the woman was pretending to be.

“Father Michael?” A crimson-gowned girl in a demon-mask offered, naming one of the nearby church’s religious leaders.

Her companion, a stalwart youth all in white, with an angelic mask and halo laughed. “It couldn’t be Father Michael — she isn’t drinking the communion wine!”

In response, the pantomiming woman shook her head, and stepped forward, changing her posture as if to represent a new person. She held both hands with fingers splayed towards the ceiling over her head, her palms a few inches apart. She lowered her hands, fingers still pointed upward, onto her hair like a hat.

“A crown! Is it the King?” A twittering of nervous laughs emerged from the group. Mocking a local priest was one thing, but to mimic royalty was touchy business, even among friends.

The goldfinch-woman smiled and nodded, then stepped back into her original place and squared her shoulders again. She made another cross in front of her, and then mimed reaching forward as if taking something from the now-invisible figure in front of her and pocketing it. She repeated this several times, then reached for the candelabra on the nearest side table and pretended to steal it as well.

The crowd murmured with confusion until Etienne burst out in ribald laughter. “It’s the Cardinal...and he’s robbing the King blind!”

The pantomiming woman clapped her hands, smiling, although a blush rose to her cheeks. She quickly glanced around at her companions to see if she’d ventured too far. The Cardinal was an important — but not well loved — figure in the current court. His greed and manipulation were only slightly less well known than the King’s unexplainable affection for him, which made him a dangerous (and therefore tantalizing) man to mock.

But, intoxicated on wine and each other’s company, the courtiers clapped and congratulated the goldfinch on her creativity.

“Your turn, Etienne!” The young woman in yellow kissed the air beside his cheek, her gaze flickering to Bellefleur as she did so. If she expected to find jealousy there, she was heartily disappointed. While Etienne’s companionship was amusing, to feel envy would have required that the other woman possessed something — tangible or ethereal — that Belle wanted and could not have. And that was simply not so.

Etienne strode to the center of the circle, making a bold play of considering his topic. By tradition, the guessing game’s subject had to be someone well known enough for even the newest of courtiers to recognize them. As well, it could not be someone who was participating in the competition, although other attendees of the party were fair game. While there was no real “score” to keep, accolades were given for particularly biting social commentary in the guise of emulation, and Etienne would not want to be outdone by the previous performer.

With a wink to Belle, he exclaimed “Ah! I have it!” and began his pantomime.

Etienne stepped out of the circle, pulling his arm in front of himself to obscure his features and surreptitiously watching all around him. Then he dropped his arm and stepped away, miming a driver holding the reins of a carriage as he progressed on a path that would take him in front of Etienne’s original hidden position.

Belle felt a shiver run down her spine, and her blood began pulsing audibly in her ears as she watched him play out each role — an obvious brigand, the frightened carriage driver, the pompous noblewoman within the coach.

“Robin Hood!” The guesses began, with excited voices calling out their suggestions. “A highwayman!” “A tax collector!”


Belle’s heart raced, the room’s lights swirling before her eyes. She fanned herself as the crowd around her clamored to be the first to identify Etienne’s secret persona.

Etienne gestured with an extended thumb and forefinger mimicking a flintlock, and Belle could hear the weapon’s explosion ringing in her ears as he “shot” the carriage driver.

... no...

As he stepped into the slain servant’s role and fell to the ground, she could smell the blood and brains and burning bone from the bullet shattering his skull.





...no, please...

Switching rapidly back and forth between the roles of the highwayman and the noblewoman, Etienne first robbed his victim, then swept a courtly bow and presented “her” with a gift.

The world narrowed in Bellefleur’s eyes, the entire room darkening save for a pinpoint of light that seemed very far away. And in that pinpoint, Etienne, as the now-charmed noblewoman accepted her assailant’s gift, raising it to her nose. “She” sniffed deeply and blushed, waving farewell as Etienne became the highwayman once more and fled with his spoils.

“The Raven!” Someone called out the name of the fabled highwayman, renowned as much for his courtly ways as for his savagery.

Others joined in, agreeing. “It’s the Raven! I bet he stole more than her purse!”

The room began to spin. Belle couldn’t breathe.

“Yes, yes! The Raven! Caw! Caw!! CAW!!!”

The crowing courtiers were the last thing Belle heard before the world went black.

En Été

“Bellefleur?” The Marquis d’Albert knelt beside her, his silk kerchief damply pressed against her brow.

Belle stirred, struggling to sit up on the chaise lounge she’d been arranged upon after fainting. The air around her still felt heavy and hot, and breathing was a chore that had nothing to do with the tightness of her stays.

“I’m so sorry, m’lord...”

“Nonsense,” her companion waved away her apology. “Delicate constitution, first soiree of the season... Perhaps you just overdid the wine?”

Belle glanced over to where her untouched champagne flute still stood on the side table. “Yes...yes, that was probably it.”

“I’ll send for my carriage and make our regrets,” the marquis offered, but Bellefleur shook her head, forcing herself upright.

“Don’t be silly, my Lord... You enjoy the rest of your evening. Your coach can take me home and return for you. There’s no reason for you to call it such an early night.”

The marquis looked relieved. He’d likely pulled many strings to obtain their invitations to such an exclusive event, and an early departure would have obviously disappointed him. “Well... If you insist?”

“Of course... If you would just be so kind as to have your men come around for me? I’ll just get my wrap from the porter and meet them at the door.” She glanced around for her mask, but it was nowhere to be seen.

The marquis scampered away to alert his coachmen, after helping Belle to her feet.

Bellefleur took a deep breath, but it did nothing to still the foreboding that weighed upon her chest. Making her way back to the entry, she retraced their steps towards the front door.

As she stepped into the foyer, Belle almost swooned. The marble hallway was like an oven, and every step she took away from the ballroom (and the nearest fireplace) only grew



more sweltering. She fanned herself, but after only a few paces, she was drenched, her silken skirt clinging to her legs as if she'd bathed fully clothed. Belle panted in a most unladylike fashion, struggling down a foyer that seemed far, far longer than it had on the way into the party. After a time, she realized she was no longer walking, but marching, head bowed, weight of the world on her shoulders. It felt as if she had been trudging along for the entire night, for a fortnight, for an eternity. There was nothing in the world but putting one foot in front of the other, only the march and this bedamned heat that went on forever.

She shook her head, clearing the cobwebs, and found herself at the far end of the entryway. The area around the front door was empty, save for the porter's chair facing the front door, a high-backed monstrosity designed to protect the servant assigned to answering the door from drafts and chill, here so far from the fireplaces of the main rooms. The idea might have made her laugh, were her head not swimming from the inexplicable heat.

"Excuse me, please. I am afraid I must leave early. If I could get my wrap?"

There was no answer from the porter, nor movement to suggest he had heard her. The design of his chair, however, was intended to block the sounds of the partygoers from filtering down the hallway, and to focus even the quietest knock from the front doors to the porter's ears. Rather than struggling to speak again, Belle stepped up to the chair, and turned to face its occupant.

The man lounging there was no porter; that much was obvious. His clothing was not their host's livery, but understated black satin breeches and matching waistcoat with a shirt only a shade lighter. His mask was simple black leather.

Belle's heart leapt to her throat, and she found herself backing away from this stranger.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry, I thought you were..."

"There is nothing to excuse." The man's voice was muffled through his mask, but there was something about it that tickled at the back of her senses, like a sip of wine that makes one yearn for the entire bottle.

"Have we met?" She tilted her head, trying to place his body language, his physique, anything that would give her a clue to his identity, but to no avail. Still, there was something about him, something as intangible but undeniable as the weight in her chest and the hammering of her pulse in her throat.


"No, we've never met before," the masked man murmured. "But I do not intend for this to be the last time..." There was a promise in his voice. Or was it a threat?

Suddenly frightened, Belle looked back towards the party, but the long foyer was as empty and silent as a tomb. Etienne and the rest might as well have been in London for all the help they were to her.

When she looked back, the porter's chair was empty. Bellefleur frowned in confusion, then felt weight across her bare shoulders.

"I believe this is yours..." Belle closed her eyes, dizzy, as the man wrapped her cloak around her and for a moment the darkness threatened to engulf her again.

"I'm sorry, Bellefleur. I couldn't find your mask, but the coachmen should be around in a moment." The marquis' voice heralded his arrival by only a moment, but it



was enough to shake Belle from her paralysis, and she took two unsteady steps towards him as he entered the far end of the foyer.

“Belle? Are you alright? You are as pale as a ghost.”

Bellefleur nodded, unable to form words for a moment. “I... he...”

The marquis closed the distance between them quickly, grasping Belle’s shaking hands between his. “You poor dear, I shouldn’t have left you alone.”

“I am not alone...” She turned toward the still closed door, but her masked companion was nowhere to be seen.

“I thought the porter would be here to wait with you. Where has that lazy scoundrel wandered off to?” The marquis blustered, and then opened the door and stepped out onto the front stairs seeking the host’s hired help.

Belle took a tentative breath, and then another, her chest finally filling deeply with the cool night air. She began to follow her escort, but only made it a step before pausing her in her tracks. An icy shiver ran down her spine, and for a moment, she felt the masked man’s presence behind her once more. She spun, half-expecting to find him standing there, but the foyer was empty.

She sighed, although even she could not tell whether it was with relief or disappointment. As she began to turn back to the door, however, something caught her eye.

There, resting in the porter’s chair was the golden mask she’d worn that evening. Alongside it was a single perfect paper-white rose.

En Automne

Twelve men on fiery steeds, twelve ladies on gentle mares, all dressed in finery of red and gold. Accompanied by servants, the hunting party proceeded on a gentle journey through the nearby forest.

“I spoke with Madame Lavoisier, and she swears he is a ghost. When she and her husband were robbed, the Raven disappeared from plain sight, right before their eyes!” The gaggle of young women gasped in alarm, several crossing themselves to protect against the forces of darkness.

Belle shivered, as she always did when the highwayman’s name was spoken aloud. She hadn’t been the same since the Feast of Flowers nearly a month ago, and the Raven was to blame. “Madame Lavoisier is blind as a bat, and her husband is fond of the drink,” she put forth. “They likely got lost in the fog on their way home, and were never accosted at all.”

The gossip would not be so quickly dissuaded, however. The roguish Raven had become a favorite topic of conversation among female courtiers, and it was said that some even planned journeys through dangerous parts of the countryside specifically for the purpose of attracting his attention. Belle, on the other hand, wanted nothing so much as to avoid him... a plan which she had managed only in the strictest of definitions.

“He’s nary a ghost,” lectured a red-haired daughter of a visiting noble, with a thick northern accent. “He’s one of the Good Cousins, for certain. My ma spoke of such, when I was but a child. ’Tis iron you need, to drive him away...”

A dark-haired lass on a milk-white mare chuckled in an earthy fashion. Like Belle, she was a member of the courtesane, although lower in social status and prestige. “Why in heaven’s name would you want to drive him away? If he’s as handsome as they say, I’d sacrifice my purse for one of his roses.”

Bellefleur breathed deeply, the image of white roses flashing through her mind. She replied sweetly, her voice dripping honey, but not so thickly as to mar the edge to her words. “Your ‘purse’, Lisette? Do you think he’d be getting fair trade for a flower? You might have to offer him change.”

Lisette straightened in her sidesaddle, sniffing in indignation, but the other ten ladies tittered at Belle’s jest before returning to discussing the Raven’s reported charms.

Bellefleur sighed, longing to leave the conversation, but as the hostess for today’s outing, niceties demanded that she remain with the hunting party en masse. She couldn’t ride away, as much as she wanted to, so instead, she spurred her bay mount gently and moved up towards the knot of menfolk ahead.

“Lovely afternoon, is it not?”

The cluster of mounted gentlemen welcomed her into their midst with a flurry of greetings, each more gracious and flowery than the last. All but one, that was.

“Bedamned boring, I’d say,” the young duke grumbled, scanning the woods around them. “I haven’t seen so much as a squirrel all day.” While his bravery had earned him great accolades on the field of battle, and his fervor in the bedroom was only matched by his generosity, Henri was easily bored, a challenge which fortunately Belle excelled in addressing.

“Perhaps a test of skill then, m’lord? If the quarry will not present itself, then mayhaps we could make a game of finding it.” The duke considered himself quite the talented hunter and rarely resisted the opportunity to show off his expertise.

Her companion’s visage brightened, like the sun emerging from behind a thunderhead. “Indeed! Whoever tracks down the most valuable prey wins all! What do you wager, lads?”

Belle signaled the servants towards the clearing prepare for their respite, and they moved seamlessly and efficiently to set up a small pavilion, and then to aid the ladies in settling in.

Meanwhile, the men bandied about wagers, each proposing some precious item. Purses of coin were bet, as were favored hounds, a hunting hawk, and even a prized stallion. When each of the men had offered something to gamble, the duke began to lay out the terms of the competition.

Belle interrupted, speaking softly from beside her patron. “M’lord?”


“Yes, ma Belle?” Energized by the prospect of the competition, the young nobleman’s spirits had noticeably lifted.

“You have not gathered all the bets,” she chided softly, with an enigmatic smile.

The duke pointed to each of the men in turn and rattled off their offering. He turned back to her, tilting his head in confusion.

The corner of Belle’s mouth lifted in a mischievous half-grin. “Surely, my good lord, the one who proposed the competition should be allowed to enter?”





It took a moment before her meaning set in, but when it did, the duke guffawed in glee. “You? Do you even have a weapon?”

Belle reached into a bag hanging over her saddle, and pulled forth a tiny pistol, barely longer than her hand. Around her, the men roared with laughter.

“Fair enough, you have me there. With such an impressive weapon, you surely are a contender. But...what would you offer as a wager?”

The courtesan furrowed her brow, thinking deeply. “You gentlemen have surely surpassed me in your offerings... I have not the wealth to compete with your purses. However, perhaps there is something I have to offer which might be considered valuable. A night in my companionship?”

For a moment, Belle feared she had gone too far, and insulted her current patron. The briefest of frowns marred his handsome brow for a moment, and as if in answer, a single cloud drifted across the noonday sun, casting shadow over the clearing.

“I mean, after all, my good lord,” she continued, voice as smooth as silk, “we all know who shall win the wager, do we not?” She winked coquettishly at him, then lowered her gaze with a long-practiced blush.

The duke roared in laughter. “Indeed! Indeed! And what better motivation, eh, lads? Let the wager be set!”

No sooner had the duke spoken than the sky began to darken. The ladies, sans Bellefleur, made for the protection of the pavilion, while the menfolk and their hostess mounted their horses once more. The duke shouted to be heard over the growing wind. “An hour — no more. Return here and we’ll compare our quarry! On your mark! Go!”

Lightning punctuated his shout, startling the horses into frenzy. The riders took to the woods in various directions hoping the storm might stir some game for their sport. As the thunder rumbled over them, Belle’s bay whinnied and jerked at the bit, nearly pulling the reins from Bellefleur’s hands.

A second bolt of lightning, this one striking within the clearing itself, was too much for her mare to bear. With a scream, the little bay reared up on her hind legs, then spun and headed into the forest just as the skies let lose a downpour.

Branches whipped at Belle’s face, stinging and scratching as the horse dashed through the thick underbrush. Belle dropped her pistol, forgoing the weapon to clutch at the saddle with one hand and the bay’s mane with the other, in an attempt to keep her seat. Hot summer rain drenched them both, steaming from the horse’s coat and soaking Belle to the skin.

Ahead, Belle spotted a large rock outcropping, tall enough to provide shelter for both her and the mare. She grabbed at the reins, hauling hard on the horse’s lead to slow the frightened mare and force her towards the cave.

Once within, Belle dismounted, her heart still pounding in her chest. The ground here was thickly strewn with seasons of fallen oak leaves, a carpet so deep she could not feel the stone beneath. The air here was sharp, despite the humidity, and redolent with the aroma of overripe fruit, rotted plant matter, and the coppery scent of blood.

“We meet again...” The masked man stepped out of the cave’s shadows and wrapped an arm around her waist.



Belle stifled back a scream. It wasn't possible. He couldn't be. How could he have...?

"An unfortunate hunt for you, my dear," the Raven murmured. Her clothing was soaked, every single layer, but she could still feel his heat through the sodden brocade.

She pulled back. "It's you. You cad!" She reached out to slap at him, but he caught her wrist in a steely grasp.

"You have not liked my gifts?" As it had that first night, his voice teased at her senses, affecting her in ways she could neither control nor understand.

"Gifts? I had not noticed," she lied. How could she not have? The roses began appearing the morning after the Fête of Flowers, as mysterious as the highwayman himself. Left in her carriage. Waiting at her favorite café. Presented by street urchins as she walked through a park. She'd strained to spy him, but failed to catch even a glimpse. Only the roses remained to torment her waking hours — and her dreams.

"As you wish," he nodded. "A gift bears no obligation to the one it is bestowed upon... not even recognition." The Raven paused, and Belle's eyes struggled to make out his countenance in the darkness. Although he was pressed against her, she could sense little more than his outline, not tall as the rumors had made him out, nor muscled like some Greek god. He was her height, no more, and his grasp, though strong as steel, was wiry rather than overwrought. His face was covered, and in the darkness she could barely make out the shape of the beaked mask that, along with his penchant for sparkling gems and shining jewels, had given the highwayman his name.

"However," he went on, "I am afraid a wager is another matter, and my claim must be paid."

Belle frowned in confusion. "Wager? I don't understand."

Although she could not see his face, the Raven's smile was evident in his voice, as he tightened his grip on her waist. "I cannot imagine that any of the other hunters have captured a quarry as lovely or wild as I have." He squeezed her so tightly her head swam, and then released her and stepped away.

Bellefleur struggled to catch her breath, and as her senses gradually returned, she stammered a response. "But how could you have... How did you know?"


The empty shadows gave no reply.

En Hiver

She returned to the clearing, only to find the pavilion destroyed in the storm, and her servants and companions returned to more hospitable surroundings. After ordering a note of regret to be sent to the young duke, Belle had settled herself by the largest fireplace in her home, wrapped in downy quilts, while her maidservants had prepared vast quantities of hot water for her bath.

She'd stayed in the tub long past nightfall. When exhaustion overcame her, her personal attendant helped her into her warmest nightclothes, a gown of ivory brocade with snow-white stockings, and then brushed the gnarls from her hair and plaited it tightly in a coronet high upon her head.

"Shall I stay?" It wasn't uncommon for the young girl to remain in Belle's room overnight, reading to her lady until the courtesan fell asleep, but tonight, Belle shook her head."



“Thank you, but no...” Belle’s eyelids were heavy as stones, and it was all she could do to make her way towards her chambers while remaining upright.

As was her preference, Belle’s bedroom windows had all been opened to freshen the room and let in the night air. Moonlight spilled through the glass, illuminating a silver pathway across the room to her four-poster bed. Belle was halfway across the room before she realized that something was wrong. The crimson duvet and coverlet had been turned back, revealing pristine white sheets in anticipation of her arrival. And there, on the pillow, was a single paper-white rose.

She gasped, just as the Raven stepped forward, his shadow falling across her bed and casting the flower into darkness.

Belle inhaled, preparing to scream, just as the highwayman’s hand clapped across her mouth.

“Hush, now. No need for that. What will happen here this evening is only between you and I.”

For a long moment, they stood there eye to eye, one of his hands holding back her scream, only his mask separating them. At length, she nodded, and he slowly uncovered her mouth. When she did not attempt to make a noise, he stepped backwards away from her.

“There... That’s better.”

Belle attempted to regain her senses and take control of the situation. “I suppose you are here to collect upon your wager? I am afraid you have not found me at my best.”

The highwayman chuckled, shaking his head. “I fear, La Belle Fleur, that you mistake my intentions.”

The courtesan arched one delicate eyebrow his direction. “Truly? You show up here in my chambers, alone, while I am...en dishabille...after sending me roses for weeks without end....”

The Raven laughed, a coarse cawing guffaw that echoed throughout her bedchambers.

Belle scowled, all pretense at flirtation lost in her confusion.

“Ah, the roses. I see. Yes, you are mistaken.” He reached behind his head, fingers working nimbly at the ties of his mask. “You see, they were intended as a message. But not the one you took.”

“No?”

“No.” Backlit by the moonlight, the highwayman pulled the mask off over his head, revealing a crown of golden hair, braided in a fashion not entirely unlike Belle’s own. He tossed the beaked mask onto the bed, where it landed alongside the blossom.

“You see,” he said, in a voice no longer muffled by the mask. Belle frowned at its dulcet tones, far more feminine than they’d seemed before. The Raven shook out a mane of golden curls, and stepped into the moonlight. Belle gasped to see her own features looking back at her.

“The life you lead, it was once mine. Until I was taken, and you left in my place.” The stranger wearing Belle’s face stepped forward towards the stunned courtesan.

“And, while that life is no longer one I can return to, it rankles me to see you living it. To see someone...some *thing*...like you, wearing my face and using my name.”

Belle gasped like a fish out of water, struggling to understand the impossibility before her.

“The roses were not intended as a gesture of affection, my dear. Not at all. They were a reminder that flowers like you are easily plucked.”

The swordswoman gestured, and her blade was in her hand, shining steel flashing between the pair like a living thing.

“And once plucked...”

The rapier slashed, cutting through fabric and flesh with equal ease.

“They quickly wither and die.”

Belle did not have time to scream as ribbons of red unfurled across her. Her blood stained her nightgown, the pillows, the coverlet, crimson rivers on the snow white sheets.

In less than a heartbeat, the woman who had once been Belle wiped her blade on her black silk sleeve before returning it to her scabbard. She moved towards the window as the creature that had lived her life began to collapse into a tumble of vines and blossoms.

By the time the flowers reached the floor, the room was empty once more.





Suffering of the Unchosen

Hunter: the Vigil (1690-1695 C.E.)

Monica Valentinelli

I was but a simple farmer whose tender son once planted seeds in barren, rocky soil, whose sweet wife once gathered berries, herbs, and mushrooms in the forest, whose family once led a trouble-free life surrounded by our cousins and neighbors in Salem Village.

Now, that life — the life of William Mansforth — is over. Though it is by some miracle I still draw breath, the rest of my family was tragically murdered a few nights ago.

I found their smoldering remains after I had returned home, battered and bruised, for I had been robbed by petty thieves earlier that day. Upon witnessing the horrible sight of my wife and child blackened beyond all recognition, I sank to my knees in despair, for everything I owned and loved had been ripped from me in a mere day's time. My purse had been stolen, my cabin and tiny plot of land had been sanctified by fire, and my wife and son had been tied to the stake and burnt alive.

In truth, I had not the eyes to see the pyre for what it was — a ruse — for I was preoccupied with guilt. What could I have done to save them? My beloved wife, Mary, and my adopted son of five years, William, were unjustly murdered and judged as witches for all to see. They were no devil-worshippers! Questions plagued me; each was a pox upon my mind. If I stayed the night, would their murderers return and end me, too? Would I know the faces of the townsfolk who took two innocent lives? Or, was this the Devil's Hand at work?

With an aching heart, I slept at the foot of that grisly sight, whispering prayers for their wayward souls, so that the spirits of my wife and son would not lose themselves in sorrow. Our cabin's logs heaped upon the pyre still burned slow and hot; their orange embers provided warmth and kept the cold dew from settling on my skin. There I slept on the hard ground, inhaling and holding the dwindling smoke of that wretched fire in my lungs, begging for death. Who could have done such a thing? Who dared to commit murder and walk free?

At my wit's end, I could no longer feign sleep. Instead I sat up, pulled out my hunting knife, and sliced my open palm. I was careful not to wince as I did so; the pain was sharp, but lingering. It reminded me that whilst my wife and son were dead I was, by God's miraculous Hand, still alive. So in this fevered state, I forged a pact with Him in my own blood, to shine His light into the darkest recesses of men's most murderous



hearts, to ensure my family's killers were justly judged — even if their capture would come at the cost of my own life.

“William...”

“Mary?” I knew not if her voice was inside my head, or if it was calling to me from between the trees. I yearned for her and hoped her ghost was a divine messenger. I shouted into the open air: “I am frightened, Mary. Is that you?”

“Here, William. Look to the great oak!”

I did as the voice bade, and saw a vision of Mary made whole, standing in front of the tree where we first met. Her naked body was shrouded in fine translucent robes, her long golden-brown hair flowed wild and free, and her kind brown eyes were just as merry as I remembered. She stood apart from me at a distance, but near enough so I could tell she was not a figment of my imagination.

“I am sorry, Mary. I was robbed, wife. Beaten *and* robbed!” I tried to beg her forgiveness, but my tongue was stuck. “Had I gotten home sooner...”

“William, you must listen carefully to me now. I have naught but a few moments, and I must tell you a secret...”

I fell into a fever-dream, half-drunk at the sight of her, wondering if I had finally gone mad. Was her spirit Heaven-sent or Devil-born? For precious few moments, I wondered if my wife truly was a witch. Then her words stuck to me like thistles, and they held fast.

“...three innocent babes, stuffed with herbs and dressed in linen, buried beneath the church by my late husband. I was the only one alive who witnessed were they were buried...and who killed them...”

“Who did this to you, Mary?” My voice was raspy, and I struggled to speak. I had to know. “Who slaughtered you and our dear boy for the sake of this knowledge? Who?”

“They call themselves hunters.”

Fearful that her apparition would vanish before she bade me farewell, I shouted out question after question, hoping that would not be the last time I saw my wife — my beautiful, *murdered* wife. “Mary... Is that all?”

“Seek those who know the Englishmen. Those frightened lambs will bring ye before the knights of the cross. Rest well, William, and rise a man of vengeance.”

I clenched my hand, sore from the shallow cut I made, until the blood dripped once more.


“Avenge me, husband! Seek justice for our family!”

“I will, Mary. I will!”

“Now kiss me, William, and take me in your arms. Couple with me, one last time...”

• • •

The next morning, I awoke with a dull headache. My conscience weighed upon my mind like a heavy stone. I had no choice but to follow the instructions of that heavenly vision, to confer with my Puritan neighbors, the Chosen, so that I might discover the nature of these hunters and their ilk and free myself of guilt. Verily, I thought to myself, my wife must have died for this reason and this alone: her eternal silence designed



to ensure the children's unlikely burials remained secret. And, her tormented spirit bequeathed this forbidden knowledge unto me, so that I might expose this treachery in the name of God.

For the remainder of the day, I took to the village, begging for charity. I broke bread with my neighbors, shared my grief, and borrowed their clothes and shelter. I partook of their wine, and engaged in many a strained conversation, until I learned what vexed the Chosen so: the Devil was alive and well in Salem Village and I did suffer for it greatly.

I thus did speak, carefully and intently, to inquire of the hunters with those such as Goody Smythe and Dame Williamson, John Masterson, and Pierre La Faux, and two Wampanoag traders, before seeking shelter with Mary's cousin, the Widow Holt, who did welcome me with sad, open arms. They spoke of unlikely visitors who sailed from mighty England's shores, the ever-righteous and ever-secretive Knights of St. George, and a group of night's watchmen who bore scarlet ribbons. That was how I discovered the names of my family's killers.

It was to my great misfortune, though, that no matter how politely I engaged the village folk, I was not only met with suspicion, I generated much scrutiny which grew, ever more intensely, until I was hushed and brought before a hunter-knight fresh off the boat from England. Her name was Lady Anne Crawford and wished to be addressed as such or, by her title, Knight Inquisitor. She was stern of face, smelled salty like the sea, and her blue eyes sparkled with curiosity.

How came I by this knowledge, she asked me. The voice that spake to me in my vision, what did it sound like? Did I believe in witchcraft, demons and devils, angry spirits and foul drinkers of blood? And, if I did not doubt such horrors, would I fight against them, holding but a candle unto the deepest, blackest of shadows until the day I died?

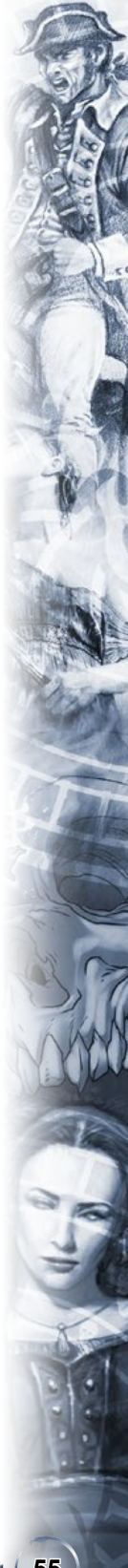
I held fast to my original purpose, and told the hunter-knight we had not time to discuss such serious matters, not whilst murderers lived amongst us as free men and women, unburdened by their guilt. Thus, the knight did bade me to name the accused, and describe them for her best I could. I held their names upon my tongue, and revealed each one slowly and purposefully, just as my neighbors had confessed them to me earlier that day:

Thaddeus Stone, a seasoned English hunter by trade of medium height and middle age. His hair snow-white, his shoulders broad, his voice deep in pitch. Reddish-brown skin weathered and cracked, with a deep scar above the knee. From Ipswich.

Sarah Alvey, a widow to a Frenchman, midwife, and herbalist. Mother of two, with hair as dark as night and brown skin and eyes. Believed to have poisoned her late husband, Marc, with nightshade, but was later proven innocent. Currently resides in Salem Town, but hails originally from Boston. Favors lavender and lemon balm.

Nathaniel Thorn, student of philosophy and a foreign language tutor by trade. Young in years, bright-eyed and naïve, well versed in the Algonquin languages, Latin, and Greek. A literate man, whose hands are smooth, uncalledoused. Slight, but not sickly. Remains indoors, and his fair complexion proves his work. Trains familiars. A rabbit named Horatio, and a bird of prey, unknown.

When I was done with my short confession, Lady Crawford bade me farewell, and forbade me to speak further of our conversation.



“Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention,” she said, giving me hope that my wife’s spirit had set me upon the right path. “I will call upon you tomorrow at the Widow Holt’s. Be ready.”

Then, she paid me a princely sum for my service, and bade me good night.

• • •

The next morn, a messenger delivered a piece of parchment bearing a royal seal. It was decorated with an oddly-shaped cross. Upon my breaking of the wax seal, I read the time and place of our next meeting, and a handful of coins spilled out onto the floor:

Salem Church

After Sunset

Come Alone

Wasting no time, I made good use of the day. First, I returned to the forest to bury the bodies of my wife and son, and sanctified their graves as best I could. Then, I revisited the Widow Holt to give her comfort, and planned to remain there until it was time to leave. She was speechless at the loss of her cousin, and did not visit with me like she had previously. She eyed me strangely, too, as if she could see something I could not, but did not tell me what was bothering her.

The rest of the day I spent in silence and in prayer, watching, waiting, and taking comfort in the Good Book’s wisdom, “whomsoever sheds blood, by man shall blood be shed”. I repeated those words until I fell asleep from exhaustion, only to wake again after the sun fell behind the horizon.

• • •


Though the corn-yellow sun had risen and set over Salem Village, its golden warmth never penetrated the cool grey mists blanketing its sickly fields, and the evening air was thus unseasonably chilled. As I solemnly strolled to meet my neighbors at Salem Church, to dig beneath that hallowed soil under the pale moonrise, I passed those precious moments in deep reflection.

Summoned by the Knight Inquisitor Lady Crawford, the impending judgment of my family’s murderers was the sole reason why I wandered through barren fields of dried husks at night, bearing naught but my lantern and a thirst for vengeance. The site of our meeting was Salem Church, a place I had not visited in some time. The village’s house of worship was a simple building nailed together with wood planks; its angular roof pointed to the sky, like two naked hands pressed together in prayer, earnestly.

Lady Anne Crawford, upon seeing my approach, addressed me loudly: “Hail to thee, good Sir. Identify yourself.”

“William Mansforth,” I replied. Dragging my boots slowly across the ground, I walked slowly toward her, waiting for the Knight Inquisitor to acknowledge me in that moonlit hour.

“Have ye brought a shovel, William?” As I hastened, I saw that she was not alone. The hunter-knight was surrounded by others of her order, the Knights of St. George.



These Englishmen and women were dressed in fine, worked armor from the neck downward, with tunics bearing the painted image of a jeweled cross, and held bright lanterns near their grave faces. Only their fair heads and hands were bare; the rest of their bodies were covered in steel plate and heavy chain, as if they expected to battle with the French or the warring tribes nearby.

Behind this motley collection of hunter-knights, I recognized the faces of the accused — Thaddeus, Sarah, and Nathaniel — along with the Frenchman, Pierre, and two others I knew not. The banner of the Knights of St. George, a gilded cross upon a field of white, stood testament to these proceedings. Though I knew not the truth of the hunter-knight's origins, I suspected their purpose was to bring order in a time of devils and witches.

“There is digging to be done, Mister Mansforth. What say you?”

Her words surprised me. I was not expecting the Knight Inquisitor to command *me*. I set my lantern upon the ground, near the foot of the church steps, and rolled up my sleeves. “These hands are prepared to do the Lord's work, if I must.”

A severe look crossed her unpowdered face. Her face was plain and unadorned, similar to the other Chosen women of Salem, but made of steel. “Are you prepared to discover the truth behind your visions?”

“I do not under—”

“Do you, William Mansforth, acknowledge the existence of Satan?”

I spake the truth: “I do.”

“Do you believe that witches, devils, and other such creatures walk amongst us?”

“I do.”

“Then, William, do you accept that your wife — and *not* an agent of our Lord and Savior — did so give you an unholy vision because she was a witch?”

My heart sank. I formed my thoughts carefully. “I am sorry, but I do not understand. Why do you accuse me of speaking false?”

Lady Crawford's response was grim. “My order does mean to investigate the matter further, Mr. Mansforth. Whatever is buried in the soil will either save your life or condemn it. For, if there are no graves, then it is *you* we must hunt, and your wife's body we must examine.”

I felt an odd fluttering in my breast, as if a wounded sparrow had been trapped there, and beat its blue-grey wings to free itself from my very skin.

“Lies,” I told her. “Lies that God will reveal. How did you come by this awkward conclusion?”

One of the other hunter-knights raised his hand. He did not identify himself. “It is not your business, William. You are no hunter.”

“It is,” I protested. “If I am to stand accused, I would know the reason for your suspicion.”

Lady Crawford stepped forward. Her thin face was taut, and her reddish-brown hair was pulled back and secured into an ornate braid, as if she expected to mount her horse and ride



into battle. “Do you know why your neighbors were reluctant to speak to you, William?”

“Rumors, m’lady. Nothing more. They are likely frightened.”

“We learned as much from them and more.” Her brow furrowed. “You are a strange one, William Mansforth, and I know not what to make of you. Your worldly possessions and family are gone, but you did not attend Church even in your darkest hour, and are not a Puritan. Yet, you came to us with a holy vision, claiming your wife was murdered for the secret she kept.”

“I do not take your meaning.”

“Either you killed your family and seek to entrap us with an elaborate deception, or those who stand accused beside you have made a grievous error.”

I looked upon the faces of my fellow accused — Thaddeus, Sarah, and Nathaniel — but I knew not their thoughts. They bowed their heads and clasped their hands in front of them obediently, like small toddlers clinging to a stern mother’s skirts for her approval.

“There is only one way to prove my innocence, for words cannot prove I am naught but a humble farmer. I may not attend church, but I am a righteous man.” I could feel the anger rising from my belly. For all their virtues, the hunter-knights treated me with great suspicion. Who were *they* to inquire about me? I forced myself to bury my rage and focus on the choice ahead of me. Dig, and I would be seen as an ally. Run, and I would be treated like an enemy. “Shall we dig?”

Lady Crawford nodded, handed me a shovel, then pointed to the steps of the church. “Knights, set the torches about the entrance, then remove the planks and the stairs. Let the accused dig up the secrets of the past, and let the truth come to light.”

And so it was that I, alongside Thaddeus, Sarah, and Nathaniel, did set our shovels into the thick mud and gravel, to lift the dirt until the innocents’ from my vision were thus revealed.

My companions remained oddly quiet, but their looks and mannerisms said much. The older man, Thaddeus, regarded me with malice and suspicion. He eyed me closely as he lifted each shovelful of dirt, as if he knew something I did not. It was strange, for he regarded me in the same manner as the Widow Holt, as if they held the keys to a riddle only they could answer.


Sarah did not dare to acknowledge me, and I was grateful for it. She was too virtuous to look upon, and I knew she had but a small part in this conspiracy. Nathaniel, on the other hand, took his cue from Thaddeus. It was clear by his actions the scholar regarded him as their leader.

“What say you, Thaddeus?” If I was in danger, then this man was my biggest threat. I dared to speak to him. “You laid the blame, did you not? Do you think me a witch?”

“Nay, William,” Thaddeus growled. “Not a witch, but not a man, either. We are certain of it.”

“Are you now? I hold your claim false. You would not know the Devil if he stood before you, and he would strike you down in your ignorance just as easily as I would strike you now.”

“You have a slippery tongue, snake,” Sarah whispered. “I would cut your throat where you stand.”



“Enough!” Lady Crawford cried. “If these hunters committed an egregious sin, then we, the Knights of Saint George, will be their judge and jury.”

“I can prove *his* guilt, for this shadow of a man is not William any longer. I tell you Lady Anne, we need not dig!” Thaddeus shouted back at her, pumping his fist into the air.

“You cannot mean to hurt me, Thaddeus.” I must admit I was not feeling totally like myself, and my oily pleas masked my fear. “Think carefully on what you do next.”

Thaddeus would not be swayed. “Hunters, attack that demon!”

“No!” I cried, realizing that I had little means of defending myself. Then, I said a strange thing: “I am William. I still live!”

Nathaniel struck at me first, but his blows were soft. I stood still and silent, breathless in that shallow pit and unaffected. Sarah, in the grace bestowed upon her, did attempt a foreign curse, but her deadened words rang hollow with forgotten magics that sputtered like hissing candles.

“See now?” I called out to the knights standing idle, watching and judging our every move. Then, I pointed to Sarah in a fit of anger. “There! *There* is your witch. Can you not hear the Devil’s influence in her very speech?”

“I. Do. Not.” Thaddeus lifted his shovel high above his head, brandishing it like an axe. Then, frozen in that terrifying stance, the hunter hesitated. His countenance was familiar to me; suddenly, he became uncertain of himself, and his fear got the better of him. “Will you bleed, monster? Like he did?”

“Like who?” I asked.

“William Mansforth,” he said, softly.

“I am he!” I shouted. “Why can you not see that?”

“Lady Anne, we had to protect him from the truth.” Thaddeus ignored me and continued. “We followed William on our way back from his cabin, and planned to rob him, so no one would know our purpose. He was bruised, beaten, and broken where we left him, but we had no choice in the matter. If we had not done what we did, many more would have been killed. That I can attest.”

“If this were true, then why do I not remember meeting you before?” I laughed at the absurdity of his claim, and appealed to the hunter-knight’s vanity. “How can that be when I stand before you now. Is that not enough?”

“Blood does not lie.”

Of all the things Lady Crawford said to me, this was the fairest. “No, madam, it does not. If I bleed for you, would you and your knights be satisfied that I still lived as a mortal man?”

“Lady Anne, do not let this monster bait you with his glib words!” Nathaniel said. “This is the foulest trickery, I am certain of it.”

“Best you keep digging, Nathaniel,” one of the other knights said. “Down to the bottom.”

Thaddeus shook his snowy head, and dug another shovelful of dirt. “Let it go, Nate. We have seen too much already. William survived for a purpose, what that is I would



like to know it. Mayhap Mary was no blood-drinker after all, and if that is true then we have earned our punishment for taking an innocent life.”

“Need you a blade, William?” Lady Crawford asked. “Look to Sarah if you wish to prove your humanity.”

I opened my hand and extended it to Sarah. She placed the knife in my palm and, after taking a step back, I drew the sharp end across my festering wound, deep but not too deep, until my blood welled in a thick, red line. Then, I grabbed my shovel, and let the blood drip upon it.

The knights ignored this gesture. Thaddeus, on the other hand, eyed my shovel greedily. He ripped it from me, then held the bloodied end fast to his nose. Dissatisfied, he wet his fingertip, touched my blood, and then pressed it upon his tongue.

“Human,” he confessed. His revelation was not for my benefit.

“Are you satisfied, Thaddeus?” Sarah asked the grizzled hunter. “Must we call every villager a monster? Soon there will be no one left.”

“That is for them to decide,” Nathaniel answered her, pointing to the hunter-knights.

“I...agree,” said Thaddeus. “I am sorry we tried to kill you, William, but we had no choice. When we first came upon your wife and son in the woods, blood was dripping from your wife’s mouth, and her teeth were clamped fast to your son’s neck. It was our duty to end her, but when Pierre told us you were on the way home...”

“What are you saying?” I could taste a bitterness on my tongue. “That there was nothing I could do to save them?”

“Aye, William. That is what I am saying.” Thaddeus shook his head. “Your wife was to take the monster’s place, but once she turned she was no longer the woman you married. We felt we had no choice but to kill you, too, to save your soul.”

“So you judged what I would do, before I had the chance to do it.”

“Aye.”

“And you tried to murder me, after you killed my wife.”

Thaddeus hesitated, then said: “Aye.”


I was confused. Angry. Frustrated. Delirious. Finally, after a long silence, I said: “I cannot absolve you of your guilt, for your story does little to justify my vision. If my wife was evil, surely God would not allow her to return to me.”

“Then help us, William. Let us look upon the graves of the fallen, and see their bones,” Sarah said, placing a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. “If the children are here, then your wife appeared to show us the error of our ways so that we might repent.”

Wordlessly, I bent down into the muck, and scooped the mud with my hands. It was difficult work, for the newly opened cut caused me fresh pain. I soldiered on, anyway, for the fate of many lives depended upon our findings. Handful after handful, I lifted the mud out of the pit, until I heard a loud gasp.

“This is not...*possible*.” It was Thaddeus who spoke first. He stepped carefully to the side and then jumped out of the pit. “Do not fall prey to this distraction! This man seeks to ensnare us into a wicked trap.”

“Silence!” Lady Crawford was not amused. “Speak no more, Thaddeus Stone, for you no longer have standing here.”



“M-m-m-y Lady Anne,” the hunter said, bowing and scraping in spite of himself.

“Water! Gather water from the tub in the back of the parish!” She was quick to hand out orders. “Pour it on the graves. Let us see the faces of these unholy creatures. And, bring me another torch!”

The knights did as she bid, and revealed what my wife Mary had predicted. Three supple bodies, perfectly preserved, with their heads shorn and their eyes sewn shut with coarse twine. Clothed in linen, the children were of a young age, well on their way to adulthood. I counted fifteen, maybe sixteen years. Two boys, one girl. They were dressed in simple shifts from simpler times, with leather bindings on their feet, and cleansing herbs stuffed into their mouths. Around their necks, each wore a gold pendant, marked with a blessing and a curse — their false names, the names of the unbelievers.

Unchosen.

Unbidden.

Unloved.

I stepped out of the hole, picked up my shovel, and stood at the edge of the pit. Listening, watching, waiting, as the hunters stood with their mouths agape.

“What will happen to us?” Nathaniel broke the silence with a whimpering question.

“Do you recognize these victims, Nathaniel Thorn? What of you, Sarah Alvey? Or Thaddeus Stone?” Lady Crawford kept her voice steady and measured, but I knew that calm demeanor for what it was. She was angry, and all who stood near her felt her white-hot rage, too. “Who are these hallowed babes, so preserved by the grace of God?”

“S-s-s-s-saints,” Sarah confessed. “They m-m-m-ust be. I am sure of it. I cannot explain it, or say how their heads were shorn. I do not even remember dressing their bodies...”

“What do you recall, Miss?” My first question was a careful one, but calculated. “Were their lives taken by your hand?”

“We thought them bitten,” Sarah said. “The signs were there! A French trader, he named them ‘loup garou’, and found them stranded in the woods, with ragged teeth marks on their necks and fur on the back of their hands. We examined them closely—”

“—you performed such heresy on these woodland babes? Looking for witch’s marks, no doubt,” I scoffed. “Such superstitious stuff. I wonder how many other victims you harmed thus during your *watch*.”

“That will be all, Sarah,” Lady Crawford. “I have heard enough for now. The bodies must be reburied for now, and the soil must look as it did, undisturbed. The townsfolk must not know what happened here, and those who suspect our presence must be paid to keep their silence. Our actions must remain a secret, though I fear we are exposed.”

“You cannot leave these hunters be,” I protested feebly. I suspected the Lady would take matters into her own hands, but I wanted to be sure of it. “Their foul deeds cannot go unpunished. The children...”

“This is our business now, William, not yours. We will investigate the preserved bodies when we have the means and the time to do so, but for now we will focus on internal matters. The dead will keep.”

“What now then?” My question was in earnest, for I wanted the Knight Inquisitor

to know I did not leave that place bitter or greedy for revenge.

“You may go, and take satisfaction that the vision of your wife was Heaven sent after all. Do you require payment?”

I faltered, for I was not expecting such a kindness. “In exchange for my secrecy, I assume.”

She smiled and said: “You are clever, William Mansforth, and one day you may yet be a hunter.”

“Then yes, I will take your bribe. You may pay the Widow Holt on my behalf.”

My words thus spent, I gave that motley group a curt nod, and did not linger. Filled with weighty satisfaction, I plucked my lantern off the ground and clutch my bloodied shovel to my chest, knowing I have forced those so-called hunters to turn on one another, to see evil where there was naught but air, and to wreak vengeance where none was needed.

As I slipped and slid across the muddy ground, plodding toward the dark forests at the edge of Salem Village, I caught a whiff of sweat and burning oil in the air, and heard the clanging of irons and the sound of the jail cart. I laughed, in spite of myself, for the hunters would never know the true nature of the suffering Unchosen buried beneath the church, or that I alone commanded them.

Verily, I am William Mansforth no longer, and the last shred of his tortured soul has fluttered away. Though I wear the farmer’s body like a second skin, I have fully remembered my demonic self. The name *I* possess is untarnished, one that will last long after this body decays, and its plain meaning suits me. For my name — my *preferred* name — is Mister White.

Now, I am free to perform my devilish works in whatever manner I see fit, without fear of intervention from those who might harm or discover me. Yes, it was I, not Mary Mansforth, who appeared to William in the guise of her spirit, coddling him so that he might merge with my seeming. It was I, not William, who trotted his wife’s murderous hunters before the Knights of St. George. And it was I, not the Knight Inquisitor, who figured out the bitter truth: that Thaddeus Stone did kill Mary Mansforth for good cause, for it was she who drank the blood of her child, and plotted her husband’s murder that very eve.

With my wicked influence thus spent, I am satisfied that the hunters of Salem have acted in accordance with my dark wishes. I am certain, however, not a single hunter will be happy with what havoc the Unchosen, the Unbidden, and the Unloved will wreak tomorrow when I command them to rise.





Cross Purposes

Mummy: the Curse (1893-1924 C.E.)

Danielle Lauzon

Sitamun strode through the squat building without conscious thought. She could feel each piece, relic, artifact, and display of wealth call to her. Each held Sekhem and each was hers; her connection to them unmistakable. She walked with her eyes closed, feeling and sensing, taking a mental catalogue. It was all here, everything she had ever found or stolen for the sake of the Judges. When had they moved everything from the underground tombs she was accustomed to? She could not remember, yet this building and their presence here felt, *right*.

Her purpose burned inside her, yet she could not truly parse the danger that stood before her relics. She would need more time studying what this world had become. She recalled Amon's words, though she did not understand them completely. Those who rule this land now wish to exchange the wealth of her collection for a different kind of wealth. On the surface, it seemed reprehensible, yet she knew she needed more time to study and understand.

Amon waited by the door as she exited the building. The priest was a tall man with ebony black skin and dark brown eyes surrounded by lines betraying his age. Otherwise, the man was ageless with perfect posture and a smooth, hairless head and face. His deep baritone voice spoke both the old language, and a new foreign language he called English. Her grasp of this new language was imperfect, but she was getting better.

"We meet with the curator in fifteen minutes. Do you need me to go over the specifics again?" He spoke as he turned the key in the large padlock holding the large doors of the warehouse closed.

"I know my purpose. Tell me once again of the gold these people wish to transfer to you." Sitamun spoke the old language, preferring to be as clear as possible, though she knew she would need to speak English in their meeting. The newer language Amon used so frequently was hard to understand, a bastardization of the old language, and she hated it.

"Not gold, money. Currency backed by gold," Amon sounded tense. He walked quickly as he led her towards the governor's estate through loud and crowded city streets.

"Sure, money. What value does this currency have?" Sitamun tried to put as much calm into her tone and demeanor as possible. It was clear to her that the priest was



unhappy with her decision to meet and speak with these people. His request was to deny them and deal with them as a problem. He hoped she would simply kill those seeking her fortunes, but Sitamun knew better than to think simply killing would be enough. She needed to understand the motivation behind the request, and to ensure that no other cults were working against her. She had no intention of selling anything to anyone, but she may need to remove her belongings from their current place, and she needed to know as much as she could before she could make any long-term decisions.

“It has no value to you, Sitamun. I’ve been trying to explain this. They want to sell what they found for empty promises, nothing more,” Amon replied. As they approached an elaborate building made of stone and faced in marble, Amon stopped her and bowed low, “Please, master, I am yours, I defer to your wisdom. But, please do not go forward with this course of action. If they believe the collection is for sale, they will stop at nothing to get at it. We should just kill them and be done with it.”

Sitamun eyed the man standing bent before her. His grasp of the old language was imperfect, but his intentions were clear, yet she would be no pawn to this man’s desires as long as she could help it. He may have summoned her with a purpose, but she would decide how to enact it.

When she spoke, her voice was cold and commanding, “Stand up Amon. I am no fool and we do this my way.”

He stood and gave a resigned sigh. He walked before her, leading her into the large building. They walked through marble lined hallways to a circular office where a dark man wearing a crisp black suit coat and trousers waited. The man stood from behind his desk and walked over to Amon, holding his hand out for him. Amon grasped the man’s hand and shook it once, letting it go.

“This is Sitamun, she owns the collection we spoke of earlier,” Amon said in English as the man turned to her.

“Ah, yes. Sitamun, welcome. And please, have a seat.” He gestured to two dark wood chairs positioned before the desk. Sitamun paused for only a moment to parse his words before sitting and gesturing at Amon to leave her. As he left, he shut the door with a muffled slam.


They sat in an uncomfortable silence for a moment as Sitamun assessed the man. He stared back at her, obviously disconcerted by something. Had she not dressed as Amon told her? She had not yet spoken, so her language could not be the problem. Nevertheless, his discomfort would work to her advantage, despite anything Amon believed.

“Tell me, how many collections does your government lay claim to for sale at this moment?” she asked, breaking the silence with her near perfect English.

The man looked startled. “I... I’m sorry. I’m Omar, curator for the Egyptian Museum here in Cairo.”

She looked him up and down once, dismissing his words, “I know who you are. You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m sorry ma’am, but we are trying our hardest to not let our nation’s treasures leave. But, our financial situation is, how do I put it, not the best. We need monetary support to ensure the museum’s initial success, which means we must sell some collections to the British and often the French to ensure the rest remain.”



She let out an exasperated sigh. When she spoke again, she tried to make her voice soft and sweet, “Yes. Okay. But, how many other collections?” She leaned forward, hoping he would finally answer.

He blanched at her attention and stumbled over his words, “I...um...three.”

She leaned back and smiled as she spoke, “See, that wasn’t so hard, now was it. I hear you have still images of some of these collections. May I see them?”

“I do have these images, but I’m sorry. I don’t understand what this has to do with the collection you are contesting?” His confidence seemed to return to him.

“Nothing. But, if my collection is going to fetch a fair price, then I want to see what else you plan to sell and know the prices attached,” she said with a cool air of nonchalance. She hoped her eagerness did not betray itself.

“I see, but we have yet to establish the ownership of this collection. Amon indicates that it belongs to you through something about land rights, but the government has declared that all treasures found within tombs belong to the state. I’m sure you can understand the legality of your claim is in question,” he said as he pulled some papers from a thick leather folio and passed them to her.

She barely glanced at the papers before speaking again, “The legality of my claim can wait. I am possessed of much wealth, and I could make your debate of sale disappear easily. What I am more interested in is seeing your other collections.” She handed the papers back to him.

Omar started at this revelation. “Ah yes. Well, I can show you some photographs, but not all. We have the collections housed here in our warehouse, but I am not allowed to let anyone in.” He pulled another leather folio from a drawer in his desk. It contained photographs each on its own page, a close up of an artifact with hand-written text at the bottom detailing its name, location found, and estimated date. She poured through them, giving each her attention before moving to the next. The black and white stills did no justice to the artifacts, and she had no way of telling which might be relics and which were simply old pots. The location names were no help either, as they just looked like gibberish to her.

As she turned from one photograph to the next, one in particular caught her attention. A faded memory surfaced with a sharp clarity. This ring, its bright green emerald shining in the light of a brazier. A scribe, by the name of Khaba-Iten, speaking to her of Irem, many sheets of papyrus strewn about a roughhewn table. His words were lost, but the intent was clear, history, knowledge, her own past and his intertwined in need, longing and hatred. She recognized this ring, and knew its owner, meaning the rest of the collection may belong to him. She passed her hand over it, memorizing the information inscribed at the bottom before moving on. She quickly finished glancing at the images, none of the rest sparking any other memories for her. She handed the folio back to Omar and stood.

As she turned to leave, Omar stood and hurried after her. “Miss Sitamun, please, wait. What about the money? Did you want to talk about the price of the collections?” His final words faded as she shut the door behind her.

She strode purposefully to the back of the museum. If his most prized relic was in the possession of these people, then maybe she could find Khaba-Iten entombed nearby. She did



not know this place, or these halls, but instead let her instincts guide her to a set of stairs leading down. A soft velvet rope hung across the railing, with a politely worded sign requesting guests to stay away. Sitamun ducked under the rope and slipped down the stairs. The bottom of the stairs let out into a long hallway with doors to either side. She opened door after door into empty rooms and office spaces. At the far end, she encountered a door labeled “storage”. The knob resisted her turn, but she applied more pressure until it twisted open despite the lock holding it. She rushed in only to find rows of metal shelves filled with light brown wood boxes. Crate after crate of neatly packed artifacts lined the walls and shelves of the room.

Each box carried a carefully lettered label, with a name and a date. These matched the inscriptions at the bottom of the images she had seen earlier, but she could not make out how they were organized. She began looking up and down the aisles taking in the words, seeking the inscription she had memorized. She wasn’t there long when she heard a group of men enter in a rush. They called out in alarm when they saw her, and approached her cautiously. She needed more time, but there were too many of them to stay without a fight, which she had no intention of instigating. She walked calmly out from among the shelves and smiled graciously at the men.

“What are you doing in here? No one is allowed in here.” The man nearest her called out in a bastardized version of the old language. She could only barely make out what he was saying.

She responded in English, “I am sorry I must have gotten lost. I was looking for my way out.” She walked directly towards the exit with purpose, and the men in front of her parted as she moved past them.

“We can’t let you leave.” The man said as he ran to catch up to her.

She spared him a glance as she continued down the hallway and to the stairs. “You can and you will,” she used the old language, her voice smooth and silky.

He stopped mid stride, shocked by her complete dismissal of his authority, affording her a precious moment to hastened up the stairs. At the top, she could see Amon at the front of the building in frantic conversation with Omar. The poor priest couldn’t let her out of his sight for just a few minutes without a meltdown.

“Come Amon, time to leave,” she said to him as she strode past. He looked at her and nodded once to Omar before falling into step behind her.


“Where were you? What happened?” Amon still sounded frantic. She must have upset Omar with her sudden departure from his office.

“I was looking. Amon, can you find out where someone is? Someone like me?” She turned abruptly and stopped before him.

He stumbled trying to stop before bumping into her. His face showed a range of emotions from fear and anger to deep confusion. He caught his breath and spent a moment visibly calming himself, “I can try. What’s this about?”

“Good. I’m looking for someone called Khaba-Iten. He should be nearby. I need to find out where he is interred or if he is awake. Can you do that?” She looked him in the eyes, causing him to look away furtively.

“Khaba-Iten is awake,” he said, his voice gruff and annoyed. “His priest came to me for aide just two weeks ago, a relic was stolen and he needed help arranging transportation to Great Britain for Khaba-Iten.”



“Khaba-Iten is gone? When did he go? Where is his priest?” She had to resist the urge to grab and shake Amon. He was telling her what she was asking, but not enough, never enough. He was always so formal with her, so stilted.

“I’m sorry, Sitamun, but what does this have to do with your collection?” Amon’s confidence was returning. He was better at remembering what he was there for, but not at remembering his place. His show of fearlessness recalled to her when she had selected him for his position of high priest. Of the options, he was the only one who dared to question her motives, to show bravery in the face of his master. She prized him then for this attitude, but now it only irritated her.

“If I can find Khaba-Iten’s collection, we can add it to our own,” she said, her tone matter-of-fact.

“Khaba-Iten’s priests are still in Cairo, Sitamun. They will not let his possessions go without a fight,” Amon retorted.

“Yes, as it should be. But, his collection is up for trade, as is mine. If we can save mine, we can save his, and add it to what we have. We need to find his priests, the rest of the cult, convince them to help us,” she spoke with growing anticipation. If she could get a hold of any piece of Khaba-Iten’s collection, he would come looking for her. She could give it back to him, and in return, they could speak again of Irem. Khaba-Iten always remembered more than her, but his memories came at a price.

Amon looked thoughtful. He didn’t say anything, but instead led her back down the street to the building she had been using as her home for the past few days.

“It may take time to arrange a meeting,” he told her, “just wait here until then.” He left her there, in the confines of the warehouse with her relics around her.

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The next day, Amon did not come back for her, so she left on her own. She returned to the museum and Omar’s office. Omar seemed pleased to see her again.

“Miss Sitamun, welcome back. I’m sorry that our conversation was cut short yesterday.” He smiled at her as he spoke. Had she understood him correctly? It was as if he had forgotten that she had walked out on him. She wondered what Amon had told the man.

“I have questions about the images you showed me yesterday,” she told him with no further preamble.

“Yes, which piece interested you?” he asked as he sat behind his desk and pulled open the drawer with the picture folio.

She took the leather bound book and flipped to Khaba-Iten’s ring. “This, Neb Ka. What do you want for it?” she asked as she showed the picture to Omar.

“This what?” He looked at the inscription and back to her. “The current bid is at five hundred.”

“Five hundred? Of what?” She felt confused. While her collection was quite large, she by no means had five hundred of anything to hand over in exchange for one small ring.

“Pounds ma’am. The currency of Great Britain. France has not yet bid, though I suspect they will let such a small piece go without over bidding,” he said almost to himself.

“Five hundred pounds. Pounds of what?” She asked.

He looked perplexed. “Pounds. Money. It’s backed by gold.”

She looked from Omar to the image of the ring. Of course, Amon had said something about this currency. He had quite a bit stockpiled for use in keeping her holdings. She wondered if she could simply purchase her own collection to end this problem.

“I see. The collection Amon has told you belongs to me. How many of these British pounds would I need to collect the whole thing?” This was not what she wanted, but Amon would be happy to hear that she was attempting to work on his problem.

“France’s current bid is at twenty thousand francs for the whole thing. I suspect Great Britain will not give us a counter offer, as this is over five thousand more than their last offer. France’s representative is determined to get the collection. Mr. Gautron’s own expedition originally uncovered the artifacts ten years ago.”

This sparked a memory. Yes, she remembered awakening to men entering her chamber, and leaving with her golden ibis. It had taken her three weeks to track it down and recollect a scattered cult to her. This was before Amon had taken over. That was when the collection moved into Cairo. It was nice to finally have that piece of her memory back.

“Yes. Of course. That is when the collection moved to Cairo,” she said as she glanced again at the ring in the picture. “I could give you one thousand for the ring now.”

Omar’s eyes lit up. “Miss Sitamun, I will have to explain the offer to the representative from the British Museum. He may want to make a counter offer, though I doubt he cares to pay such a high price. I won’t know until the day after tomorrow. Is that sufficient?” He had the look of a hungry animal.

“Where is the ring being held?” She asked, trying to sound casual.

“Here in the museum ma’am. Safe and sound,” he assured her.

In the museum, so close, yet she would have to wait to retrieve it. Her attention snapped back to Omar. “Of course. I will come back in two days’ time,” she told him and turned to leave.

“What of the other collection ma’am?” He asked.

“Send word of the offer to Amon. He will handle it,” she said as she left, distracted with thoughts of how to get the ring.

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When Sitamun arrived back at her warehouse, Amon was waiting there with a woman. It was Khaba-Iten’s priestess, Maia, second in line after his high priest. Maia was a short woman with thick dark hair covered in a sheer linen veil. Her skin was lighter than most in the area, and she spoke the old language with a lilting accent. Though, Sitamun had a hard time understanding what she said half the time.

“Amon tells me that you know Khaba-Iten, Mistress?” The girl said with reverence. Now, this was a cultist Sitamun could enjoy. She knew her place, and respected the power before her. Amon could stand to learn a thing or two from her.

“Maia, when does your master return?” Sitamun asked in a cool tone.

“I don’t know, but I’m charge of his relics until then. I’m sorry to say that the museum has a hold of them, but no matter what I do, I cannot retrieve them. The curator,





Omar, tells me that someone has offered a great sum of money for the artifacts. He expects to close the deal tomorrow.” She sounded terrified. And rightly so, the loss of Khaba-Iten’s relics would spell her doom.

“Sitamun, Omar tells me your collection has been agreed upon with France. They intend to come and collect in the morning,” Amon said with urgency into the silence that followed as she mulled over Maia’s words.

“Then we must move quickly, shall we not?” She replied to the man, turning back to Maia. “Tell me Maia, what do you know of the Egyptian Museum?”

“Master, we need to move the collection before tomorrow. Even if I call the entire cult together, we cannot do this alone. You must help us. Kill this Gautron, remove him as a threat.” His words resonated inside her. This was his purpose for her, the one she had known all along. Kill the thief.

She shook her head. “Amon, please. We will speak of this later,” she waved a hand to dismiss him and returned her regard to the girl. “What do you know?”

“Sadly, not much, Mistress. It is not yet open to the public, but is filled with artifacts. I know they keep guards outside at night, but few would be bold enough to steal from the museum. They can steal directly from the tombs of our ancestors with more ease,” she said.

Sitamun looked between the girl and Amon. “Oh, good idea. They won’t expect a break-in, and we can collect all of Khaba-Iten’s things.” She turned to Amon and said, “And, if I find Mr. Gautron there, I will kill him for you.”

He looked dismayed. “Master, you must seek him out. I doubt he will be at the museum. Please, it is the only way,” he was nearly begging her.

“Amon, collect the rest of the cult,” she turned to Maia, “and you contact your cult and tell them to help Amon move my relics.”

Maia bowed low and left the building. Amon’s face showed his strain. He did not like the idea of working with another cult.

“Sitamun, please. What if Khaba-Iten’s cult tries to steal from you?” He was pleading.

“That isn’t how we work, Amon. Khaba-Iten would never steal from another Arisen, no matter how sordid our past,” she tried to sound reassuring.

“You are trying to steal from him,” his voice rose in anger. “Yet, you tell me that they would never do this thing. Those, whose master is far away across the sea. Are you blinded by your own desire?” The words stung. It was true, and she knew it, but now that she had set her course, she had little desire to leave it behind. Despite the drain she felt by ignoring Amon, despite the way it made her remember the icy chill of Duat.

“I will kill your Frenchman,” she said in cold tones, the words forced from her. “Tonight, I steal the ring.”

• • •

Kill the Frenchman.

Sitamun stood outside the museum, her senses dulled and her mind feeling fuzzy. She was so tired, the feeling of Duat returning to her, so soon after awakening. It had only been a week, but she had been ignoring Amon’s purpose for too long. Her preoccupation



with Khaba-Iten and finding his ring was starting to have a visible effect. Maia stood next to her, Amon was back at the warehouse, packing her relics for transport. A lone guard walked around the building at intervals. She had been watching him for the better part of an hour, timing his steps, and waiting for the best opportunity. As he disappeared around the corner of the building, Sitamun stepped forward, Maia close on her heels.

They approached the wall and walked the same path as the man, following his track around the building far enough away to be out of eyesight. They made their way slowly around to the back of the building and to the large bay doors leading to the storage rooms. Sitamun remembered seeing doors inside one of the rooms with small windows leading outside. She was having a hard time remembering where the doors would lead, but she didn't care. She just needed to get inside, then she could start her search. The doors held a chain and a padlock on the outside, preventing easy access. She pulled on the chain, straining against the metal until they broke with a sharp crack.

Maia jumped, and pulled on Sitamun's arm. "Please ma'am, we need to hurry. He's sure to have heard."

Sitamun pulled the doors open, and they slipped inside, closing the doors quietly behind them. They stood in the dark room for a moment, allowing their eyes to adjust. The adjustment took far too long for Sitamun's liking, and she pushed forward, her vision still muddled by the darkness. They were in a large room with large crates, bigger than any she had seen earlier. This was a loading bay, filled with shipping crates and packed artifacts. The collection was unlikely to be in this place. She moved to the inner door and turned the knob. It refused to budge, and she turned harder, yielding a slight crack and a popping noise. The knob was not turning as she expected, her strength depleted as she hastened through her Descent. Damn Amon, and his purpose.


Kill the Frenchman.

She put her shoulder into it and slammed into the door. It popped open with a snap. Maia watched her, a concerned look on her face. She ignored the girl and walked down the long hallway to the door at the end, and the room she had entered a few days before. The door was chained shut, the staff not having had enough time to replace the knob she had broken. She pulled at them, and they came apart, nothing actually holding them together. She entered the room and surveyed the rows of shelves.

She pointed to one end and said, "Maia, you take that side, I'll take the other." She had written the inscription from the picture onto a piece of paper for the girl. They moved through the stacks, pulling crates and reading through inventories. Sitamun's head swam as she read, the lines of the letters blurring together and back again, making the process much slower than it needed to be.

Somehow, the guard had missed the broken door chain, or Sitamun just felt like more time passed than actually had. She glanced up every now and then to see Maia moving methodically past boxes, glancing at labels and moving on to the next. She seemed to be moving at the same pace, which made Sitamun feel better. A few moments later, Maia's exclamation pulled Sitamun out of a daze in which she had been reading the same label over and over again.

She hurried over to where the girl was pulling a crate off a shelf. Together, they pried the lid from the box, pulling the nails from the soft wood. Inside sat four cloth wrapped bundles nestled in dried grass as packing. Sitamun pulled the smallest of the



packages out and unwrapped it. She held in her hand the small gold and emerald ring, the normally lustrous gem dulled from the darkness surrounding it.

A memory swam through Sitamun's mind. She was sitting next to Khaba-Iten in a low-lit room studying writing on flaking and ancient papyrus. The words were in the old language, and they told of memories of Irem. Another memory of the scribe laughing at her, watching as she descended into Duat. Yet another memory of Khaba-Iten's resting place, as Sitamun placed the ring upon his tomb, returning the relic to its rightful holder.

Maia quickly checked the contents of the other three packages and nodded to herself. "This is all of what they took and we were unable to recover. Thank you, Mistress," she said as she gently placed the packages back into the crate. Sitamun slipped the ring on her finger before returning the cloth back into the box and pushed the lid on.

"Right, let's get out of here." She grabbed the crate and started moving towards the door, Maia following. They made back through the way they had come without incident. As they reached the outer doors, Sitamun could see that the sun was peaking just above the horizon. Had they really spent so much time in that dark room? Her body felt weak, and her mind glazed over. As they moved out, she heard a call from the front end of the building. A guard had spotted them as he came around the corner. He pulled a small device from his belt and held it aloft at Sitamun and Maia.

"Freeze right there. Drop the crate and move away slowly," he called to them, waving his device in their direction.

Maia let out a small cry and moved behind Sitamun. The man yelled again, but Sitamun couldn't understand what he was saying. He was threatening her, and she would have to kill him.

Kill the Frenchman.

The impulse hit her like a rock to the head. For a moment, she had complete clarity. The French curator would be going to her warehouse as the sun rose. He would take her collection and bring it to another country. If she did not kill him, she would fail in her purpose, and descend down to Duat. Amon would be unable to summon her again before it was too late. Her relics would be lost to her. This man in front of her was not the man she needed to kill, but the impulse drove her forward.

A loud explosion broke the air as the man's device puffed with smoke. A moment later, something slammed into her chest, causing her to stagger as she moved forward. The look on the man's face told her that he expected her to fall, or stop moving from the impact, but she continued on. He shot again and again, bullet after bullet grazing her arms or impacting into her chest, yet still she moved to him with a singular purpose. She grabbed him by his throat and squeezed, her weakening fingers barely able to put enough pressure to cause him to gasp. He cried out in fear, and she grabbed him with both hands and threw him to the ground. His head hit with a sickening crack, and she could see blood seeping, bright red in the growing light of morning.

Her vision swam and she teetered and fell to the ground. "No," she called out, her voice weak. "Fentu, no! Not again, it can't end this way again."

Kill the Frenchman.

It was her last thought as she lie on the ground, gripping the emerald ring in her fist, waiting for the last gasps of life to leave her.

From Galveston

Promethean: the Created (1933-1940 C.E.)

Matthew McFarland

I. The Song and the Jungle

Lord, how long since I seen that river?

How long since the river I seen?

How long till I drink deep the cool, clear water?

How long till I am made clean?


I heard that song at a camp in Oklahoma. I was beat — bulls threw me off a train and I had to walk four miles along the tracks to find anything resembling people — but the fellas were friendly enough. I walked up and they were sitting around a fire, three of them. One was singing that song. One, a younger colored fella, was playing guitar that looked like he'd kept together with wood glue and the Lord's favor. The third, a tired-looking old man, just tapped his feet a little. He was holding a harmonica but I never heard him play it.

One of them — the fella who was singing — offered me a pull from his bottle of whiskey, which was generous of him. I took it, and I thanked him, and we sat there and chatted and lied like men on the road do. And I had the same thought I always did: How am I to know what being a man is, when all men do is lie and struggle? As always, no answer came.

They asked me how I busted the wrist, and I told them the truth: "Bulls threw me off." They all nodded. They'd all been there. No one asked me how I lost the leg, and I didn't offer. I flexed my wrist — it didn't hurt, but I could feel the bones beneath the skin, grating and cracking, and it was uncomfortable. I looked to the sky, hoping for a storm, but I saw nothing but black. I looked at the men around the fire. They probably thought I was hoping for rain.

That jungle got busier every day. The train ran close by, and the fellas talked about a little town up the tracks. They said there was work there, but they'd look at me crossways when they said it. Thought maybe I couldn't work on account of my leg, or maybe they were afraid I'd take their work, or rob folks, or otherwise poison the well. I couldn't tell them that I *was* the poison, and they were already sickened. I couldn't tell them why they hated me. All I could do was wait.





Four of them came to see me one night. We'd heard thunder to the south, but no rain was coming. The best we could hope was more black dust, choking the life out of the world. The four of them stood there over my fire. One of them was a boy, couldn't be older than fourteen. The others were men; one wore an Army coat, and I figured he was the most dangerous.

"You're hot," said the soldier.

"No, I ain't," I said.

"Why you got them pistols?" asked one of the older fellas. He was missing teeth and the s sounds he made whistled.

"Where I'm from, men carry pistols," I said. It was true, in a sense.

"Where's that, now?" The soldier leaned down. I saw what he was doing. He was getting close, figuring to grab me if I went for a gun. I wasn't going to. I realized as he leaned down how skinny he was.

"Galveston," I said, staring into the fire.

The fellas standing behind the soldier looked at each other. Worried? Scared? I couldn't tell. The soldier nodded at my leg. "What happened there?"

I looked up at him. "Lost it in the war." It was a lie, but I said it for a reason. It gave him an out. He took it. He looked back down at my leg, and I saw battlefields in his eyes. He looked maybe 40, so probably he was in the Big One. He waved at the other fellas, and they wandered away. I heard one of them mutter "buzzard" under his breath, and that right there told me I'd have to leave. Once the other 'bos think you're a buzzard, you're done.

But the soldier sat down, and said, "Sir, I'm sorry." His coat hung on his frame like a tent on a beanpole. He was hiding it well, but he needed food, and soon.

"What for?"

He said, "Sir, I was in France in 1918. I saw men get shelled and blown to pieces and stabbed and dying in the muck. I'm sorry we bothered you."

I nodded. "It's fine." But it wasn't. I'd still have to leave, but of course that wasn't his fault.

"I carried dead men back to the line," he said. He wasn't looking at me anymore. He was staring off into space. I suspected he was back in France. I let him talk. "I carried them back, dead and bloody and...." He stopped and looked up at me. "But you know, don't you, Galveston?"

"Yeah." I didn't, though. I've never seen war. Just the river.

The storm came in that night, dry and black and horrible. It destroyed the camp, scattered the fellas in all directions, and brought me no lightning to heal my wrist. Of course, it brought no rain, either. Just a black blizzard, choking the life from the world.

I wandered in the black, looking for high ground, desperately trying to catch the lightning. When the sun finally peeked out at me again, I found the soldier, dying. The hunger and the black dust had done him.

II. The First Question and the River of Death

"Please," he whispered. I leaned closer. I could barely hear him. He was so weak couldn't put any breath into his voice, and he sounded like wind outside a thin door. "Please."

His body was a bunch of dry sticks in a sack. I heard his bones grate together as he reached up for me. I took his hand as gently I could, but I'm not built for gentle. I felt bones crackle under my grip, but he didn't wince. He was beyond hurt, or maybe he'd reached a point where everything was pain.

"Not in the black." He coughed, and even that was thin and pathetic. His lips curled back, and I saw his gums, dry as Texas sand, cracking. "Not in the black dust. Find a place where something grows." And then he was gone.

I sat there with him for a good long while. I had seen so many bodies, both of my own making and laid low by the black blizzards. I'd seen little children dead, huddled together, tiny lungs choked with black dust. I'd see men shoot their wives so that they wouldn't starve, and I'd seen men put gun to temple or blade to throat because they couldn't live one more minute in this wasteland. I knew death — it was my birthright, in a way. I reached out to him, and I touched his face, and I woke Death up for a chat.

Do you really care where you're buried?

Death speaks through the tongues of corpses. It doesn't give good answers, of course; mostly just "yes" and "no." It doesn't carry much in the way of tone or emphasis. Death is cool, calm, and neutral. Death surprised me, this time.

YES.

It wasn't a shout, not exactly. It wasn't long and drawn out like a scream, or short and curt like an angry snap. It was...heavy. I felt that weight of that answer, and it landed on me, pushed me down, far more than the stick-bundle body of this poor man ever could.

I picked him up, and I started to walk. I started walking west. I knew if I walked west long enough, I'd hit Texas, and I couldn't find anything in Texas, I could maybe get up into Arizona. Something had to be green. Something had to grow.


When I first woke up, I was on a ship. I don't know the man who made me. Don't even know if he was man or something like me, but knowing what I know now, and remembering how *dry* that ship was, looking out over the sea and seeing only salt and not water, I suspect the latter. He never told me his name. I barely saw him. We docked, and he jumped off the boat and ran. I never caught up with him, because here's me with half a goddamn leg. I hobbled off the boat, and I wandered around Galveston for a while. A kindly woman helped me fit a peg onto my stump so I could walk without a crutch. Her brothers and father then dragged me to the beach and tried to drown me. I didn't know it then, but that's my fate — to be hated and beaten.

But never killed. Oh, no. Not that night, and not ever.

I was there in the surf, in the shallows, four men holding me under water until all I could taste was salt, and I saw the River of Death, and I felt something from deep inside — something *me* but older than me at the same time — telling me to go there. And I tried to swim deeper, but they were holding me too tight.

I reached out and grabbed the pistol that one wore on his belt, and I fired four times. All four of those men washed out to sea that night, and I never did see the damn River. I ran from the beach, jammed the gun into my own belt, and I spent the night shivering and cold in the shadow of a church.





The next morning when the sun rose, the priest came out and invited me in. I ate the food he gave me and I listened to his sermon, but I didn't understand much of it, but then I perked up and asked him about the River of Death.

He seemed puzzled. He asked what I meant.

"I nearly died last night," I said, "and as I was dying, I saw a river. I heard a voice telling me to come—"

He broke in, then, started talking about how the Father would cleanse me in the river. I pulled out my pistol. I wanted to be cleansed. That sounded right. He grabbed my arm, horrified. No, he said. You kill yourself, that's a mortal sin.

I didn't know what that meant, exactly, but I understood enough to know it meant I wouldn't see the River. I thanked the father, and I walked on, because if I couldn't get myself to the River, I'd need to find another way.

It was 1920 when I stepped off that ship, but 1932 when I picked up the soldier's body and started humping him across the black wasteland. In that time I'd had lots of people — and some things that weren't people — try and send me to the River, but none of them managed. And it burned me that they saw it before I could, but I wanted to play by the rules. I wanted to be cleansed. That meant I had to give my best if someone came to kill me.

III. The Second Question and the Mulligan

Four days into the walk, I found a jungle. It was marked with a square with the top line missing, and that was good, because I needed a rest. I can walk forever and I can walk through all kinds of weather, even a black blizzard, but what I can't do is walk fast or without discomfort.

I'd stolen a sheet off a clothesline the day before and wrapped the body up. It still looked a lot like a body, but I couldn't exactly stuff it in a bindle. I stashed it in some brush and hobbled up to the fire. They had a big iron pot on it, and a Mulligan bubbling.

"Hey, there," one fella said. He was stirring the pot with a stick, and I thought it was funny how they had a pot but no spoon.

"Hey, yourself," I said. "Mind if I set a while?"

"Got something to throw in?" asked another 'bo. He was missing part of his lower lip. Looked ragged, like maybe it had been bitten through.

I shrugged. "Not really, fellas." I'd eaten nothing but scrub brush and most of a dead cat I'd found the day before for the last four days. I always felt bad that I could eat most anything while other fellas starved.

The fellas looked at each other. I knew they were all trying to work up the nerve to tell me if I didn't throw in, I couldn't eat, but they also saw I was armed, and that made everyone nervous. "Tell you what," I said. "I just remembered I might have something. Hang on a minute while I go find it."

I walked back to the body and opened up the sheet. I picked up his arm and felt it; the flesh was thin and barely there. I took out my knife and started to cut it open, but then I figured I'd better ask. I woke Death up again, and said "OK with you if I take your armbone?"

YES. The word had the same weight it had before.

I cut the skin on the arm open. I'd cut people open before — never like this, of course — and I was used to seeing blood, flesh, a flash of white fat before the gushing starts. The soldier's arm was nothing like that. It was just leathery skin sliding open, and then dry, spider-web nerves and fibers clinging to yellow-white bone. Was this what the blizzards were doing to people? Or was it me, tainting all the water left in his body, drying it out and leaving a wasteland contained in a corpse?

I didn't know. I couldn't think about it then. I snapped the arm-bone out, tore off the fibers and skin, and covered the corpse again. And then I walked back to the fire. "Here," I said. "Soup bone. Maybe it'll add some flavor."

I knew it was perverse. I knew it. But it was all I had to offer, and I had to offer *something*.

The fellas didn't notice anything amiss. I was afraid maybe one of them was a doctor or a medic or a cook or someone who would know what a man's arm-bone looked like, but they all just nodded and the guy stirring the Mulligan added it in. We let it cook a while and then one of the other fellas pulled out three tin cups from his bindle, and we filled them with stew. I never asked where they got the water to make it. I looked around, but I didn't see anything green or growing, so I knew I had to move on soon. I needed rest, though.

I stared up at the stars that night, and thought about the corpse in the sheet, hidden in the brush only a few hundred feet away. I felt a strange burning sensation on my tongue, but I ignored it; maybe one of the other 'bos had put a hot pepper in the stew before I'd got there.

A retching sound woke me. I saw two other fellas stumbling around in the dark, groping wildly, pained, panicked. One of them grabbed me and gasped out "water," and then spit up a gout of blood. It just barely missed me, but I caught his shoulders before he collapsed. I held his head up so he could finish, but he didn't stop. The blood just kept coming, until finally he went limp in my arms and fell dead.

I checked the other one; he was dead, too. The burning on my tongue was worse, and I felt the skin in my mouth start to slough off. I sucked the flesh off the roof of my mouth and spat it out, but apart from that, it didn't seem to be bothering me. No River tonight, then.

I leaned down to the second dead man, the one who'd been stirring the soup. I tapped his head and woke Death up. I figured I'd better ask all at once, this time.

"Stew was poisoned?"


Yes.

"Fella with the ripped up lip do it?" I hadn't seen his body, and come to think of it, I hadn't seen him eat the stew — he'd taken his cup and wandered off.

Yes.

I stood up, and looked out into the dark. I sniffed the air, and I smelled blood, bile, death, and the still-appetizing scent of the Mulligan. I followed the scent, and it led me to the stewpot. I looked down into it; still plenty enough to feed three men. If I ate it, I wondered, would it take me to the River? Would that be a mortal sin? I didn't poison the stew, after all.





I kicked over the pot, and watched the stew slop out onto the dry, dusty ground. The fire was down to embers, and everything around me was darkness, but I heard well enough. I heard the hammer click back on a revolver. I heard the shot like a thunder crack, and felt the bullet strike my back. It caught me off balance and my peg slipped in the muck from the stew, and I fell.

The buzzard with the tore-up lip walked out of the dark. “You’re a hard bastard, ain’t ya?”

“I am that,” I said.

He cocked the gun again and put it to my temple. I shut my eyes.

A boom. Not his handgun; even at this range it wouldn’t make that sound. He fell over onto me, gun dangling uselessly from his hand. I pushed him off me and saw another ’bo holding a double-barreled shotgun.

“Damn lucky I came along,” he said.

I was all covered in blood so he didn’t notice the tears. “Damn lucky,” I said back.

IV. The Third Question and the Cannonball

Another week went by, carrying the brittle, rattling corpse over the blasted land. The blood hadn’t so much washed off as dried and flaked away like paint off an old barn. I hadn’t seen a soul in six days, but that was just as well.

I found the tracks in the early morning, and I found a ’bo mark on a shack nearby. It was three slanted lines. I wasn’t sure about that one, but I could tell from the condition of the tracks that they were in regular use, so I sat and waited.

I heard the train coming a ways off, and so I concentrated and listened to it. It was coming far too fast, what the fellas called a “cannonball.” I tapped the body again, and now the tap made a sound like knocking on a hollow box.

“Any use in catching this train?” I asked.

YES.

“Damn,” I said, and got ready to go on the fly. I tied the body to my back — if I threw it on the train, no way could I run fast enough to catch up. I had to jump from a standing position and into or onto the train.

The train sped towards me, and I put all the fire I could into my body, making my legs strong, making my eyes sharp, and I saw an open car. I waited until the last second, and I jumped.

I landed in a heap. I heard bones breaking from my passenger, and then I felt something puncture my skin, and I realized that one of his bones had snapped at the right angle to stab me. I pulled myself up to standing, and looked around the car.

I wasn’t alone, but the other person in the car was hiding. I could smell him — him? Maybe not — underneath a pile of old burlap sacks. If he was hiding, though, no point in disturbing. I shrugged off the pack with the body, and the bone fragment, probably from his missing arm, slipped out of my back with a *pop*. Whoever was under the sacks gasped.

“You can come on out, if you want,” I said. “If you don’t, or if I’m hearing things and you ain’t really here, then it’s no skin off my back. But if you want, come out, I ain’t



gonna hurt you.” I took my pistol out of my holster, opened the cylinder, and unloaded it. “See? Not looking to hurt anyone.” I sat down against the wall, opposite the pile of sacks, and wished again for lightning.

I must have dozed off, because when I woke up, my guns were both gone and my hands were tied together. Someone had gagged me with a snotty bandana, too, which was really the worst of it. I blinked a couple of times, and I realized my wooden leg was gone.

Three bulls were sitting against the wall. The train was still moving — had they climbed in from the roof, or had we stopped? I had no way to know. I sniffed, trying to see if the stranger in the burlap sacks was still there, but I couldn’t smell anything past the nose juice on the rag in my mouth. Whoever had used this rag was fond of chewing tobacco. It’s not in my nature to be squeamish, but right then I felt like gagging.

“You awake now, boy?” One of the bulls walked over and kicked me in the ribs. I felt something crack. Between my wrist, which was still healing up, the gunshot wound in my chest, the damage to my mouth, the fresh bone-stab in my back, and now this, I was thinking maybe I’d be visiting the River by inches. I guess that would do.

He leaned down and pulled the rag out of my mouth. “Damn it, we marked every building on this line with one of them fool signs you people use.” He drew three slanted lines in the dirt. “This means ‘unsafe,’ don’t it?”

“I couldn’t say.” I spat on the floor.

“Don’t you spit on my train,” he said, and kicked me again. The ropes holding my hands came loose.

“Damn,” I whispered.

“What? What’s that, boy?” He drew back for another kick. I didn’t answer. When he landed the kick, I wrapped the rope around his ankle and pulled. He was standing too close to the open car door when he fell, and out he went.


One of the other bulls shouted “Paul!” and ran to look. The other one, slightly smarter, pulled out one of my pistols and pointed it at my face. He pulled the trigger, but heard nothing but a click. I snatched it away from him, grabbed him by the lapel, and threw him against the wall behind me. I forced fire into my muscles. I knew he saw me, saw the shriveled, salted-leather of my true skin. I didn’t care. All I’d wanted was a ride.

Someone came out of the burlap sacks. She was maybe 12, skinny as an old farm cat, but she was angry. She shoved the bull at the door, and out he went, following his friend Paul. Then she turned to look at me. She was panting, eyes wide, face dirty. She had deep brown skin and her hair was tied up in a scarf that looked like it had once been yellow. “Hey, mister.”

“Hey, Maeve.” I said that so she’d know she didn’t have to tell me her name. She nodded at me, gulping for air, trying to calm herself down. I looked over at the man against the wall.

“Sir,” I said, “all I wanted was a damn ride. You’re carrying nothing, here, just some old sacks.”

“This ain’t for you,” he said. He’d landed right next to my dead friend. Fortunately none of them had thought to look in it, although I couldn’t see how it would have any worse if they had. “You didn’t pay.”



“Pay,” I said. “Yeah.” I loaded my pistol. “Where’s my other heater?”

He nodded to the door. “John had it.” Maeve looked panicked. I waved her off.

“My leg?” I spun the cylinder and snapped it closed.

The bull didn’t speak. Maeve cleared her throat. “They tossed it out.”

I shut my eyes. I felt something well up in me, something like the voice telling me to find the River, but this one was telling me something very different. “That leg was... important to me.”

“Then I guess you should have kept walking on it, bum.” He spit at me. It was dry and pathetic. No water here, either.

“I guess so,” I said, and pulled the trigger.

V. The Final Questions and the Bone Orchard

“You didn’t have to shoot him,” said Maeve. The train was slowing down. We were going to get off when it stopped. I promised I’d keep her safe until we got out of the train yard and she promised she’d help me walk until I could find something to use as a crutch.

“I know,” I said. We’d tossed his body out in the desert. I didn’t rouse Death to ask him anything. I couldn’t think of anything he could tell me.

“But I guess I didn’t have to push that other bull.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, kid. Maybe you did.” Killing people was always easy for me, I guess because I’m not people. As we hobbled down off that train, though, I looked at Maeve.

She was suffering. I had seen it on the train, but I hadn’t known why. She was suffering because she killed a man. She was people, and she’d ended one of her own, and now that hurt. Was that because she knew what he felt? Because she didn’t think she was right to do it? I knew she was; I knew buzzards when I saw them, and I knew that those men would have done terrible things to her if they’d found her. Did that matter to her, though?

The voice — the me-but-older-than-me voice — came up again as she helped me walk out of the train yard. It wasn’t a voice this time, though, but a feeling. It was a rush of cold water on a hot day, filling my stomach and my soul, and showing me that I was still...I wasn’t sure. Still carrying the banner, as the other ’bos say. She’d killed a man, and she felt for him, even though he meant her ill. I didn’t fully understand, but even a weak match is better than pure dark, I guess.

Maeve took her leave of me the next day. We found a dead tree and broke off a branch, and I used my knife to whittle it into something I could use. She thanked me, and she struck off north. I kept heading west.

Sometimes endings come on you so fast you don’t know what they are. I’d crossed into the bone orchard and was walking through it, reading the stones that weren’t worn away by the wind, before I saw the grass. It was sparse, but it was green. Something grew here. The earth was brown, not black. Here we were.

Here we were.

I found a shovel and I dug out a grave for my friend, and I laid him down in it. I reached down and tapped him again, and called up Death. “You ready to rest?” I asked.

NO.

“This place ain’t good enough for you?”

YES.

“Then what?” I don’t know what I was expecting. Death doesn’t answer complex questions. I have no idea why. But the body started to move then.

I recoiled, and I tried to run, but I missed my grab for my crutch and I fell. I heard the bones rattling behind me, but the rattling was getting muffled, like the bones were slowing being wrapped in cloth.

I made myself turn. I saw the soldier stand up in the grave, but he wasn’t the soldier anymore. I don’t know what he was, but he had flesh now. He had two good arms, and he was thin, but he wasn’t a skeleton. But at the same time, he was still as dead as he ever was. His eyes were sunken and glassy. His right arm was sliced open and the bone missing. His chest was so empty he looked hollow.

And he had fire in him, just like I had in me. I had laid down a dead man, but what rose up was one of my kind.

He stepped out of the grave, and he came toward me, hands outstretched, pleading with me. I knew what he wanted because I’d wanted those things, too. He wanted answers. He wanted reassurance. He wanted someone to tell him what he *meant*, where he was going, who and what he was.

All I could think, though, was here I brought another poison into this blighted world. All I could think of was how I would feed us, clothe us, how I would survive on the road if I had to watch out for him, this punk, this child.

“You walk,” I said. My voice broke and I coughed a bit, and then continued. “You walk. East, north, south, I don’t rightly care, but you do not go west. You eat anything that you find that was once alive, plant or animal, and it will sustain you. You carry the banner and live among the ’bos, you learn the signs. You walk. You find your own path to the damn River.”

He didn’t understand most of it, I knew, but he understood “walk.” He turned and started walking north, shambling, stumbling, and weeping as he went.

VI. The River, At Last

He was gone an hour before I understood what I’d done.

I screamed out for him, there in the bone orchard, but no one heard. I hadn’t given him a name. How could I call him?

I tried to follow him, but my limbs were heavy. I was wounded, hungry, and dying of thirst. How could I follow?

I knelt down before the grave, and I wept, but no tears came, only black dust. It was in everything, even my veins, even my eyes.

To Hell with mortal sin, I thought. To Hell with the rules. To Hell with the walk and the banner.

I put the pistol’s barrel under my chin, and stared down into the grave. I thought I could rushing water, but as I squeezed the trigger, I really didn’t care.





The Sea's Own

Geist: the Sin-Eaters (1950-1955 C.E.)

Michael "Hollywood" Tomasek, Jr.

They say you cannot kill an idea.

At least, that is what Cameron Watson thought on that overcast day in March 1950. He looked over the ocean on his lunch break, the gray reflecting the emotional tempest churning in his head and heart. He sat quietly reflecting on that gray, as he had daily for the past couple of weeks since she had the nerve to leave him. Molly Earle, a beautiful buxom brunette who grew up only a few kilometers down the same road from his childhood home. He had loved her since the day he laid eyes on her, they had been childhood sweethearts, and she wrote him weekly during the war, staying true the entire time.

Those letters talked so much of the future. They talked of Cameron coming home, of their impending engagement and marriage, of starting a family and being happy, together, forever. It was the driving dream that made it easier to get through the days of war. The dragging monotony of the military interspersed with the hyper-violence of combat. But he came home safe — which was much more than he could say about a lot of the lads he met out in the field. The war against the Axis powers was now over, or at least for him it was.

The echoes of the war clung to him, though. The dreams, more like nightmares, were coming more often now that Molly had left him. Did she leave him because of the nightmares? Was it the drinking? He never hit her like some of the other men. Battle fatigue is what they called it. Made you bitter, angry for no real reason. Some would come home after a day of work, blackout drunk and take a row with the missus. But not Cameron, never him. He tried every day for the last five years to get that girl to marry him. But that was no matter, not any more.

He had come home and the relationship that they had, over pen and paper, just seemed to never materialize face-to-face. The shadow of love was still there, but it had seemed that Molly was more so in love with the *idea* of love — and not him. Not Cameron Watson. Not her "hero" that she lovingly referred to via missive to the front. That hero was no more, left behind in the alleyways of an Italian city.

So with that idea, he found himself, left alone with the salty air that reminded him of tears. He sat along the same docks of the wharf he had worked since returning



home from his European tour. He sat with his lunch, day in and day out, slowly moving away from the friends he worked with every day. Watching the waves come in and out, lapping at the posts holding his occupation away from the scaly fingers of the sea.

They say you cannot kill an idea. But Cameron was surely going to try. He opened up his lunch pail revealing a shining, recently-oiled service pistol, which he gingerly placed in his mouth, inhaled deeply, and pulled the trigger. The last thing that went through his mind was the face of the woman he loved, Molly Earle.

Well, actually, the last thing that went through his mind was a bullet.



The time was just not right. Tommy Royston knew that it was just not right. He watched that boy, well, technically he was a man, put his officer's pistol in his mouth and pull the trigger. But that was not when he was supposed to die, Tommy mused over a drag of his cigarette and the lingering smoke, like the staying confusion over the wrongful death of a young soul.

Tommy took a sip of his stout and took another drag of his cigarette. He was a larger man, with a flat nose, widow's peaks now scrunched with the web of thoughts running through his head. He sat waiting for his mates to get off of the shift, so he could discuss the day's events per usual, but today was not so usual.

The pub, The Thistle Inn, was a modest, if not well-worn, public house of wood and glass design. A quiet, dark place to get a pint and a plate of chips before supper. It was inhabited this evening by Tommy, the two older gentlemen who quietly drink their pensions away, and the bartender, Smitty.

Usually Tommy and his Whanau, or Krewe as the Yank Sin-Eaters in Italy called it, would meet after work, discuss the day, and plan anything out that was in need of being tended to such as wandering malicious spirits or even the rumors of the occasional person sticking around in the skin-lands a little too long.


But things had been calm. Since their last escapade out on the Cook Strait about six months ago with the help of Ol' Ned things have been right as rain.

That is until today.

His web of thought was cut off as his two compatriots meandered boisterously through the door

"The marxists will be the death of us and our jobs! They've been openly recruiting for their union and, oh, one pint of bitter Smitty," Silas Riordan casually flipped across the bar. His tan skin and dark hair lent him a cool grace, even though his temper flared through his argumentation. His debonair attitude covered his occasional slimy underbelly; being a Bone Picker, and a Torn one at that, had certain drawbacks, such as the local knowledge to never get into a betting game of cribbage with Silas.

"Something needs to change, we can't go on living like this. There is word that everyone else is getting a raise on the docks but us," William Neylon, a lanky Maori man of taller build stated in his low, gravelly voice. His dark skin flush from the argument. and a look of exhaustion weighed on him from the day's work but his Celebrant demeanor would never allow him to give up a evening of good libations and friendly discussion. His Torn threshold though would also not let him give up this argument.



“It’s to someone to make a difference, the union is just one way.” He put a pound note on the bar, the old pensioner giving him a side glance. “A Cider Smitty, please”.

The two made their way over to Tommy with their drinks still engrossed in conversation until they noticed his dour demeanor.

“What’s the matter Tommy?” William asked. “Seem like you saw a ghost or something.”

“Yea, Cap’t,” Silas echoed using Tommy’s old rank. “Tell me your troubles”.

“Well, other than the fact that I saw a kid put a bullet through himself earlier, it’s been a pretty chipper day.” Tommy said, taking another drag of his cigarette. “The gore isn’t what got me, it was the timing. The kid’s clock was off. Earlier this morning, I gave everyone a good looking to, just to make sure there wouldn’t be any accidents I have to steer clear of. The kid, Watson, I think, he looked good, he was sad, sad since his dame left him, but good. At least another 30. Then pow, lights out.”

“The Communist? Wait, are you talking about the young kid, with the floppy brown hair? Up until two weeks ago he was passing out flyers for unionizing.” Will took a swig from his glass. “That seems a bit strange, I even talked to him yesterday about organizing.”

“On you go about that organizing bit again,” Silas scoffed. “Who cares if some pinko put himself out of his misery. Do you really think it’s some sort of deal, Cap’t?”

Taken aback by Silas’ disregard for life, Tommy kept his revulsion to himself. While the war had made all three of the men more hardened to the brutalities of life, it was something he never got used to. Even as a Reaper, he didn’t like his job. It was just something that had to be done, and he was rather good at it.

“Listen, I’m just saying it’s a bit on the dodgy side of things alright? You don’t have to get your knickers in a twist all about it.” He punctuated his sentence by putting out his cigarette. “And, what’s with you getting all up in arms against us unionizing, eh?” Then, Tommy lowered his voice so the old men at the bar hopefully couldn’t hear him. “You’re a picker for God’s sakes, you earn off of the dead, the most marginalized. But I’m pretty sure that don’t bloat your checks, eh? You are just as right fucked as all of us.”

Silas finished his pint and rolled his eyes at Tommy. “I work mighty hard for my riches I might remind you.” He sat up straight and raised his chin. “I earn my check and my spoils. I ain’t giving any more of that away in taxes to feed some commies. That’s all I’m trying to say, and there is word that if we unionize, we’ll get exactly that, on top of being shit canned.”

William chuckled into his glass.

“Listen if the Cap’t thinks it looks a bit suss, maybe we should check out the scene tomorrow night while he’s on shift?” Will was referencing the fact that Tommy had the “fortuitous” side job of occasionally working a night shift to look over the wharfs.

Tommy finished his pint and looked over to his two friends.

“How ’bout we meet at nightfall at the gates. We’ll take a look see if we can find anything. I’m off before the missus gets worried. Cheers.”

Tommy pushed his chair back and grabbed his hat, noticing his mates dived back into their previous argument. He walked past the bar and out the door into the rain and the clarity of the cool evening air.



The rain stopped sometime in the night and the day was crisp and bright. A perfect day to work outside on the docks, Tommy thought peeling himself from his warm, luxurious bed. After the war, after barracks, beds, and fox holes, he promised himself that the first thing he would buy would be a comfortable bed. And it was a promise he kept and cherished.

After a brief breakfast, he jumped in his old pick up and attempted to turn it over. Damn it general, you couldn't pick another day to fuck with my truck, Tommy mused. With a jump, the truck started up. He headed down the long, dusty road, his small green farmhouse growing smaller in the distance, leading him into Auckland. The trek to the docks was uneventful, long, vacant roads so early in the serene morning light. Like the bright calm of death after the sickness of a storm.

The foreman on Tommy's side of the bustling pier put him on packing duty, he loaded the overflowing boxes of fish onto the crane to be put onto trucks heading for the local markets much like any other day. Over the work whistles and the conversations of men, Tommy counted one box, two boxes, three boxes, four. Sometimes Tommy would count them, sometimes he wouldn't. The occasional smoke and joke the only thing to cut up the overwhelming monotony of his career choice.

Striking a match on the wooden post to light up one of those oases, Tommy inhaled and reveled in the snapping ocean breeze. I wonder if we'll actually find anything here. There hasn't been a ghost here in months. And the kid seemed to have passed on, even though it was pretty gruesome. Maybe I am being paranoid. He noticed another storm coming in over the sea on the horizon.

He took another drag of his cigarette when the foreman, Connor was his name came marching up to him.

"Eh, you Royston? Weren't you on the shipping for today?"

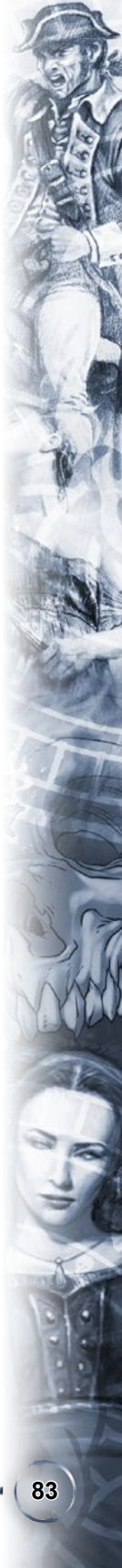
"Yea, uh, yes sir. Is there something wrong Mr. Connor?"


"You packed the wrong pallets, son." Tommy hated it when this particular foreman called him that. The man was only a few years older than he was, and it was simply a way of creating a culture of privilege. His tone was, to say the least, aggravating.

"The hell I did, those were headed to Christchurch. That's what's on the fucking order, Mr. Connor." Tommy dropped his smoke and snuffed it out with his heel, punctuating his dissatisfaction and throwing pleasantries out the window. He grabbed the order clipboard off of the pallet and showed it to him. "It's right here, Christchurch. Whatchu getting at with saying an entire morning's worth of work isn't going to where it needs to?"

"Ah, Christ, the form in the office says the opposite, let me get back to you 'bout this, son."

He turned to go as Tommy heard a strange sound. The rumbling. The cacophony of gunfire and the grinding of bones underneath tank treads. The General is here, he thought. His geist. The frantic feeling of the battlefield, of lost friends, of the coppery stench of blood. The one who gave him life, because of his honesty and supposed grace in combat.





Tommy looked down and then up again, as he quickly allowed his sight to flood his senses with a quick whiff of gunpowder and the red haze of brutality. He held himself against the post, trying to get his bearing when Connor called out to him once again.

“And get back to work, Royston! We don’t have anyone getting lazy on the—” Tommy locked eyes with the man. Checking his connections to the afterlife just as the last few seconds of Connors existence ticked down. Thomas braced for impact.

The last words his boss said rushed to Tommy like the snapping of a guitar string as the pallet, holding about a ton of fresh fish, came crashing down onto the foreman’s head. Tommy and the surrounding workers were splattered with a fine mist of blood as the wood, fish, and ice cascaded around what was left of Connor.

The state of shock was almost immediate. The visceral, physical reaction of being splattered with blood, and then covered with a mixture of freezing cold water, ice, and fish blended together like a toxic poison that washed over Tommy. The psychic backlash was worse. Tommy had seen people die before, and he had killed many of those same people himself, but not *while* his death sight was open.

That was when Tommy felt the worst of it; the pain felt as if he had stared into the sun for an hour. It was a mixture of the purest black and blinding light, so powerful his senses began to fail him and draw him into the raw death that strode behind the wake of gore and ice.

Just before he hit the ground hard and passed out, he managed to catch a glimpse of the commotion. Out of the few men who ran to see what the commotion was about, the one that bothered him the most, was the appearance of Silas draped in a permanent caul of shadows, hanging like a mantle around his shoulders to represent his geist, The Night Raid.

• • •

“Mrs. Royston, I promise you he will be fine. We got him all bandaged up, it looks like his head got banged up and he has a possible concussion.” Tommy heard a familiar voice through the darkness. Such lovely darkness, there was no pain there. The light though, that awful, blinding light that felt like fingernails digging into his skull, was out there, somewhere. With every word, Tommy reached closer to that light, that anguish, until he had to grit his teeth to not cry out in pain.

“I would like you to know, Captain, that I brought you back. You took a very nasty hit to the head. This was not easy for me, nor will it be on you. You’re going to have to owe me one. And get me near The Night Raid. I have some questions for it.”

The General faded back into the recesses of his consciousness, Tommy felt the connection to his geist slip slightly. It felt like he disappointed a good friend. The light began to fade to a sharp, stabbing feeling, as he was dragged out of the compassionate black into the world of the living.

“Once he wakes up, we’ll run a few tests, and he’ll be ready to go. The accident will be covered by the wharf, so no worries about cost or anything like that.” The light dulled to a mild throb. Tommy opened his eyes with a flutter, and saw the faces of his wife, Marley, and a clean-shaven man with slicked back hair in a white coat.

Oh no, *hospital*. Tommy’s anxiety was almost immediate. He didn’t know if they took any of his blood or if he died *in* the hospital. The last thing he needed was to be in the papers as some sort of miraculously cured man.



“Oh, darling! I’m so glad you’re alright!” Marley grasped his hand and bent down to peck him on the cheek.

“Where am I, pumpkin?” He knew damn well where the hell he was. “What happened, where am I?”

“Good evening, Thomas, I’m Doctor Giuseppe. I’m very glad you’re awake.” He didn’t look too glad that he was awake.

“I rightly appreciate that, doc, so could you please tell me what happened? The last thing I remember, I was at the docks and something happened to...oh God, poor Mr. Connor...” Tommy felt nothing for demise of the spineless foreman, and wasn’t sure who would miss him. Probably his sister, Molly, but that was about it.

“Ah, er, well,” The doctor seemed uncomfortable. “Mr. Connor has, unfortunately, passed on Thomas. We were quite worried that you had as well, but it seemed your wound just looked much worse than it was. Nothing a few stitches couldn’t fix. Do you feel any, light headedness or nausea?”

“No, I feel right as rain. I mean, the ol’ noggin seems to have taken a beating, but it feels fine,” Tommy lied. He felt like shit.

“Well, I have written you a prescription for some codeine. And now that you’re up, after the tests you’ll be free to leave.”

The tests went smoothly: a flashlight in the eye here, a blood test there. They came up with nothing in his blood, and from what he gathered from talking to the nurses he just looked like a bad stretch of road to them. It was all done by four in the afternoon. The drive home was quiet, and Marley held Tommy’s hand the entire way home. She’s a good woman, he thought, and I’m pretty damn lucky to have such a beautiful wife. Too bad she can’t know the truth.

After an uneventful dinner, a few drinks, and cigarettes, Tommy kissed his wife good-bye to head back to the docks. She protested at first. But, he explained they needed the money for the mortgage (even though they didn’t) and that he wanted to file any paperwork that had to go along with the accident (which he was *sure* there wasn’t any).


Walking to the car, Tommy realized he needed to find out what the hell Silas had to do with this mess. There had to be some sort of connection he wasn’t seeing. Or did there? Tommy lit up a cigarette and hopped up into his truck to head into town. Whatever was — or wasn’t — going on, he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

• • •

Those same headlights poured onto the gates of the wharf and illuminated the silhouettes of Silas and Will who’d been waiting for him. The storm was finally coming in off the water, and the sea’s waves could now be heard before they were seen. Tommy killed the engine, put on his hat, and lit up another cigarette. Silas rushed over to him, just as soon as he saw him step out of his car.

“Jesus, Tommy, I saw what happened. I’m so sorry, mate.” Silas said. “I didn’t think the doctors would have let you out. You didn’t look too good when they strapped you to that stretcher.”

He knew had to play it cool, especially if he wanted any answers. Something seemed off about Silas, as if he turned sacrosanct and was gonna try to convert the group



to some sort of hyper-capitalist war battalion. He had another thing coming, he thought. Tommy felt the plasma in his veins rise to the surface just in case some awful things had to burst forth from him.

“Silas, you still look dodgy to me, mate. I might have to call the authorities.” Tommy joked, hoping to cut the tension. He kept his eyes on Silas, and grabbed a paper bag from his truck bed. “Shall we?”

“Yeah, sure.” Will took a swig from his flask. “Let’s get this over with.”

The three men quietly marched over to the warehouse where Mr. Connor had died. Tommy clutched his bag, filled with ritual odds and ends, wondering if they’d work in this rain and the howling wind.

“Well, this seems like as good a place as any to try and make contact. The veil should be pretty thin with this storm coming and the recent deaths. I can sense the Awhawhiro starting to bleed through, though, so we should get started.” Tommy shouted. “It’ll be hard to keep the candles lit, but we gotta try.”

Tommy pulled out some candles and placed them under the awnings; Will poured the gin, which he brought as a libation. So far, so good. It seemed that Tommy was right: Mr. Connor was not coming back, and had nothing to keep him hanging around. Silas, on the other hand, was acting strangely, as if he was trying to perform the ritual himself.

“What are you doing?” Tommy asked. “We got this!”

“Uh...sure, Tommy,” Silas stopped chanting and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Sure.”

Tommy was worried he’d have to drop everything and help him—which would spell disaster for all of them. If their rituals failed, it’d be off to some unsettling wasteland or some place *worse*. Did Silas resent him? He couldn’t be sure, but it didn’t matter. Even though Tommy’s ritual was successful, thanks to Will’s help, no spirits came forth. The wind, however, seemed stronger and more furious than ever.

“Listen, uh, Silas, I’m just gonna come out and say it. I noticed you were on the crane today mate. Did you, um, see anything or anything like that?”

“What you mean, eh?” Silas folded his arms across his chest and glared at him. “You think I tried to kill you or the Watson kid or something?”

“I wasn’t asking about the kid, Silas. Do you, uh, know something we don’t?”

Silas’ mouth pressed into a thin line. “Killing someone isn’t a crime in our part of the universe.”

“Jesus Christ, Silas, you could have just fucking told us! What the hell, man!” Tommy could feel the anger rising from his belly. “You fucking put us on some weird wild goose chase and then you fucking killed me this afternoon! I *died*! That pallet killed both me *and* Connor. What the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t owe you any answers. You and Will have been going on for months about how bad each of you got it, while I’m the one out there doing supply runs, scrounging up what I can. So yeah, I did something for myself and you, unfortunately, got in the way, mate. I don’t need to apologize for that.”

“What do you get out of this?” Tommy asked him through gritted teeth.

“Love. Love, Tommy, something your thick skull wouldn’t understand.” Silas gave him a small smile, then backed away.

“I killed that pinko, Cameron, because I loved his broad. She was going to leave him, you know? We were gonna work things out between us, and buy a houseboat. That was until Connor — her idiot brother — mucked everything up. The night afterwards I went over to their farm to try to talk to Molly, and out came him, talking about how it wasn’t time. Well, look who’s got all the fucking time in the world now?” Silas turned around, yelling over the crash of the waves.

Both Tommy and Will started backing away from Silas.

“Fuck man, you’re sick. I know you were low, but this is a new level.” Will broke his silence, and chimed in. “You killed a man for a *shot* with Molly? And then killed her fucking brother?”

“You don’t get it. I knew you wouldn’t fucking get it.” Silas’ eyes went wide, drops of water dripping from his nose. Silas pulled out a knife and began punctuating his words with swipes in the air. The spiritual yolk of their Whanau, the communal brotherhood of violence, rising in each of them. “You two have always been so uptight about all of this nonsense since the war. Can’t a man use his gifts for his own good without some squares coming down on him?”

The slithering of blood and steel behind Tommy’s eyes forced everything to slow down, then freeze. He heard the General muse, and then whisper in his ear. *This man, Silas, has to be put down. There is something rabid about him. The Night Raid isn’t itself, either. Help them move on to the next phase, son. Remember you owe me this. I did you a favor by bringing you back from the dead, and now it’s time to pay up.* Then, suddenly, the voice was gone.

Time sped back up, and Tommy wasted no time. He jumped forward and tried to grab Silas’ wrist to push him off balance. Silas anticipated his move and used his momentum to pull Tommy towards him. Then he fell backwards and rolled their bodies towards the edge of the dock. Will yelped, helplessly, as the two men tussled.


Silas managed to get up, and pointed at Tommy; his eyes turned as black as the sea’s depths, his cries bursting into a scream as the crash of waves pummeled the dock, pushing its deadly cursed energy towards his target.

Leaping to escape, Tommy bounced off a pillar and rolled into the fall. Then, he looked up to see William’s body blasted across the docks into a warehouse wall. He could not tell if William was dead or unconscious or worse, and had no time to check on him.

“Oh, fucking hell!” Tommy felt the black ichor build up around his hands and ran towards Silas. While Silas readied another attack, Tommy jerked right, then left, punching Silas in the ribs with a thunderous crack. Silas was thrown with such force, the dock splintered as he fell. Still alert, Silas rolled as Tommy came down for another blow, shattering another part of the beams holding up the boardwalk.

Just as Tommy was preparing to attack him again, he felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. William let lose a foul curse, and it landed with a sickening slap onto Silas’ back. The man stumbled forward, and Tommy tackled him one last time, hoping to trap his body in the oddly-shaped hole in the dock. His ruse worked a little too well. Down, went Silas. Down went Tommy, too. The dark water engulfed both men, just as Will shouted their names, hoping to save only one of them.





The shock of the water did not freeze either of the two, angry men. Tommy punched Silas as hard as he could, even though the water softened the impact of his fists. Silas pulled a knife from his belt and tried to stab him with it, but Tommy lunged toward him, grabbing his wrist so hard he felt a bone break. A cascade of bubbles escaped Silas' throat as he let go of the knife — just long enough for Tommy to gain control of it and push it into his windpipe.

Silas's body went slack and started sinking lower and lower into the sea. Although he wasn't sure Silas had died, Tommy swam to the surface as fast as he could, his lungs burning for air. When he finally reached the open air, he took a deep breath, and swam to a nearby pillar. Will was waiting for him at the edge of the dock. Reaching out, he pulled his friend from the stormy water, saddened by all that had happened.

• • •

Eventually, Silas returned from the depths of the sea; he was confused, battered, and broken. He made contact in *The Thistle*, and bought a round for the group. He spoke for a few weeks about how he was walking on the docks, and some *thing* took hold of him and didn't let go. He didn't remember much else, other than watching glimpses of his life — including the fight — as if he was watching it happen on the other side of a great expanse. Then, he woke up on the shore a day or two later. Profusely apologizing for his actions, he bought another round for all his mates, including Tommy and Will, and hoped he didn't cause any irreparable harm.

That got them all talking. What was it? What was the *thing* that took Silas, forcing him to disavow his own ideals and, even worse, his friends?

Maybe they'd never know.

• • •

They say that you cannot kill an idea.

Tommy sat on the docks, casually eating his lunch, and looking out over the waves into the endless blue. It gave him some peace of mind that his friends were back to being themselves.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Then, he heard a faint "Hello, Tommy!" and turned around.

It was Molly Earle.

Wordlessly, she sat down next to him and gestured to his pack of smokes. He offered her a cigarette, and she lit it gracefully.

"We are going to do amazing things, Tommy. You don't know me but I know you."

"Excuse me?"

She turned to him with black eyes, dark as the depths of the sea.

"Yes, Tommy, we are going to do great, *fantastic* things."

And that was the last thought that went through Tommy Royston's mind.

War Spoils

Demon: the Descent (1960-1961 C.E.)

Eric Zawadski

I.

“How long ago were these taken?” Herr Lärche asked as he slid the trio of photographs back into the plain white envelope and set them on the grimy diner table.

Herr Entspannt shrugged. “Six days ago.”

“Near the new KGB headquarters?” He allowed his middle-aged face to look incredulous, a habit born of long experience blending in with humans.

“Is it bait for one of the adversary’s traps?” The young-looking demon held out his hands, palms up. “It’s hard to account for every bit of, ah, divine intervention, but I took these myself. I wouldn’t have risked the border to bring you word that he’s alive without performing a thorough investigation, Herr Lärche.”

He took the other demon’s hand firmly in both of his own. “You have more than kept your promise, Herr Entspannt. Thank you.”

The other demon withdrew his hand with a slight shake of the head. “You got us out of East Berlin before the angels got to our families. I only wish we had been able to do the same for you.”

Herr Lärche tapped the envelope with one finger. “Perhaps it isn’t too late after all.”

“Yes it is.” Herr Entspannt twisted his face into a deep, exaggerated, disapproving frown. “Max is a part of Project 41789.”


“The Iron Comrades.”

Herr Entspannt wrinkled his nose. “A stupid name given by stupid people to something deadly serious.”

Herr Lärche shrugged. “People who work in the intelligence community often buy into the propaganda of their side. That’s as true in the East as it is in the West.”

“He has been raised by the Soviets, educated and trained by them. He is out of your reach and mine as surely as if they fished his body out of some river. Take what closure you can get from this news. Mourn him. Mourn them both, if you must.”





Now it was Herr Lärche's turn to frown, but he was better, practiced at it. "How many other of these Iron Comrades did you recognize from the Battle of Berlin?"

The other demon hesitated before speaking in a tight voice. "Enough. Not all, but too many. I think it's safe to assume that this was one of the reasons the Enemy came for our children. What we know about our offspring now it clearly understood even then, and it wanted that power for itself."

"We could recruit them, turn the Enemy's weapons against it. It would be just like old times."

"Herr Lärche, no." His old friend shook his head sadly. "Think of your wife. Your children. They deserve good, long lives with you in them. Besides, times have changed too much since you ran with us. Back then, an act of sabotage or a dead S.S. officer might have prompted an investigation, but there was always the war to distract them from us. These days we must move more delicately than that."

Herr Lärche could have winced without affectation at that. Herr Lichtmauer had built a well-earned reputation even among Saboteurs for high-profile operations that ended in building-leveling explosions.

And our home was no exception to that. No more than a crater remained. How many did you take down before they overwhelmed you? Six? Eight? You were forged for the trenches of the Great War — an unsubtle Shield for an unsubtle time.

"I'm not going to bomb KGB HQ," Herr Lärche told him. "I'm no Destroyer."

Outcast Swords who tried to emulate you never lasted long. They didn't understand our partnership. You needed me to extract you once the angels showed up. That was true even when they took you, wasn't it? Did you meet them with grim fatalism, or did you hold out hope until the very end that I would reach you in time the way I had a hundred times before?

"You can't possibly think you can do this alone."

Herr Lärche stood up and put on his hat. "If I don't return, send word to the others. They'll look after my family."

II.

A small face with brown pigtailed peeked at Herr Lärche through the curtains as he approached the house. Tanja smiled broadly and disappeared. A moment later, the front door opened.

"Papa!" she cried, wrapping her arms around one of his legs.

Laughing, Herr Lärche patted her head and went inside. By the time he had closed the door behind him, little Swen had grabbed the other leg, forcing their father to drag the two children along as he walked into the living room. He set his briefcase down in its usual place, and made his way toward the couch while the six-year-old and three-year-old giggled into the backs of his knees.

A woman with long, blond hair appeared in the doorway to the dining room. "Swen! Tanja! Your father just got home from work. Let him have a little peace and quiet before dinner."

Herr Lärche pulled himself into his usual seat near the big radio. "It's fine, Angelika. My day has been too peaceful and quiet."

"Read to us, Papa," Tanja pleaded.

"Yes, Papa," Swen agreed.

"Of course. Of course. Let's pick out a book together."

A short while later, Angelika called them to dinner, and the children reluctantly crawled off their father's knees. Herr Lärche's wife met him at the door with a kiss. He almost reflexively pressed one hand to her belly. The pale blue dress she wore was still loose around the waist, but she would be showing again, soon.

"How was your day, Markus?" she asked him.

Herr Lärche shrugged. "It was a day at the office. They want me to travel to Köln on Thursday to inspect some factories there. Depending on what I find, I could be gone a few days or a couple weeks."

"Why such short notice?" Angelika asked.

"There was an unusual accident. Probably just some freak incident, but the inspector wants to rule out sabotage."

"Sabotage that far west?"

"It's probably nothing, my love," Herr Lärche assured her. "Where's Lea?"

"In her room. She says she's not feeling well enough to eat."

Angelika sounded like she didn't quite believe it, but then their eldest daughter had been complaining about feeling ill a lot in the last month. They both suspected the nine-year-old did it so that she could have some time alone, an impulse Angelika thought was perfectly normal. For Herr Lärche it was a reason for worries he did not share with his wife.

Lea has manifested two different abilities in the last six weeks.

The first incident had involved pulling pieces of candy out of her pocket and eating them until she had made herself sick. Herr Lärche had been able to simply explain it away to Angelika as a bag of candies he had bought for himself that their daughter had found. The second, a little one-person play Lea put on for their neighbors, had involved impossibly quick costume changes, and Herr Lärche had been forced to bring his own powers to bear to hush up that one. He had no illusions that he had convinced her to stop using her powers, but at least she was getting better at hiding her experiments with them.

It could be worse. Frau Spiegel's son thought that faking his own death would be a hilarious trick to play on his babysitter. That very nearly led to a police investigation. And Uta's clumsy attempt to make herself the most popular girl at school sparked fist fights between her classmates.

"The poor dear," he said as he joined her at the table. "I'll check on her after dinner."


The doorbell rang.

"Who could that be at this hour?" Angelika asked, beginning to rise.

"I'll check, dear," Herr Lärche told her.

By the time he reached the front door, whoever had rung the doorbell was gone, but they had left a small envelope in the mailbox. Herr Lärche checked the front and found





it addressed to him. He opened it. It contained a small, printed thank you card with no details and an illegible signature.

“What is it, Markus?”

“Just a card,” he called back.

It was a mark of how long Herr Lärche had been out of the game that he didn’t even think to check the return address until he had dropped the envelope in the wastebasket. He took it in at a glance, carefully hiding the surprise he felt when he recognized it.

We used to use it to let each other know we wanted to meet.

The address had always been a red herring — a spot watched by agents who tailed, or in some cases killed outright, those who came to the house looking for demons. Those who were meant to receive such invitations knew perfectly well where the ring would be meeting.

Especially cautious spies use one-time pads — pages and pages of random numbers that make it almost impossible to crack their coded messages as long as they only use each page of numbers once. We memorized one-time meeting places — a different one for every day stretching out fifty years. Most of them were destroyed during the Battle of Berlin or demolished during its reconstruction, including the ones for today and tomorrow.

Herr Lärche picked the card out of the wastebasket and looked at the date at the top. It matched a spot that hadn’t yet been bulldozed.

But we Unchained are nothing if not adaptable.

III.

Herr Entspannt was already sitting on a park bench by the time Herr Lärche reached the Victory Column at the heart of Tiergarten the next morning. He sat down on the opposite side and pretended to read a newspaper.

“Please tell me a good night’s rest has brought you back to your senses, Lärche.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Herr Lärche told him honestly. “I tried to think about how happy I am now, how what I have with Angelika and the kids is what I always wanted to have with Herr Lichtmayer and Max. But instead I spent the whole night remembering all the blood I shed during the war.”

“What happened at that radio tower in Gleiwitz wasn’t you,” Herr Entspannt chided him. It was a familiar argument.

“Not that nor the blitzkrieg that followed. I meant after Herr Lichtmayer and I came to Berlin. We were so certain that if Germany lost the war it would break the God-Machine’s power. We used that to excuse our methods. Sabotage. Blackmail. Mind control. Torture. Murder. We were practically dancing in the streets on the eve of the Battle of Berlin. All the looting, rape, and slaughter that followed? The starvation and disease? They were acceptable losses. We never thought twice about how our war against the Machine killed our neighbors. We didn’t care what happened to the children of Berlin until the angels in the Soviet army started kidnapping ours.”

“We did what we could,” Herr Entspannt said gently.

“It wasn’t enough!” Herr Lärche snarled into his newspaper.



“This is a strange time and place for a confession.” If he was shocked by this sudden outpouring of emotion from a fellow demon, he didn’t choose to play along.

“It’s such a curse, our memory. I remember the face of every prisoner I delivered to Gleiwitz to fuel whatever God-Machine project the Nazis’ mission there was meant to mask. I perfectly recall the terror of the humans as they tried to escape the falling bombs and then their anguish as they picked through the rubble to pull out their loved ones. I can’t forget how our next door neighbor’s daughter screamed herself hoarse while those Red dogs killed her father and raped her mother. I wish I could, Herr Entspannt.”

“Do you think maybe you’re doing this because you secretly hope the angels will catch you at it? One last act of sabotage that lets you go down fighting the way Herr Lichtmauer did?”

“Perhaps. I don’t feel self-destructive, and yet here I am preparing to sneak into KGB headquarters in East Berlin to kidnap the one person who will instantly recognize me as a demon.”

“Your mind is set?”

“Yes.”

“Well good,” said a woman’s voice behind them. “I’d hate to have told my boss that I was going to my grandmother’s funeral for no reason at all.”

Herr Lärche turned and saw a middle aged woman he didn’t recognize, as well as a red-haired man in his early 20s.

“It isn’t a swan song mission if you survive it,” said the redhead.

Herr Lärche pointed at the woman and then at the redhead. “Frau Spiegel and Herr Rotbraun.”

Both nodded.

“Are Herr Mitternacht and Frau Gift here, as well?” Herr Lärche asked, suddenly hopeful.

Frau Spiegel shook her head. “My husband wanted to come, but someone has to take care of the children in case this operation goes badly.”

“And no one’s seen Frau Gift in at least ten years,” Herr Rotbraun added. “Either she’s gone dark or she’s not in Berlin anymore.”

“This operation,” Herr Lärche repeated. “Does that mean you’re going to help me?”

“We still owe you for 1945, even if this is easily the stupidest thing you’ve ever convinced us do,” Frau Spiegel said gravely.


Herr Lärche looked at each of his friends. “What’s our plan?”

In moments, they were all staring at Herr Entspannt.

The Messenger sighed a little too dramatically. “If we must do this, we do it soft and smooth. No noise, no light shows, no trail of corpses leading away from a smoking crater.”

“Agreed,” said Herr Lärche.

“I’ll pull some strings with my Agency to get some good skins. Rotbraun, you’re going to play private eye. Track Max’s routine. We need to be able to predict a time and place when he’ll be alone or nearly so. Spiegel, I need you to identify likely angels



near KGB headquarters. Stop smirking. I don't want you to stir up a hornet's nest in the process. I have to live on that side of town, remember?"

"The Americans aren't the only ones who can fight proxy wars," Frau Spiegel said, still smirking.

"What about me?" Herr Lärche asked.

"I need you to sit tight until phase two. If Max gets one glimpse of you before we're ready, this mission is over before it's begun."

Herr Lärche allowed himself a small frown but said nothing.

Herr Entspannt turned his attention to Herr Lärche with an expression that belied his apparent youth. "One more thing before we start. Our debt to you only extends as far as helping you get Max out of East Berlin, and we may have to give him some pretty rough treatment to accomplish that. Once we cross the border, he's your son, your problem. If he lets himself get picked up by the CIA or blows up a factory or escapes back to East Berlin, we're not going to get the ring back together to rescue him a second time. Are we understood?"

"Yes, of course."

IV.

Lärche, now, said Herr Entspannt's voice in Herr Lärche's mind.

Herr Lärche walked purposefully up the stairs leading to the KGB headquarters. The cover he wore was a middle-aged man with just enough social connections to low-level Soviet agents to seem vaguely familiar to the intelligence community without any complicating professional post. In short, he could be anything from a minor functionary to a powerful player whose security clearance was so high that most of the KGB weren't even allowed to know what it was.

The two soldiers guarding the front door challenged him in broken Russian, asking his name and business.

Local boys. The KGB doesn't have enough personnel in the city to waste them on jobs like this.

Herr Lärche reminded himself that although that made this situation easier, he would soon face more vigilant opposition.

"Rinat Tokaryev," Herr Lärche said in flawless Russian, flashing a wallet. "I'm here to see Colonel Zakharov."

He noted the spark of recognition in their eyes as his deception wormed its way into their minds. They had seen a badge where there had only been a flap of leather. That glimpse wouldn't normally have been enough to convince them, but he had included an additional twist on the knobs of their minds to make them certain he was in charge here. They had no idea what rank he held, but they were confident that it was much higher than their own.

The soldiers saluted smartly. "Yes, sir. The reception area is right through these doors."

One of them even held the door open for him.

The receptionist looked up from her typewriter as he entered. Herr Lärche waited until the door was shut firmly behind him before speaking.



“Good afternoon. I have an appointment with your commander. Rinat Tokaryev is my name.”

She consulted an appointment book that sat open on her desk. Herr Lärche gently short-circuited her mind, showed her what she was looking for. The receptionist nodded.

“Three fifteen. It should be about ten minutes. Please sign your name in the visitor log. Would you care to take a seat over there until Colonel Zakharov is ready?”

Herr Lärche picked up the pen as if to write his name in the log. A flicker of power, and the receptionist lost interest in him. Once she was sufficiently distracted, he set down the pen and leaned over to read the next entry in the appointment book.

“*No lucky gap in the schedule,*” he told his ring through Herr Entspannt’s remote link.

“*The colonel is a busy man, alas,*” came the Messenger’s reply. “*Did you catch the name, Lärche? Spiegel can set up an elaborate chain of events keep him from keeping his appointment.*”

“*Herr Komarov,*” Herr Lärche told them.

“*Shit,*” came the reply — from Frau Spiegel, this time. “*Guys, that’s him. Max’s guardian angel. What the fuck is he doing here? Max is a good ten miles away.*”

“*You have to love those Shield threat assessment instincts,*” Herr Rotbraun noted drily.

“*Do we abort, Entspannt?*” Herr Lärche asked.

“*No.*” Frau Spiegel. “*Just stay in cover and you should be fine.*”

“*Proceed, Lärche,*” said Herr Entspannt.

Herr Lärche took a seat in a part of the waiting room that wasn’t easily visible from the reception area, unfolded the newspaper he had brought with him, and pretended to read while watching the second hand on the wall clock count down his remaining minutes.

“*I’m on my way to the club with the boys,*” Herr Rotbraun announced. “*I have a feeling none of them will hold their vodka very well, tonight.*”

Herr Lärche silently reviewed his approach. He only needed the briefest skin-to-skin contact with Colonel Zakharov to carry out his role in the operation, but the way Herr Rotbraun told it, even that might be difficult. The colonel was a paranoid and suspicious man who wouldn’t talk to any stranger privately unless his angelic handler told him to. There would be no friendly handshake, and he wasn’t likely to forget an attempt at forced contact — never a good prospect when an angel was involved, even if the man didn’t keep a loaded revolver on his person at all times. That probably left Herr Lärche with his old cigarette tricks.

“Herr Tokaryev?” the receptionist called.

Herr Lärche closed the newspaper and stood up.

She smiled. “Right this way.”

Herr Lärche smelled the cigar smoke even before he reached Colonel Zakharov’s office. A man in a black suit was walking in the other direction. He simply nodded at Herr Lärche, and only a demon’s self-control prevented him from doing anything other than touching the brim of his hat in mute reply.



“What does Komarov look like?” Herr Lärche demanded through the shared link.

“He’s kind of a middle-aged man,” came Herr Rotbraun’s reply. *“Favors black suits. Insufferably polite.”*

“You didn’t tell me he looks exactly like Herr Lichtmauer’s last cover, Spiegel.”

“It’s not relevant,” Herr Enstpannt said. *“Lichtmauer is dead, taken by the angels. Even if the Machine put him in an identical body, he’s not our old circle mate. He’s an agent of the Enemy.”*

“Herr Lärche is right to worry,” Herr Rotbraun noted. *“If Komarov is here, Lärche could be walking into a trap.”*

“He’s cut off my best route out, so it’s too late now,” Herr Lärche told them as the receptionist turned the doorknob.

The office itself was smaller than Herr Lärche had expected, but it nevertheless showed hints of its occupant’s influence. A fine hardwood desk, several silver-plated pens in elegant stands, and even a small liquor cabinet. The colonel himself was fat and balding, with a sheen of sweat on his forehead.

The receptionist excused herself and closed the door behind her.

“Herr Tokaryev, was it?”

“Yes, Colonel,” Herr Lärche said, holding out his hand.

The colonel made no motion to take it. He was frowning, uncertain.

“Lärche, he still hasn’t left the building,” Frau Spiegel warned.

“I’m outside now,” Herr Enstpannt announced. *“I’ll put the guards in an argumentative mood to hopefully draw him outside, but you need to hurry, Lärche.”*

Herr Lärche would have broken into a nervous sweat if he had lacked a demon’s self-control. He withdrew his hand and sat in one of the chairs on his side of the desk.

“I’m an associate of Herr Komarov.”

“Forgive me if I am skeptical.”

The colonel opened a desk drawer without breaking eye contact. Herr Lärche expected the man to pull out a revolver, but instead he only removed a box of cigars. “Do you smoke, Herr Tokaryev?”

That gave Herr Lärche pause. He and Herr Lichtmauer had used that sign for years to identify each other in unfamiliar covers.

The countersign was out of his mouth before he could stop himself, “I’ve been meaning to quit, Colonel.”

Zakharov snapped the box closed and held out his hand. “What can I do for you, Herr Tokaryev?”

A thousand possibilities screamed through Herr Lärche’s mind, but Herr Enstpannt’s drowned them out.

“He’s back in, Lärche! Get out now!”

Herr Lärche took the proffered hand and shook it.

“It was so nice to have finally met you, Colonel, but I must be going,” he announced as he opened the door and slipped into the hall.

Herr Lärche closed the door behind him and ignited the flames that would consume the colonel's memory of the encounter. As he reached the waiting area, he glimpsed the receptionist staring his way, but there was no sign of Herr Komarov. Herr Lärche reached out and turned a dial in her mind. She saw something through a nearby window and stared at it as if nothing in the world were more interesting. Walking as calmly as he could, Herr Lärche slipped past her and made for the front door. As he touched the doorknob, he felt a sudden, overwhelming Aetheric pressure coming from the colonel's office — the unmistakable signature of an angel manifesting one of its powers.

"Please tell me you're not still in that office," Entspannt said.

"I'll be clear in a moment," Herr Lärche assured them.

Herr Lärche turned the knob and strolled into the afternoon sun. The guards saluted him, no doubt remembering him from his arrival. He saluted them back, and their memories of his departure curled, melted, and turned to ash like incriminating photographs tossed into a fire.

V.

Herr Lärche sat in a black sedan just outside the house where Stepan Komarov ostensibly lived. Even at this distance the demon could sense the truth. The building's peculiar arrangement of gutters and eaves concealed the Infrastructure that allowed the angel to remain materialized.

One of the KGB heavies tapped on the outside of his window.

Herr Lärche rolled it down a crack. "Yes, lieutenant?"

"All three teams are in position, Colonel Zakharov." The man's eyes glowed a faint green, like a cat's caught in car headlights. "It doesn't look like anyone is inside. He must have fled already."

"Perhaps, but he surely didn't have time to destroy all evidence. Storm it. Tear everything apart. My sources say he often hid objects in the gutters. Rip them down."

"Yes, Colonel."

Herr Lärche rolled up his window, again. "It looks like we're in for a long night. Driver, take me home. I need to make some phone calls."

"Yes, sir."

The sedan lurched forward and soon left Komarov's house behind.

"Any movement, Rotbraun?"


"Not yet, Lärche. Max's guardian is still giving me the evil eye."

"Give the colonel's men some time to smash the furniture."

Ten minutes later, Herr Lärche's car pulled up to the front Colonel Zakharov's house. Inside, the demon knew the colonel was asleep on the couch, a nearly empty vodka bottle on the table next to him — Frau Spiegel's rough handiwork. He would wake up late the next morning with no memory of anything that happened after that burglar slipped into his living room and punched him in the jaw.

The demon got out of the car. "You go home and get some sleep, too. I won't have further use of you tonight."





“Yes, sir.”

Herr Lärche walked slowly toward the house until the car was well out of sight and another one arrived. This one was driven by a non-descript soldier in the uniform of a Grepo. Herr Lärche got inside and shed the face he had borrowed from Colonel Zakharov.

“Komarov just left in an awful hurry,” Herr Rotbraun announced. *“Bring around the cab. We’re on our way outside.”*

“Less than a block away,” Herr Entspannt responded. *“Spiegel? Lärche?”*

“On our way to the checkpoint,” Herr Lärche assured them.

“It’s almost over, Spiegel,” Herr Lärche said to the driver.

Frau Spiegel wrinkled her nose at him in the rearview mirror. “I won’t believe it until we’re home and rid of these skins,” she said, the baritone sounding strange to his ears.

Herr Lärche couldn’t help but agree with her. Komarov couldn’t possibly be Lichtmauer, and yet he and his pet colonel used the same recognition signal that Lärche and Lichtmauer had used during the war. His cover was identical to the one he had worn in 1945, aged exactly as it would have in the intervening years.

Did you survive the hunters after all? Have you spent the last fifteen years infiltrating the Machine’s tools in East Berlin?

But then Herr Lärche thought of the Infrastructure at the house. A demon didn’t need that, wouldn’t have known it was under attack.

A wall of light crashed down directly in front of the car. Frau Spiegel slammed on the brakes, but even moving at city speeds she couldn’t stop. The hood of the car crumpled from the impact, and only her reflexive defenses prevented both of them from being killed instantly.

As the demons staggered out of the vehicle, the wall of light coalesced into a humanoid figure with wings like burning magnesium.

“Where is he?” the angel shrieked at them. “Where is Max? What have you done with him?”

“He’s safe,” Herr Lärche told the angel. “If you harm us, he will not be.”

Herr Lärche caught a glimpse of Frau Spiegel reaching for her gun. The angel saw it, too. Frau Spiegel vanished into a sphere of white light so bright it made Herr Lärche flinch.

The angel smiled knowingly, its teeth almost as painful to look at as its wings. “You wouldn’t destroy the very asset you risked so much to acquire. You wouldn’t hurt a hair on the head of your precious son.”

If the angel knows, then the Machine knows — or soon will.

It had been a trap after all, and his ring had walked right into it. Herr Lärche prepared to cast aside all pretense of humanity as Lichtmauer did. He tried not to think about what would happen to Angelika when he did not return, about what would happen to their three, soon to be four, children.

My ring will look after them. Who thought when we were blowing up factories and assassinating Nazis together that we would one day be caring for one another’s children?

The angel's rage turned to shock as its wings went suddenly dark. The sphere of light that held Frau Spiegel vanished, and the Destroyer collapsed. For a single moment, the angel was Komarov again, and then it abruptly vanished. A sound like distant thunder echoed from the direction of the Shield's house.

"We need a pick you to pick us up, Entspannt," Herr Lärche linked.

"What happened?"

Herr Lärche sat down on the pavement next to Frau Spiegel. She was still breathing as if in sleep, already stirring.

"Komarov. He's gone, now. Catastrophic Infrastructure failure."

"I thought we agreed — no building-leveling explosions," Herr Entspannt chided.

Herr Lärche considered admitting that he'd had nothing to do with the explosion, but something held him back.

"A last minute improvisation. Sorry."

Had this been the Machine's plan all along — to let the demons rescue Max?

What are we bringing back to West Berlin?

He lifted his head at the sound of an approaching car, half-expecting three squads of Iron Comrades to converge on them. When the car door opened, though, Herr Rotbraun sat there waiting for them. A young man with copper wire for hair leaned against the Messenger as though passed out drunk.

Frau Spiegel sat up and climbed into the passenger seat without comment. Herr Lärche took the last remaining spot next to the sleeping soldier. He took the young man's hand in his own and stroked it gently as they drove away.

VI.

"Has the asset reached West Berlin?"

"Yes, Colonel," came the voice over the phone.

"Good. And the gas explosion at Herr Komarov's house?"

"The fire didn't leave much, but we found a body."

"Who else could it be? A pity. Keep me apprised, Captain."

Zakharov hung up and pressed the cold compress to his forehead to soothe the pounding there.

I knew I could still count on you, Herr Lärche.





Top Dog

Werewolf: the Forsaken (1969-1979 C.E.)

Meghan Fitzgerald

My name is Violetta Mazza, and I'm a goddamned werewolf.

But let me start at the beginning.

"It's a dog-eat-dog world, Vi." My father said this to me on a crisp, clear Saturday morning. He tapped his cigarette against the ceramic ashtray. A thin curling haze hung over the room, catching the sunlight streaming through the oversized bay window. "So long as you're top dog, you get what you want."

"No kidding, Dad." I indulged him with a smile.

"Hey, you may be a big shot out there, but in here you're still my little girl. So I'll give you all the advice I want. And I say, don't pass up the opportunity to eat them alive."

"I won't. And on the subject of eating, pass the bacon, would ya?" He slid the plate over with a chuckle.

On the television, Congresswoman Chisolm exhorted us to extend our compassion to the underprivileged, to fight for equality for all, and to choose morality over profit. My father blew smoke at the screen. "A colored woman for president?" he snorted. "That'll be the day."

"Why's that, exactly?" I talked around a mouthful of pork. The button needed pressing, so sue me, I pressed it. "Doesn't she have as much right to be top dog as anybody?"

He eyed me, then reached up to turn off the television set just as the crowd cheered. "You shouldn't talk about things you don't understand."

"Is it that she's black or a woman that's got a bug up your ass?" I pushed. "Five'll get you ten it's both."

"Don't get smart with me," he said, staring bullets across the table. "I should have known sending you back to school would be bad news."

"You wanted a lawyer in the family, you're getting one." I snapped at him, though it wasn't wise. "And I'm the best one for the job, and you know it."

“What I know is you should be married by now, that’s what I know.” My father stood up, looming over the room in his dark suit and clipped beard. His square jaw and the streaks of gray in his black hair made him seem like some kind of king. He punctuated his tirade with thrusts of his cigarette. “Everybody’s talking about my daughter, the smart-ass troublemaker who won’t get herself a husband. And now this? You gonna go around spouting this hippie bullshit to all your cousins next? You’ll be the death of me, Violetta.”

I stood up too, an angry heat rising in my face. “I’m doing this for *you*, for all of us. You can’t expect me to get another degree *and* have somebody’s babies at the same time!”

“Would it kill you to at least *date* somebody?” The storm clouds receded somewhat, but they kept roiling under the surface. “What about Dominic’s kid, what’s-his-name. Benny. You like him, right?”

I willed my heart to stop hammering. I couldn’t tell if I was pissed off or poised to flee. But I had enough experience lying through my teeth to put a lid on it. “Yeah, he’s all right.”

“I’m gonna have Jeannie set you up a date with him.”

A long puff on his smoke signaled the end of the discussion and I thought better than to protest. One night sitting awkwardly at a movie with a boy (and a lousy conversationalist, to boot) was better than a full-blown argument with Dad right now. “Fine.”

He smiled, pleased, and ground out the butt of his cigarette in the ashtray. “That’s my girl. Come here and give your father a kiss, huh?” I went around the table and kissed him on the cheek. He took his leave, said I could show myself out whenever I was ready.

I put on my plaid jacket and matching hat, tucking thick brown hair behind my ears, then stood at the window munching bacon from the plate idly. Part of me berated the rest, saying I shouldn’t have backed down, should’ve just told him the truth and walked out. But it’d break his heart, and maybe more than that besides. The thought paralyzed me with fear, which only turned up the volume on the castigation.

I twitched the drapes aside to look out over the neighborhood. The Verrazano Bridge towered like a throned queen over the brownstone skyline. Traffic honked a familiar chorus while the sounds of a garage band hitting the guitars early wafted over from a few blocks up. A couple of guys shouted each other down by the corner over a double-parked car. My father’s domain, Bay Ridge. I’m a West Side girl at heart, though.


In case you’re wondering, I wasn’t a werewolf. Not yet, anyway.

• • •

“Do you recall what was revealed the day the music died?” the radio demanded in between spirited piano riffs. “Turn that off, will ya?” I snapped. The cabbie glanced at me in the rearview mirror and obliged. His wrinkled brown face with its heavy bags under the eyes looked like somebody’s idea of a human raisin.

I swallowed a few aspirin without water and decided I’d been working too hard. For hours now, every little sound exploded in my head, setting it to pounding. Neon signs glared like naked suns. The half-moon sliced open the black sky, shouldering past the





stars to stake its claim. The hypnotic pattern of light, dark, light as we sped through the Battery Tunnel churned my stomach, and I could have sworn I saw something scuttling across the curve of graffiti-covered walls to keep up with the taxicab. Must be getting ill, I told myself.

I rolled down the window and watched Brooklyn pass by as we emerged from the tunnel, all its billboards and brick towers rising like a bleak forest. A block past the 68th precinct's ugly new building, I told the driver to stop and let me out. A sleek black Chevelle parked across the street from the station, sitting empty — but I knew that car. It belonged to Lou Alvino, one of my father's associates. I mussed my hair and sprinted to the station's front door, throwing it open and bursting in to plead for someone to catch the cabbie who tried to steal my purse, please, do something!

I sent an officer on a mission to file paperwork, giving a report I made up on the fly so I could look around. Most of the blues were on the telephone and ignored me as I slipped away from the din to find quieter business. I don't know how I expected to find Lou, but I imagined I could hear his nasal voice even through the bustle and walls. Instinct drove me, around corners and up a flight of stairs, until I *did* hear him — Lou and somebody else, probably a cop, behind an office door at the end of a vacant hall. Eavesdropping from half a city block away through thick wood and glass, totally normal, right? I didn't think about it.

“...losing business to this dirt bag, and that's unacceptable,” Lou said conversationally.

“I understand,” said the other voice. It was deep and rough, and hearing it set my teeth on edge. My pulse quickened and my nostrils flared as if an offensive odor had wafted through, though all I smelled was dust and old paint. I pressed myself against the wall and held my breath, as though the man behind that voice would hear my heart beating and barge through the door to tear it out. “You'd like us to stir the pot, make the place...*unpalatable*. Herd the sheep with their wallets to your waiting arms.”

“Right on,” said Lou. “You'll be there in person, head things up, right?”

“Of course.” Papers, or maybe bills, shuffled.

“It's the Hyperborea. On 17th, by the pier. Midnight. Don't be late, now.”

I froze. Clapped a hand over my own mouth to keep from making any noise. Shit. No. Shit. I had to get out of there, get to a phone. I heard someone's hand, Lou's hand, on the doorknob. I slunk back around the corner, digging my fingernails into my arms to keep still. Something about the cop's voice made me want to move, to break something, to bare my teeth. Why?

Lou's footsteps echoed halfway down the hall and then he got onto an elevator. I waited until he was gone and pushed open the door to slip back into the stairwell.

Deep Voice was standing there on the other side, grinning at me.

I gasped. My skin crawled, I wanted to tackle him and send him tumbling headfirst down the stairs. Instead I played the vacant confusion card.

“Funny place for a girl like you,” he said. He had blond hair cropped short, a receding hairline, and a face like a Roman bust. How had he gotten here so fast, so quietly?

“Sorry, I got myself lost looking for the ladies’ room,” I said. “Care to show me out?”

He lunged at me, forced me up against the cinder block wall with an arm like a steel beam. Our hurried breathing sounded like bellows, my peripheral vision swam with indistinct shapes. I inched my hand toward the pistol in my purse, shoving down panic.

He pushed his face toward mine and I got ready to clench my jaw, but instead of shoving his tongue down my throat he *sniffed* me, long and loud. “What the hell—”

“I was right,” he said, a whisper like a roar. “You’re close.”

“You got any idea who my father is?” I said. I expected to sound like a quivering mouse but it came out steady. “When he hears about—”

“Doesn’t matter.” His other hand closed like a noose around my wrist. “You’re one of us, little nuzusul. And you’re coming home with me.”

“Dream on,” I spat at him, feeling sick. I struggled to reach the zipper on my purse, to slip out of his grasp, but his strength was irrefutable. Absurd, almost. He yanked me toward the stairs.

“Just what the fuck is this, Riegel?” said a stern voice from the end of the hall. We both turned. A cop in a suit was standing there, her hand halfway to the gun at her hip, her gaze accusing.

“None of your business, Detective,” said Deep Voice — Riegel — but I felt him tense up. I stomped on his foot, hoping to loosen his grip enough to break free, but he barely seemed to notice.

“I beg to differ. Let her go.” She rested her hand fully on her piece. A long, hot moment stretched by. Finally, the pressure on my wrist eased and I pulled away from him. He stood in the doorway, staring at the detective like he was about to rush her. Instead, he gave me a slow, knowing smile and vamoosed into the stairwell.

She didn’t move until he was good and gone. Then she approached me. She was a head taller, with broad shoulders and tired eyes. “I’m Detective Dimera. Are you all right? What are you doing here?”

“I’m fine.” But I heard my own blood pumping like I’d turned my ears inside-out. Something wasn’t right. “I made a wrong turn.”

“A wrong turn up a floor?” She shook her head. “Regardless, Riegel was grossly out of line. As usual.”

“He just came at me,” I said, straightening my jacket and running a hand through my disheveled hair.


“Wouldn’t be the first time.” She sighed and muttered, “It’s enough to make you want to blow the damn whistle all over again.” Then she gently but firmly put a hand on my shoulder. “Come on. Back downstairs with you.”

• • •

“You know and I know it’s a raid, Angie.”

Cigarette smoke and the regular passage of headlights cutting into the darkness weren’t helping my headache, stuffed as I was into a cramped phone booth. I clutched the receiver with white knuckles and a fucking prayer, scanning the streets for any sign that I’d been followed.





“Come on, Vi, I can’t just close down on your say-so.” Angie and her mohawk were good people, but I couldn’t exactly confide in her when it came to my father’s business. She loathed paying the “extra tax” on the liquor and rent every month but it was that or get shut down, so she ponied up. I wasn’t about to tell her I was in with any of that. Her open doors meant too much. “You got any proof?”

“I told you, I overheard some fuzz. Just take the night off, would you please?”

“Sorry, sugar. The vibe is flowing tonight. And if they come, well.” She snapped her gum. “I got a bar full of flammable shit and a bitchin’ insurance policy, if you get me.”

I shut my eyes, trying to dull the sensations pressing down on me from all over. “Is Sashka there?”

“Hang on. Yeah, she’s here. You want me to put her on?”

I almost said yes. Almost jumped at the chance to tell Sashka to go home and extract myself from the whole thing. But I couldn’t do that to Angie, to the rest of them, the only people in the world who knew me for me. After running into that creep at the station, knowing money and power changing hands gave this raid even more teeth, I couldn’t let it ignite into another Stonewall. People were gonna get hurt. *My* people. I’d had enough.

“Nah. Thanks, Angie. I’ll see you later.”

“Catch you on the flip side, Vi.” She hung up.

I didn’t risk a taxi or even an unlicensed car, not around here. I took the subway like an everyday New Yorker for once. My father always said the subway was where rats went to die and people went to become rats. Hard to prove him wrong, down there in the tunnels that smelled like piss and rot, with their flickering lights and press of sweaty flesh. Ordinarily I wouldn’t have paid it all much mind, but with my senses cranked up, it was nightmarish. Once clear of the platform in Chelsea I booked it on foot, three short blocks and three long ones, keeping my hand close to my purse in case the pimps and dealers got any ideas. It was almost eleven-thirty by the time I turned onto 17th and the sour stink of the Hudson wafted in to me clear as day.

I caught an overpowering whiff of sweat and wet dog just before something catapulted out of an alley behind me with a bowel-shaking snarl and collided with something else halfway across the street. I had my gun out a heartbeat later, drawing down on the scuffle in the headlights of a pickup truck that screeched around the corner and stopped just shy of the brawlers.

One of them lashed out at the other, with what I thought was a knife. Copper and salt assaulted my nose and I reeled. I caught a glimpse of a uniform, blond hair — it was Riegel — and then it fucking *wasn’t*. He staggered back and in the sickly yellow light his limbs warped and distended, impossibly long and hairy, casting a shadow like a cancerous horror bursting from a cocoon. I shuddered violently as a shaft of moonlight stabbed down out of cloud cover to pierce me through the heart.

Voices shouted but they sounded distant and thin compared to the rushing in my ears, the grinding of my joints, the heaving in my stomach, the unbearable stretching of my skin over muscles and bones that were the wrong size. The agony of it forced my dinner up and I puked all over the sidewalk, my throat burning with acid. I could’ve sworn I was dying, but then my head whipped around toward a host of scents that lanced through the tumult like a flare exploding into view. Cigarette smoke. English Leather.



Gunpowder. Deodorant, and a pungent meaty smell I'd never acknowledged before but was unmistakably familiar.

Dad.

He's here. The thought rampaged through my mind. The first wave was panic. He'd see me here, he'd know the truth about me, he'd grab me by the hair and drag me home and I'd never see the light of day again. But the second wave crashed in and drowned that out. He had the balls to show up here and watch, or worse, while these crooked police dragged innocent people — *my people* — into the streets and beat them bloody, for the crime of existing, on *his fucking order*. For what? A petty heap of bread? Some dam inside me that I never knew I'd built crumbled and let out a flood of blind white-hot fury. Then I was moving.

The clouds shifted and the streets were dark again, but I had the scent to guide me true. It hid behind a veneer of chrome and leather but I tore that away, smashing the window as easily as tearing through wrapping paper, wrenching the door open. Through a surreal haze I saw my father, his eyes grown wide, sitting in the passenger seat. "Vi? What the... what the fuck are you doing here—"

"*Me?*" I reached out and seized him by the lapels, dragging him out of the car. I barely noticed the claws jutting from my fingers, gouging holes in the expensive cloth. "You son of a bitch, you tell me, what the *fuck* are *you* doing here?"

I smelled fear and confusion, an acrid lure. He squinted, trying to see me clearly in the dark, shoving against me. Somehow I held him easily, bent over so I could snarl inches from his face. "But you... no. No, tell me you're not here for them, that you're not in with these... these..."

"*People!*" The scream ripped out of my throat into the air. "We are people just like everyone else! And we're done sucking from the tit of your goddamned empire, you hear me? Do you *hear me?*"

His breath came in ragged gasps as I shook him, like a dirty blanket. "Yeah! Yeah, I hear you! Violetta, let's...let's talk about this. Just let go, will ya?" He stopped struggling and held up his hands. "I swear, I'll end this, I'll pull all the money out of the clubs, I promise you. Okay? Okay, sweetheart?"


I *tasted* the deceit on him. A putrid stain on my tongue as I breathed his false words. "You're lying," I barked at him. I threw him to the pavement. A glut of power in my legs, in my jaws, ached to be unleashed. A need to fasten my teeth around his throat made my mouth water. This time, the pain of changing barely registered. I lunged.

My muzzle fastened around something that burst with warm fluid when I sank my fangs into it. I heard my father's strangled scream as he bled. I saw his face go slack, pale with shock. And then Violetta fled to let something else take over.

• • •

I came to coughing and gagging. A voice said, "There you are, pup. Rise and shine."

I rolled over on something flat and hard, spitting. My mouth was bitter with bloody remnants. Disjointed recollections drifted back to me in bits and pieces. Then I sat straight up. "Dad!" Tearing flesh, crunching bone...



I brought up my hands to stare at them. No claws, now. I sat in the bed of the pickup, and the rumble beneath me said the engine was running. My headache was gone, but the wealth of smells and sensations remained.

A figure moved out of the shadows beyond the headlights, a wiry woman with an afro and a weird amulet. “We had to take you down before you went off on somebody else. Show and tell’s over for now, we need to get you out of here before that Anshega comes back with friends.”

“Where’s my father?” I demanded.

She held my gaze firmly. I fought the instinct to look down, to let her win the silent contest. Eventually, though, it was like she’d pushed me and I’d fallen. I broke eye contact, feeling defeated. “Talk later, move now,” she said. “You up and howled to the whole damn neighborhood that you were here, those evil mothers are looking for you and they got your scent. Only so much the pack can do to keep them off us.”

I glanced back up at her. “What’s going on, can you tell me that much? What...am I? Who are you?”

“I’m Destiny.” She tapped her amulet, some kind of stylized sigil. “Of the Hudson Wolves. The pier’s our territory. And you’re Uratha. You’re a werewolf, friend.”

A gang, then. That word, Uratha, it was familiar. A story I’d known once and forgotten. It made hearing “werewolf” sound normal to me. But like a punch to the gut I realized I had more immediate problems. “Wait, what time is it?”

She rolled her eyes and checked her watch, impatient. “Eleven fifty-five. What does it matter?”

“We gotta get to the club. The raid’s on at midnight.” I slid down from the truck bed, trying to ignore the stench of blood all over my clothes.

“Look,” said Destiny, glancing around. “Normally we’d be right there with you, wasting these dogs. But we got a cub on our hands and that trumps everything. You’re a target, you dig?”

“I get it. So I’ll make you a deal. You help me stop Riegel and his people, I go wherever you want.” I met her eyes again and she stared back at me, but this time I dug in my heels. Sashka was in there.

After a moment, Destiny flicked her gaze off to the side. “We got ourselves a real champ here, huh?” She rested a hand on her hip, giving me a smirk. “All right, half-moon, you got a plan? Or at least a name?”

“My name’s Vi. And yeah, I got a plan.”

• • •

12:06. Chaos and noise should have spilled into the street, police forcing people to line up and present themselves for “examination,” patrons fighting back with chairs and bottles. Instead, it was quiet, although a few cop cars were parked along the curb — empty. I stood alone outside the familiar club with its neon sign, depicting a shining sun downing a margarita behind the word *Hyperborea* in faux-Greek lettering. The Hudson Wolves were out there somewhere, watching from inky shadows between scattered points of halfhearted light. I wanted to go inside, but instinct and common sense both



vetoed the idea. Trying to put aside the itch of anxiety that something was off here, I did the first thing that came to mind.

“Hey, asshole!” I shouted. “Remember me?”

Thirty agonizing seconds ticked by. Just when I started to think they weren’t in there after all, the door swung open and the Anshega, as Destiny had called him, stepped out. “Violetta,” he said. His rough baritone still scratched at my ears, making my hackles rise. “Why am I not surprised?”

So he did his homework, big fucking deal. Was I supposed to be impressed? I grabbed onto that indignation and fanned its flame, letting it blossom back into fury. I couldn’t think or talk about Dad unless I was angry. Just... not *too* angry. “If you know who I am then you know who my father is. Or was, I should say.” His eyebrow twitched. “That’s right. Your agreement is null and void.”

“Yeah?” He leaned against the wall, under the sign. It gave him an eerie jaundiced look. “I suppose you think I should just take my pack and go home, do you?”

“Well, it’d be nice.” I shrugged. “But no, I’m not that stupid. I’m here to offer you a better deal.”

“By all means, do.”

I spread my hands. “Me. I know what you’re after. So you leave this place the fuck alone, I go with you, nice and peaceful.”

“Mm.” He stroked his chin in a parody of thoughtfulness. “Say I decline. What’s to stop me from taking you *and* this place?”

I gestured out into the darkness. “Them.” On cue, a chorus of dissonant howls rose from the alleys, echoing down the cobblestones of 17th Street.

His casual posture straightened ever so slightly, the tilt of his chin raised a fraction. “I see,” he said. “And I’m to believe this mess of Forsaken Urdur will just hand you over?”

“It’s not their decision.” I stared him down. He was a good foot taller, but I had my fury and my pride. They would have to do. “They don’t speak for me any more than you do. Or than my father did.”


He visibly weighed the options. I had no idea if anyone was even left inside to protect. I thought I heard faint voices, but the pier’s late-night rabble made it hard to pinpoint their source. “Think about it,” I added. “You got your claws in the police already, how much more reach would you have with the Mazza family attorney in your pocket?”

“You make a good case,” he mused. “All right. It’s a deal.” He came toward me, unhooking his handcuffs from his belt. I stepped back. “Insurance,” he said.

“Not until everyone’s out. What the hell are your people doing in there?”

He clicked on his walkie-talkie and spoke into it: “Riegel here. The operation’s over. Bring everyone out.”

I hovered near the curb as the door opened and a handful of officers escorted a stream of people out — my friends. I studied each face one by one, with anticipation squeezing my heart inside my chest. Where was she, where was she.... There!



I didn't give Riegel the satisfaction of breaking our standoff, but Sashka was there. Whole. Safe. Relief loosened my tense muscles, but more than that, triumph. I'd won over fear, over this bastard's power play, over the family. Now I just had to hold on until the Wolves intercepted us on the road.

"Satisfied?" said Riegel, gesturing for his men to back off from the group, who watched the proceedings with curiosity and confusion.

I eyed the cops sidelong and gave him a nod. I let him push me up against the cruiser and cuff me, like a real arrest. He wasn't exactly gentle, but he didn't hurt me either. Still, the cold steel restraining me woke something primal and imperious inside me, rising like a geyser, demanding to be freed. I clenched my teeth and fists both to keep from immediately taking another form and casting the petty shackles aside.

Riegel was ushering me into the car when a howl rang out over the street, sharp with warning. I twisted to see an enormous brown wolf tearing across the cobblestones at full speed, several others at its heels. The Anshega reacted faster than I did, seizing me by the cuffs and drawing his piece. He pushed the barrel up against my head and his finger hovered over the trigger. "No closer," he growled. Again I struggled to keep my human form, with Sashka's eyes on me.

I had a fleeting few seconds to notice that she and the others were oddly calm about all this. They just watched, clustered by the door. Before I could think that through, the brown wolf convulsed up onto its hind legs and turned into a man, though fangs still jutted from his mouth. "Spirits!" he shouted. "A rite, they're possessed!" At the same time, the pressure of the gun's barrel vanished and metal bits clattered on the pavement. "Fuck," Riegel had time to spit out, before a sleek black shape darted out from between two cruisers and tackled him off me.

I stumbled off-balance and caught myself gracelessly, thumping up against the car. *Possessed?* I looked at Sashka, who stared back at me without recognition, her blue eyes strange in the sign's yellow glow. "Sashka!" I called out.

She broke away from the group, as the other werewolves clashed in the street and the sounds of furious battle exploded all around us, guttural roars of pain and rage, claws scraping against stone. She came to me and reached up a hand to touch my face. "I see you in her mind," she — it — said. "She feels for you. She fears for you."

I met that alien gaze and shivered. In all the years I'd known her, she'd never looked at me like that, like a stranger walking into a place I didn't belong. "Can she hear me?" I snarled quietly.

"No," it said, and a subtle menace oozed from the word. "She sleeps within."

"Good." I let out a ragged, wordless shout and changed, muscles and bones bulking up to monstrous size. My wrists strained against the handcuffs and then shattered them to pieces. I grabbed the thing that looked like Sashka by the shoulders, but hesitated. Couldn't bring myself to slam her against the car despite the instinct that pounded through me. "Give her back!" I bellowed instead.

"Why should I do this?" it asked, tilting its head to look up at me. "I serve, and in return I receive sustenance. To do as you demand would be to disobey."

"What *kind* of sustenance?"

“Fear,” it replied, as though it were the simplest thing in the world. “These Pure Ones terrify, intimidate. In their wake countless nightmares rule, and I will sup upon them. And so, I serve.”

“Not for nothing,” I said, “but that sounds like a shit deal.”

“You would have me serve you instead, Elodoth?” It sounded amused.

“Not at all.” I let go of it and folded my arms, towering over it instead. “Partner with me.”

It cocked its head. “Go on.”

The plan came to life as I spoke, as much blood-borne impulse as conscious idea. “I got a lot of smug bastards to teach a lesson after tonight. They’re gonna learn the hard way that Violetta Mazza’s top dog now and they answer to *me*. I will put the fear of God into them and so help me, anybody who doesn’t fall in line is fuckin’ wolf chow. You hang with me, you’ll never go hungry, I promise you that.”

“A hunt, then, in the manner of your kind.”

It felt right. “Yeah. A hunt.”

The thing with Sashka’s face didn’t change its expression, but it seemed to consider. “And in return?”

“Teach me.” I glanced down at one upturned palm, brutal claws curving out from long, thick fingers. “I get the feeling you can. Maybe that you should.” I looked back into its eyes. “And let her go.”

It bowed, like a knight or some such damn thing. “Bind me to your oath, then, Walker. I am ready.”


And I knew even as the words came out of Sashka’s mouth that it wasn’t just fancy talk — I could make it a true oath, one we wouldn’t soon break. I stepped closer, warping my body until we stood eye to eye again. “It’s a deal, then,” I said, and pulled the spirit into a kiss.

At first it was cold and unsettling, like kissing a doll, or a corpse. Then her hands came up to tangle in my hair and she leaned into it, and it was no longer the spirit but Sashka there in my arms. I pulled back after a moment. “Hey you.”

“Vi, what’s going on?” The sounds of fighting had died down behind us and I heard footsteps approach. I chanced a glance over my shoulder, dreading to find Riegel stalking toward us. Instead it was Destiny, grinning at me with a mouth full of blood.

I turned back, pushed a stray strand of long strawberry hair out of Sashka’s face. “We gotta talk.”





No Signal

Chronicles of Darkness

(2015-2016 C.E.)

Dennis Detwiller

Imogen called at 2:05 a.m. after the bars let out. There were no after-parties, and it was cold. Emily put it on speaker, on the edge of her bed, half asleep, legs in the air on the windowsill; freezing. Outside the window, past the moisture marks of her toes, the sky was a dull pink fading down to a hazy grey.

“Pick me up. I’m at the Waldbaum’s. IT’S SO COLD,” Imogen said, and coughed, and Emily could see plumes of arctic air, somewhere downtown near Hoboken, Dr. J’s, or the Juice Bar. Somewhere stupid. Skanking.

“Fuck no,” Emily said, “just in bed. Take a cab.”

“It’s four days before Christmas. It’s Hoboken. There’s no fuckin’ cabs, bitch.”

“Byeeee.”

Emily hung up.

The phone rang again, once, at 2:23 a.m. Emily didn’t get up. Finally, silence.

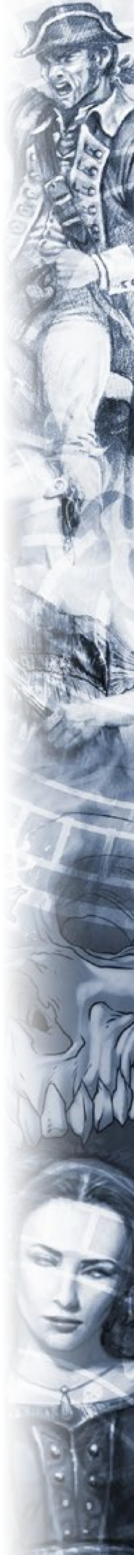
She dreamt of a running on a highway, dodging blurred lights in the night; roaring engines on all sides, and that final, meaty thud. A smash and flipping perspectives, and a red-brown blur and humming at the edges.

And then something was there with her, in her, moving. She woke and went pee and stood and looked in the mirror, and in the reflection, in the back, the time said 2:49 a.m. in reverse.

Later, she would know at about that time, someone dragged Imogen into an icy, weed-choked, empty lot near the Waldbaum’s, strangled her with her own tights, and then tried to put her body in a corrugated drainage pipe.

• • •

They were friends, but not *friends-friends*. She knew Imogen through high school, and reconnected in the most casual way after college, when she moved back to Jersey for the job at Fitness Authority. It was a job, at least. Imogen had to borrow money every month from ‘friends’, which meant she slept with various people in what an unkind soul might call a very casual form of prostitution.



Imogen was alright. That is, of course, until she was dead. It sounded shitty, but the whole police, parents, funeral thing was more of a minor inconvenience than anything else.

I mean, she milked it. And cried, and did all that shit. But really, what it came down to was that now she needed a new roommate. Fucking bummer.

The roommate was her main concern. That and dealing with Im's crap family showing up to take out all of her shit.

Until the calls.

• • •

In the dream, she shambled back to some version of life. It was seamless — as if she had started the dream from the other night by settling in to her bed and hitting play. The highway, the flipping, then the intruder, and the resurrection.

She wasn't herself. She was a man. A corpse-man. Thin red hair, pale skin, and a smile split by gaps. A patterned tattoo opened on the arm and bled, winding and snaking all over.

She was the man, and she wasn't. Something was in the man. In her. It was night, forever, and the machine needed them. It had plans.

Then awake instantly.

2:04 a.m. The phone jumped on the windowsill, buzzing like a bug. It spun and shook and finally, fell on to the bed.

Emily stretched her arm out but couldn't reach the phone without sitting up. Instead, she lay in bed with her arm open, ready to accept it, hanging in open space two feet from the phone as it buzzed. Nothing moved.

Her body was an orchestra of aches and pains.

"Fuck," she said, and her voice was deep from sleep.

She fell back asleep after the phone stopped ringing.

Cold air on her skin, across the tattoos she didn't have. Freezing air and sodium lights and the night, walking.

And the flip-knife was talking to her.

Then, again. Sometime later, the phone buzzed on her leg and she jumped up from the bed, stumbling, knocking over an ashtray and a two-liter of Diet Coke.


"Shit, shit, shit."

The Coke fizzed on the parquet floor and settled down, and she could see cigarette butts floating in the black liquid.

Later. She'd clean it tomorrow.

She ran her hands over her eyes and down her cheeks, then bent down and snatched up the phone

which continued to insist itself upon her. Outside the window the sky was a flat purple, split here and there by sodium lamps. Late night or early morning. No idea. Fuck.



The clock said unintelligible numbers, and it took her a second to realize she had knocked that over too. It was upside down.

2:23 a.m.

She flipped the phone open.

“What. Fuck. What?”

“Em?” The voice said, so fast, it was hard to tell if anyone was on the line at all. It was there, and gone instantly — if it was there at all. A woman. Or a man screaming, she thought, and suddenly felt like someone was watching her.

She turned and scanned the room. Shadows. Reflections off old cabinets. A sea of lumps of clothing on the ground traced to a pile emerging from a pull closet. A lone desk chair hung with a denim jacket.

“Hello?”

Click.

Bed. No dreams.

• • •

The lot was two blocks from the high rises at the river. An empty, freezing street without traffic. Two fences. New blacktop. Ice. Weeds. Nothing.

A field behind a portion of ruined chain link fence cluttered with chest-high reeds. Beyond it, the Waldbaum’s.

A meandering path cut by the residents of the condos tracked through the wasteland to emerge in the parking lot on the far side. Otherwise you had to walk all the way around, down past the Tunnel diner, and up an unfinished strip of shop fronts.

No one walked around.

Emily stopped at the gap in the fence, and the wind took her breath back and past her face. Reeds shook. Tan and dry and freezing. Winterdead.

Two meandering lumps of hills, with slight gaps that swung down and around.

Imogen died down there.

Emily closed her eyes in the wind, and behind them, an image resolved itself.

A stumbling retreat into the dark of the drain pipe. Red hair on thick grey forearms. The cold of water which never approaches the cold in the body. Empty eyes and a motivation like a snake’s need to strike.

She opened her eyes on the reeds as the wind shifted them again.

Then, time for work.

• • •

The dreams were bad now. They had moved from nightmares into something else. Deep water her mind had never shifted into before. Cold water. When the flip-knife came out. When the shape of the woman in the reeds struggled once more, and then fell in the dirt on her face, Emily woke; a second before the blood.

She sat up for a long time, drinking.



When the next call came, she was up, and it was almost like she was waiting for it. Emily grabbed the phone before the end of the first ring and flipped it open.

“What?” she said, and looked at the clock. 2:05 a.m. Emily was still drunk. Confused. She waited.

“Pick me up,” the voice said. The voice was flat and then rose strangely at the end. Not a question. A statement with a lilt. It wasn’t a man or a woman. It was a voice. Almost electronic.

A machine?

“Who is this?” Emily said, and felt a wave of cold spill down her neck and into her gut.

“Come down and get...me,” the voice again, in the low register, hovering near inaudibility, mumbling. Almost a purr.

“Hello?” Emily said. There was a click.

She slowly put the phone down on the counter.

The light was on. The door was locked, but somehow she didn’t feel like she was alone. She stood at the window; looking out from the 12th floor. Below, a light curve of lights. The field. The Waldbaum’s.

Beyond that, the Holland Tunnel. Double light streams pouring into the dark, heading elsewhere. Into the earth. Into the city.

2:23 a.m. The phone jumped again on the counter. Buzzing.

She looked at it, but didn’t answer. Outside the window, the night was oranges and purples, and she didn’t feel anything.

• • •

“Emily...Dunser?” the male voice said on the phone.

“Yeah,” Emily said, and shoveled a half a dozen fries in her mouth. Life went on, after all.

She kept the phone away from her face as she chomped.

“We, ah...spoke before. This is Detective Granfar, Jersey City police department?” Duh-paht-men.

A picture in her mind. He was a fat man. Sweat stained, with a gut that swung out in front of him. Forties the hard way. No hair and the standard mustache pulled from the Mr. Pickles magnet game.

“Oh. Hey?”

“Yes. So. We’re having complaints.


“And that has...what...to do with me?” More food.

“Mrs. Dunser.”

“Miss.”

“Miss Dunser.”

Crackling silence on the line. Across the food court, a fat woman with a hairnet was swiping at a puddle on a table with the tip of a finger poked through a rag.



“Yeah?” She finally prompted.

“Mrs. Caricola indicated you called her house at...odd...um...at...2:04 AM?”

“Wasn’t me,” Em heard herself say.

“Oh yeah. Well, it’s the number of the apartment you share with the...deceased? Imogen Caricola? 551-761-90—”

“Yeah, that’s the number. I didn’t call her. I didn’t call Mrs. Caricola.”

“At night?”

“No.”

“Well, let’s just keep on...not...’kay?”

“I didn’t.”

Silence.

“I DIDN’T,” she repeated.

“Have a good day, miss.” Click.

In the bathroom, the song was *Summer Breeze*, which reminded her of sitting on an inner tube at Ocean City, far out, but not too far out. Looking back at the people on the land — nothing more than dots — as they moved about, like colorful ants.

Their din was barely audible out beyond the jetty, and the only sound was the ocean, and the only movement was the machine-like up and down of the waves. In the unknown depths, things moved and the surface, forever obedient, rippled.

Her eyes were sunken from lack of sleep, and the water did little to restore any color to her cheeks.

She got back to work twenty minutes late.

• • •

It was colder, and almost dusk when she crossed the broken fence into the weeds. It was on the way home.

The sky was orange and light blue, fading up to black. The horizon was a red arc. The reeds rustled in patterns. First here, and then there, behind her, again and again. Whispering, like a giant, invisible hand raking through them in a zig zag motion. Dancing.

Footprints were locked in the clumped, frozen mud at the gap. Dozens of them. Overwritten and stomped. Imogen’s were down there, somewhere. And now hers, too. They would be washed away when spring came. Nothing would be left of Im, anymore. Just a bag somewhere at the precinct, and that trio of creepy pictures of her at her mom’s in New Brunswick.

Silence. Wind and rippling reeds.

Waldbaum’s was a white spike of light through the reeds. Pinpoints of arc sodium lamps, gridded at a perspective which made it feel like the world hung off the edge here.

Em walked down further into the reeds, until the dead grey plants were at her eye line, waving and turning in the wind.



There, perpendicular to the fence was a beaten trail of footprints and crushed weeds. A rusted standpipe was there, barely visible.

The pipe where the body was. Just a few steps down the path.

She walked down the path, and slowed near it. One step. Stop. A stumbling step forward. An arm outstretched like it was tied to fishing wire — like something was tugging her ahead.

The pipe didn't smell. Ice clotted the ground, choking weeds and ruined plastic oil bottles. Inside, the police tape had fallen and had blown to one side, forgotten. The ground was a clot of churned footprints.

She flipped open her phone and turned on the light. Inside, the standpipe was big enough to crouch in comfortably. The light in here was harsh. The pipe bled into the dark, and finding it, curved into the earth, cutting off visibility.

Amazingly, as if she was being remote controlled by something outside, she stepped inside the pipe.

Nothing.

Ice cracked beneath her feet, but never gave way to standing water. It was too cold. Nothing.

Then she turned.

On the lip, above the exit someone had scraped a word in the concrete encasement.

MCJACK

She stumbled out into the open air, not wanting to see the (the red haired man, the knife-man's) name.

The wind picked up directly in her face, making her cheeks numb and her eyes water. There was no one there. No one in the field. She knew.

Still, she ran.

• • •

Sleep was something she did in ten minute intervals now. The relief wasn't worth the dreams. She drank sometimes, but that made her tired.

The phone rang, as she knew it would.

She picked it up on the first ring, and put it to her ear, but the person on the other end was already talking.

“—pick me up because it's late—”

Again, the voice was strange, though why, she couldn't say precisely. It wasn't Imogen's voice, or a person's voice even. Not even a voice, really. Noise that momentarily aligned itself into words. It *was* a machine.

“Imogen?” She couldn't help it. The name spilled out.

“And it's late. Pick me up.”

“Where...Who...who is this?”

“It's Hoboken. It's late.”

Static.



“Imogen? Im?”

“No fuckin’ cabs.”

Static so loud she held the phone away from her head. Dial tone.

She thumbed to the call log, and the number was there. Im’s number. Right there.

She clicked it and it dialed. *Ring. Ring.*

“THE NUMBER YOU HAVE DIALED HAS BEEN DISCONNECTED...”

She hung up and sat at the counter with her head in her arms, watching the phone. Twelve minutes to 2:23. Until the next call.

• • •

“Pick me up. Emily. Pick me up.”

It rose in her like vomit. Suddenly, she was hyperventilating. Crying. Her vision was completely blurred and her chest was rising and falling in hitching breaths.

“Imogen? Is that you?”

Imogen, blank faced and over-made-up in a coffin in a place that smelled like Windex and cookies. She had been there. She was in the ground, now.

On the phone.

“Im?” She asked, between wracking sobs, which seemed drawn from her uncontrollably, one after another.

“Come pick me up I’m at the Waldbaum’s,” the voice said, quietly. The cadence of someone telling someone else to be quiet. To hold still.

“Who is this?”

“Come,” it said, again.

Dial tone.

She hung up, and grabbed her keys and ran her forearm across her face, which felt fat and hot.

• • •

She hardly ever drove anymore, but the Rabbit started right up. By the time she was out of the security gate, she had stopped crying. She placed the phone on the passenger seat.

2:39 a.m. now.

The sky was a deep grey. Clouds and night. Freezing. She flipped on the heater and it spat even colder air for a moment, before the warmth began to creep up her legs.

Up towards the tunnel, and then to the right, around. Empty storefronts and bright white lights. Two night employee cars in the Waldbaum’s. An empty, well-lit grid of sodium lamps.

She turned and pulled in and drove at a forty-five degree angle across the lot, towards the gap in the fence which lead down into the reeds, to the path that came out on the other side.

She stopped the car, lights on, doors locked.

Buzz.

The phone jumped. She lifted it. Looked at the screen.

SEE YOU. The text message said. Im's number.

Emily shook uncontrollably, and tried to look through every window at once. Outside, in the loop of headlights was the ripped fence, and the white tips of reeds. Past that, a mile or so beyond, her apartment building. Her bed which she was not in.

A certainty had entered her mind, too late, as it always did. Im's killer had her phone. Im's killer had drawn her here, alone, at night.... Red haired and filled with bile. A machine built to strangle and wrench life from anything like a bartender squeezing out a rag. Emptied and hollow.

Then, by some magic, the time counted off in turn. No more phone. No music. The heater running. The gas tank creeping down. Hours. Eventually, somewhere in there, amazingly, she slept. But the dreams were not there, waiting for her. Instead, it was a wall of humming black; the warmth of winter covers in a snow storm. Muffled silence and safety.

And then, a knock at the window.

For a moment, it was the red-haired thing, tapping on the window with a flip-knife. Naked from the waist up in the freezing air, his pale skin a skein of tattoos that blazed from his arm like a sun.

But then he resolved into a bearded teenager with a Waldbaum's tag who smiled at her, and then un-smiled. He rolled his finger in the air.

Roll down the window.

She did. She didn't know what else to do.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Emily offered, coughing and wiping her eyes.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, sorry. Yes."

He looked after her, no coat in the twenty-degree morning, as she drove off.

• • •

Emily pulled around to the gate. Swiped the key fob and listened as the gate chattered open. She drove the rabbit down to her space, and slid in on automatic pilot. She sat for a moment after she shut off the car, as the engine clicked and popped.

She grabbed her phone and stepped out of the car. She would call in sick today.

She got ten steps before she heard it. She turned just in time to see the passenger side door of the Rabbit pop open on its own, the weight of the car shift as some invisible force disembarked.

And then the door, independent of any operator, slammed shut hard enough to cause the yellow car to shake back and forth.

Im was home.





About the Authors

Howard Ingham is a professional poet, artist, and storyteller. He's so good that the British government hired him. His latest game-related work is the occult past life fantasy, *Chariot*, which can be found at chariotrpg.blogspot.com.

Malcolm Sheppard has written fiction for dozens of game books, stories for *Mage: The Awakening Second Edition's Fallen World Chronicle* anthology, and a novella for a *Mummy: The Curse* book called *Curse of the Blue Nile*. His work is also appears in the upcoming shared world fantasy-horror anthology *Tales of the Lost Citadel*. You can read his thoughts at mobunited.com.

Peter Woodworth is an English professor, game designer, and freelance writer, not necessarily in that order. He has written for the *World of Darkness* and *Chronicles of Darkness* game lines since 1997, working primarily in the *Mind's Eye Theater* division, but with some tabletop credits for *Changeling: The Lost* and *Hunter: The Vigil* as well. He has also accumulated fiction and game writing credits for Galileo Games, Evil Hat Productions, Magpie Games, Eschaton Media, and West End Games. You can find him online at peterwoodworth.com.

Renee Ritchie is a writer, editor, and avid LARPer. Her work has been neatly strewn about across the *World of Darkness* and *Chronicles of Darkness* game lines, specifically *Vampire: The Masquerade Dark Ages 20th Anniversary Edition*, *Vampire: The Requiem*, *Demon: The Descent*, and *Beast: The Primordial*. Writing is also part of her day job, where she creates and manages content for various high-tech companies. When not typing her fingers to the bone, she knits yarn and chainmail, belts out Queen at karaoke, and runs or contributes to various *World of Darkness* fan blogs such as *Harpies Gonna Harp*.

Author, editor, developer, gamer, geek. **Jess Hartley** lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, The Viking, and daughter, The Valkyrie, and an assortment of other strange beasts.

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Danielle Lauzon is a freelance writer living in Houston, TX with her two dogs, two cats, and one husband. She is a freelance writer, developer, and game designer who works part time searching for the cure for diabetes (not really, but it sounds cooler than lab technician). She is an avid gamer and LARPer, and enjoys all things sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. She has worked for Onyx Path Publications, since 2012, on both the *Chronicles of Darkness* and *World of Darkness* game lines.

Matthew McFarland is an ENnie-award winning game author and developer. His work has appeared in almost all of the *World of Darkness* and *Chronicles of Darkness* game lines, and he developed the revised *Dark Ages* line of games as well. In addition to working as a speech-language pathologist in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, he and his wife, Michelle Lyons-McFarland, own and operate *Growling Door Games, Inc.* In 2015, they released a new edition of the classic horror RPG, *Chill*. growlingdoorgames.com.

Michael “Hollywood” Tomasek, Jr. is a Chicago native, writer, artist, and game designer. When not participating in the creative process, he is usually teaching preschool or writing about teaching preschool on his *Preschool Anarchy* Facebook page. When he’s not doing those things, he’s usually hanging around with his beautiful wife Meredith and his weird cat Banjo. He might even be hanging out with his wonderful family too, who he thanks for supporting his writing. When he’s not doing any of these things, he’s usually writing games for *Front Room Games*, because he thinks his friends there are rad.

Eric Zawadzki is a fantasy writer and game designer. His credits include work for *Mage: The Awakening First and Second Edition*, *Demon: The Descent*, *Beast: The Primordial*, *The God-Machine Chronicle*, and *Werewolf: The Apocalypse 20th Anniversary Edition*. He is also the co-author of *Kingmaker*, *Lesson of the Fire*, and *The Pithdai Gate*. He spends his free time hanging out in Minneapolis with his filk rocker wife and their 4-year-old son William, attending local sci-fi conventions, and blogging about books, movies, games, TV shows, and writing at fourmoonspress.com.

Meghan Fitzgerald is a freelance writer and game designer, and a digital archivist at HBO. She has worked on a variety of game lines for Onyx Path Publishing including *Mage: The Awakening*, *Promethean: The Created*, *Cavaliers of Mars*, and others, as well as the *Chill* RPG for *Growling Door Games*. She has also penned lyrics and libretti, including the new English translation of *Final Fantasy VI*’s *Aria di Mezzo Carattere*.

Dennis Detwiller is a game designer, artist, and writer. He is the four-time winner of the *Origins Award* for gaming, and the three-time winner of the *ENnie Award* for RPG excellence. His games *Delta Green* and *Delta Green: Countdown* remain the highest-rated RPG products of all time on *RPGnet*. In 2016, he raised \$460,000 to bring a new edition of *Delta Green* to the slaving Lovecraftian-hordes, and in June his new four-player procedural roguelike *Necropolis* will be available on Steam/XboxOne/PS4 (published by Namco/Bandai). Oh, and he has some kids and a wife. And a dog. Maybe. Sometimes, he even sleeps.



Walk through the ages...

As a companion to *Chronicles of Darkness: Dark Eras* this anthology reveals secrets of the mystics, whispers rumors of the dead, and shines a light into the darkest corners of the world. This collection includes historical stories based within the shadowed past of *Vampire: the Requiem*, *Mage: the Awakening*, *Werewolf: the Forsaken*, *Changeling: the Lost*, and other *Chronicles of Darkness* settings.

In the Chronicles of Darkness...

Explore the shadows with tales by Howard Ingham, Malcolm Sheppard, Pete Woodworth, Renee Ritchie, Jess Hartley, Monica Valentinelli, Danielle Harper, Matthew McFarland, Mike Tomasek, Eric Zawadski, Meghan Fitzgerald, and Dennis Detwiler.



Chronicles of Darkness

