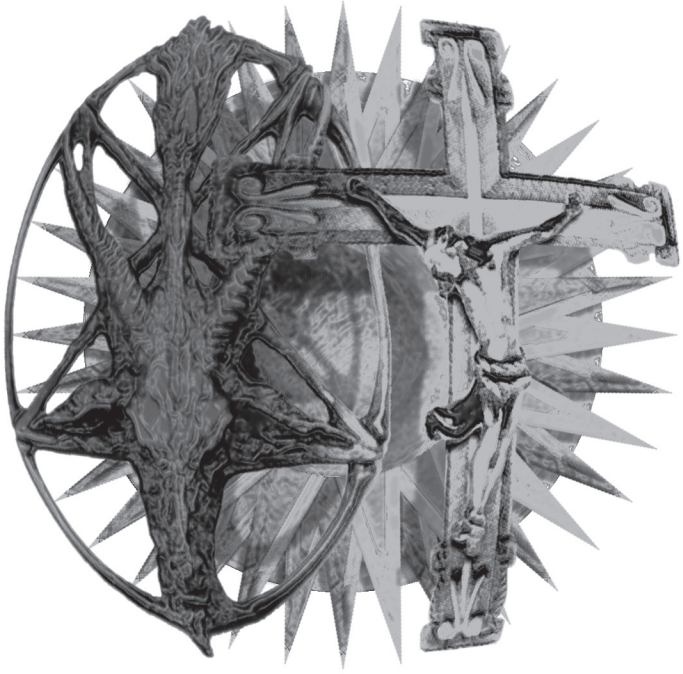
# War stories



# War Stories

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This anthology is dedicated to the memory of my father, A. Allen Legge. You inspired me, Dad. I took your advice and I never gave up. Thank you.

**Disclaimer: These stories are fiction. None of this is real. This book is not a manual for learning the dark arts, nor is it an excuse to be a dipshit and hurt yourself or someone else. If you can't handle that, don't read it.**

**Suggested for mature audiences due to graphic content.**

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# Contagion: War Stories

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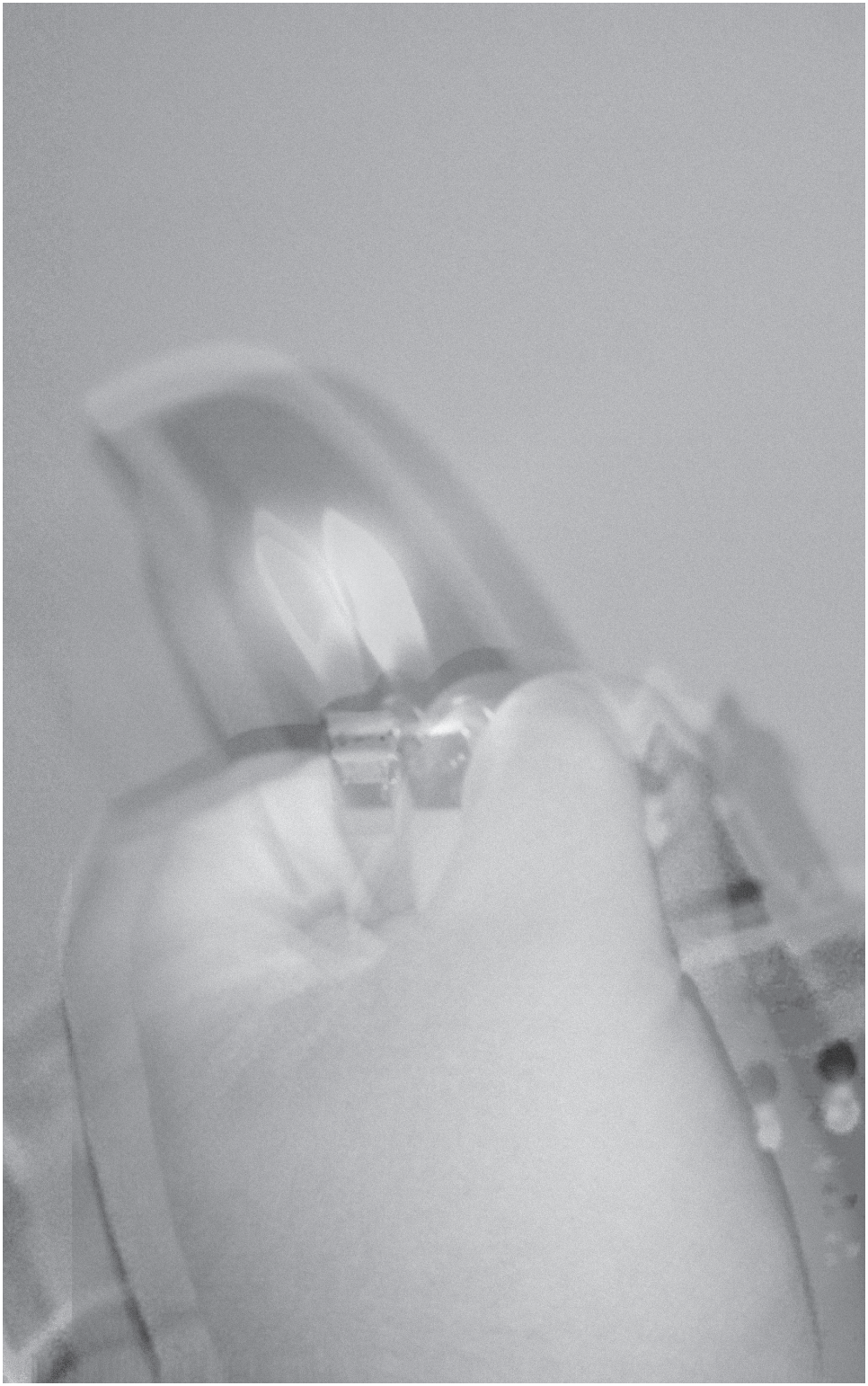
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# Meditations of a Would-Be Monster Hunter

By ssg

I can't find my lighter.

Everything else I have to do, everything else I've been sorting and tracking… and I can't find my lighter.

From somewhere above me, I can hear vague hints of church music… probably that old man living in the third floor apartment, listening to the televangelists through his half-deafness.

Lotta good that'll do 'im.

I can hardly believe anyone lives in this place at all – filth, squalor, mouldy plaster falling like great scabs from the desiccated beast carcass walls and ceiling… not to mention that amazing, putrid smell… something like sewage and old oranges… I still can't figure out where that smell is coming from….

Forget it… I've got to remember why I'm here… I'm trying to focus, trying to get pure… well, maybe pur*er*… shit! What am I doing? I'm sitting in the fucking corner of this shit-hole, pouring over these books like they could possibly help, sharpening my pathetic little weapons like a pointless, caged rodent uselessly whetting its' claws… and why? To what great purpose? Have I totally lost it, gone irrevocably in-fucking-sane? Have I gone so completely beyond the edge of reason that I could possibly believe a single iota of what I'm seeing? That I could bring myself to the point of digging through this trite crap, of being able to swallow any of this bullshit and is it *in any way possible for me to want a cigarette MORE!*

*GOD DAMN IT! WHERE THE HELL IS MY FUCKING LIGHTER?!*

Crap.

Another "sin."

I'm trying so hard to keep my mind pure… so… hard….

I've stayed away from television, magazines, junk food, alcohol, drugs, pornography… shit, I haven't touched *myself* much less anyone else since all of this started… and I've basically been doing my best to stay away from people in general… well,… just in case.

Still, I just had to keep one little vice, for now, just to keep some semblance of sanity… here lighter lighter lighter, come out come out wherever you are…

please?

Once again I find myself slumped, here, in this corner, with these books… and my questions… trying to clear my mind of those questions… faith… it's called blind for a reason, right?… does holy water get more potent if you condense it somehow, or evaporate some of it off?…or, what if you put it in a humidifier?…or a vaporizer? There's a product! And how about that jingle- "Feel the Healing Vapors of God."

Focus! focus… deep breath, in… out… read…. There has to be something in these old legends that's true- some unassuming and yet precise, exacting,… *correct* fairytale, inadvertently passed through the generations unchanged from when the storytellers recited it as survival manual. It has to be… just some little hint. Maybe, something everyone has already heard a million times, never understanding the meaning behind the old words… a trick of syntax… a greater truth hidden by a slight change in spelling, grammar… something. It's so hard to find any act, twist, quip, sequence of word or movement resembling utility….

I'm learning, though – little by little – or, I think I am, anyhow. I find out something that holds true for one occurrence, only to find the rules changed the next time around. Is it certain types of wood?… certain types of metal?… crystals?… ores…?

Are the answers as vague and varied and ridiculous as these books seem to suggest? What kind of cruel joke would *that* be? Wait, I'm questioning too much, again… faith… remember faith… it seemed to work… once….

Once.

I lean forward, set the book I'm leafing through aside, and begin to—

Oh… thank God.

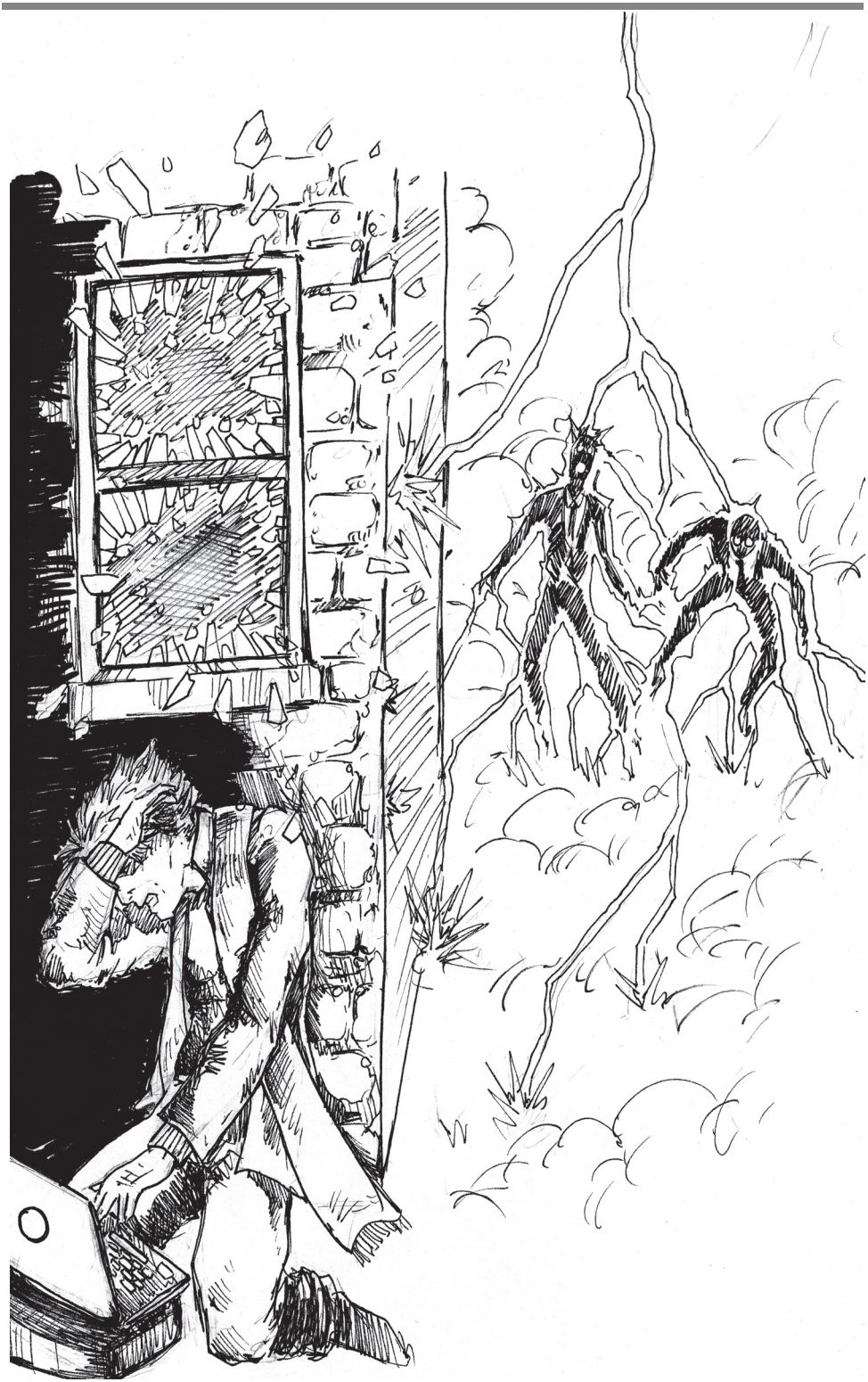
My lighter.

I lean back, back, back, as comfortable as I get, here,… and smoke my cigarette.

Ah,… soon, I'll probably want to be giving this up, too. I'm not perfect, – at all, really – but, I should always try to be better… that's part of what it's all about, after all… I think.

Alright… that done, I lean forward, again, and begin to sort through my little pile, preparing,… stones… ores… sharpened bits of wood… knives… crosses… potions….

It *is* getting dark out, after all, and now I know the monsters are real.



# Karma

By Travis Legge

"What are you waiting for?" Arianna cried over the ceaseless gunfire, "Do it!"

Mark was huddled behind what was left of his '87 Dodge Daytona. Flipped on its side, burning, and smashed all to hell, it was becoming a less effective source of cover by the second. Arianna, having been thrown from the car was lying in the alley nearby. Both were bleeding badly. Their assailants approached relentlessly, ignoring their own wounds and laying waste to everything in their path.

Mark's fingers hovered over his laptop, which he had lain out on the ground before him. With one simple keystroke he could save Arianna and himself, and considering that Arianna's knives were still in the car, that one keystroke was their only hope.

So what was the problem?

To tell the truth, Mark was scared out of his wits. Sure, he trusted his knowledge, and he was working with the best equipment available, no doubts there, but with so many variables to consider was he sure it would work?

Of course not, but it was his only hope.

Press enter.

Reality itself began to ripple as Mark's finger brushed the key. Arcane equations worked themselves through the laptop, reordering the fabric of existence. Symbols flashed across his screen. Mathematics was the key to the universe, and Mark knew it. It was just a matter of applying that knowledge as quickly as possible.

The sky roared and flashed in the throes of the storm Mark had summoned. Almost immediately rain fell in buckets upon the street-turned-battlefield. Then the lightning came. Strike! Strike!

The storm left as quickly as it had come. The only item left untouched by the rain was the laptop in Mark's hands.

Rising to her feet, Arianna called out to Mark from the alley, "Is it safe yet?" She stumbled toward the car's wreckage.

Mark slapped his laptop shut and scrambled to his feet. "Stay back!" he yelled as he ran out from behind the remains of his car. He looked out into the street to see what havoc his spell might have wreaked. What he discovered was one tempest-tossed street and two very cooked sets of human remains.

"That must've stung."

"Whatever you send out you get back times three," offered Arianna. The

statement was equal parts warning and gratitude.

"Piss off," was Mark's only reply.

***

Two bus stops, eleven blocks walk, and five panhandlers later they were back at the hotel. A rather low class establishment, there were no questions asked when the battle torn pair entered to seek out their room. Third floor, and no elevator. Mark ventured that this fact complimented the preceding events extraordinarily. Arianna just ignored him. His sarcasm, pessimism, and "fuck the world" attitude had worn thin on her, and all she wanted was a shower. Whatever she had to endure to get it was just fine with her.

Room 318. In the door, straight to the bathroom, and off with the tattered rags that were a designer outfit till that whole thing about the shit and the fan happened.

Arianna looked in the mirror at her naked body. Pretty soon those cuts and bruises would be nothing more than the latest in her massive collection of scars. Despite the mutilations she had endured, often at her own hands, Arianna was quite beautiful. Her flowing black hair and emerald green eyes gave her a mythic appearance. Hers was a face to be loved and celebrated by the Goddess. Of athletic build, she seemed a huntress, with the grace of a dancer, and the demeanor of a Priestess. Her hips and bosom, while conventionally attractive, were too small to make her a breeder. She didn't mind much, as she was able to devote her time to more immediate pursuits. It was, after all the Goddess's will.

Steam soon filled the tiny hotel bathroom. The cleansing mix of soap and water stung her wounds like famished mosquitoes. She ignored the pain for as long as it lasted. Soon the cuts were numb, and Arianna was able to enjoy the hot relaxing mist of a shower well earned.

***

Mark's face was glued to the hockey game. A Budweiser in one hand, a Camel in the other, and fire in his eyes he shouted profanities at the screen in an effort to usher his team to victory. This was the most relaxing time he'd had in ages. He had been buried up to his eyeballs in mystic grimores for the past several months, translating equations, uploading them to his laptop. His grueling regimen of study and practice had almost taken its toll. Then, finally, he was free. Franco Esparenza, his master, had come to him the week prior to release him of apprenticeship and bestow the title of Magus. Magical study had filled Mark's time and mind, and he couldn't wait to become his own man. His own Magus! Had he really made it? Had he actually come so far? It seemed too good to be true. Of course, when something seems too good to be true…

After receiving his title, Mark was informed that he was to go to Trenton, New Jersey. It was to be his first "official" mission. Recover an alchemical

workbook that had been stolen from a Dormitory in Trenton. All the Magi there had been slain, save one: Arianna Nighthawk, a Celtic Priestess and Magus of the Guardians of the Innocent. With little evidence to go on, time was quite short.

Mark was to meet Arianna at Room 318 in the City Crest motel. There they would exchange introductions, information, and tactics. Mark was pissed. No way was he going to enjoy working with some sap drinking, tree hugging, free loving, feminazi Guardian. The whole damn lot were a bunch of man hating bull-dykes and extremists. Sure they did what they did for the right reasons, but the wrong things done for the right reasons didn't make them any less wrong. Their actions were acts of weakness, plain and simple. Now Mark had to try to work with one of them. Had to. No choice. Being a Magus had hardly granted independence.

Now, sitting on the edge of the hotel room bed, relaxing and looking back, Mark had to admit that it hadn't gone as badly as he had thought it would. After all, he and Arianna had managed to retrieve the much-lamented stolen text. Bruises and lacerations aside it had actually been pretty fun. About that time Mark opened another beer and decided that he would apologize to Arianna as soon as she came out of the bathroom.

***

Arianna stepped out of the shower, dripping wet. Taking only a few minutes to dry off, she wrapped the towel around herself, and stepped out into the main room. She stopped for just a moment to watch Mark "relax". He was so wrapped up in his little beer-swilling testosterone fest that he didn't even notice her enter the room. Being a Magus, he should know better. Letting your guard down, even for a second, can get you killed. She intended to remind him of that.

Removing her towel and wrapping it into a makeshift noose, Arianna silently approached from behind. She would teach this bitter man a few lessons, once his initial shock wore off. A few silent steps later she had the noose over his head, ready to drop it and pull. Steady.…

Arianna looked around sharply, trying to understand what had happened. Somehow she was on her stomach on the bed, her wrists wrapped in the noose, and someone was on top of her. How did he do that? It was Mark, the little bastard!

"Nice try," as Mark spoke he backed up off of her and pulled the towel tighter. The cloth irritated as it tightened. While the sensation wasn't all together unpleasant, Arianna was unable to thoroughly enjoy it. In fact she was quite angry about the situation.

"How?" she growled as Mark grinned in silent dominance.

"Next time, try harder." The prick had a lot of nerve, but he was obviously right.

"How?" she repeated, growing quite annoyed.

Mark gloated as he released her arms.

"Try not to think so loud."

Arianna snatched the towel from Mark's hands and covered herself. She was a little embarrassed, but she wasn't sure if it was her mistake, or her modesty causing it. "I stand corrected." She looked down submissively and blushed as she spoke. Mark looked down at her for a second, without speaking. Finally he turned away quietly uttering one sentence.

"I'll give you some privacy."

Eager to get past the embarrassing incident, Arianna spoke as she dressed. "Hey, we really did it, didn't we?" About that time she realized just how much she sounded like the little, embarrassed eighteen year old girl that she had been before, a time not so long ago, and not like a Magus. Not like a Priestess or a Guardian. It sickened her.

"Yeah, whatever you say" was Mark's response.

Arianna finished dressing in silence. She then reached into her satchel and produced the tome. It wasn't really much to look at. A thick leather-bound book, with no adornments on its cover or spine, the text was more a product of functionality than decor. The silk strings, which tied the book shut, were mystically sealed, preventing anyone from opening it without undoing the seal. The thieves obviously hadn't breached the seal, as Arianna couldn't open it. That was definitely a good sign; however it did not do well to serve her insatiable curiosity. Perhaps Mark could open it.

Leaning forward, Arianna tapped Mark on the shoulder. "Mark," she asked, "do you know how to open this little book?"

"No," he replied abruptly, "and even if I did, I certainly wouldn't do it! I'd still tell you I think it's a horrible idea. Why?"

"I was just curious."

Mark turned around, smiling. His eyes met with hers, and for a second, not only did they not hate each other, but they had found common ground. You see, like it or not, Mark was just as curious as Arianna, if not more so. Imagine what was in that book! Department 7 killed an entire Dormitory worth of Magi to get it. Arianna's Dormitory. It must be important. Besides, Arianna deserved to know, right?

"It's a terrible idea."

And with that, Mark crawled into his bed and went to sleep.

Not long after, Arianna, clutching the book in her arms, did the same.

***

Mark sat up sharply. Try as he might, he could not ignore the curiosity that had overcome him. He wanted the information in that book, and he wanted it now. Quickly he began to think of every reason why he shouldn't. First there were the moral: an early apprenticeship filled with tales of Pandora's boxes and dead

cats. Then, of course was the practical: if he hacked the seal, his superiors at the Dormitory would know. He would be in some serious trouble. They might even call it treason! On the other hand, it could be a test of his knowledge and wisdom. A final hurdle to separate an apprentice from a Magus. Quite the conundrum. What was he to do?

"Arianna, wake up."

Arianna rose, groggily. "What's wrong?" She purred like a baby kitten pulled from its mother's breast.

"We're going to open it."

"Now?"

"Quick, before I talk myself out of it."

***

Arianna knelt on the bed, looking over Mark's shoulder as he typed frantically. She had little understanding of the magics used by the Order of Ouroboros and even less grasp of computers, which made her pretty much useless in this situation. As Mark worked, he spouted out an endless stream of incomprehensible technobabble, so Arianna did her best to tune him out, while still watching intently. No small task, even for a Magus.

Mark may have been a prick, but he knew his stuff. Arianna never would argue that. As the hours passed, one by one the wards on the book fell to Mark's onslaught of Fiber-optic invocation, until finally he was on the last ward.

Arianna could barely contain herself. Now she would know what knowledge was so valuable that her housemates would sacrifice themselves to protect it. She hopped up out of the bed and sat right next to Mark, leaning over him to watch him work. The clicking of the keys seemed to approach a single tone, he was typing so fast. Beads of sweat littered both their foreheads. They were as two children sneaking downstairs on Christmas Eve to see Santa; only in this case they had laid a bear trap for old St. Nick. There would be no disappointment. Arianna wrapped her arm around Mark and slipped out a giggle of anticipation, as Mark pressed on. Minutes went by, and nothing. Elation turned to frustration. Giggles turned to growls. Then suddenly it happened.

The last seal had lifted.

***

Mark couldn't believe it! He had actually done it! At this point, the contents of the book didn't even matter to him. This had become a quest for him hours prior. All that mattered was solving the puzzle. The contents of the book were irrelevant. For all Mark cared the pages could all be blank.

He reached forward and untied the silk bindings only to discover that this was precisely the case. The pages *were* blank.

Mark knew he should have expected no less. This trickery was simply

another layer to the puzzle. A layer that Mark swore he would master. He had to. This would prove him worthy of his title. Worthy of independence. He pressed on.

***

Arianna leapt into the air with excitement as Mark opened the tome. Her celebration abruptly ceased as Mark wailed in frustration. "No!" he screamed, rattling the walls in their cheap room. "This can't be!"

Arianna looked down at the open book in horror. Surely enough, the pages were blank. What could this mean? Mark had obviously seen this as merely another obstacle for him to overcome. No sooner did his scream escape his throat, was he back to work, attacking this problem with renewed vigor. Arianna however saw it in a different light.

"Mark, you must stop." As Arianna spoke, she grabbed Mark's wrist, stopping his typing. Mark turned his head slowly, all the fury of the storm from the night before burning in his eyes. He looked right at Arianna, straight into those emerald eyes, and violently yanked his arm free.

"Stop?" He was possessed. "Stop now, are you crazy? We are on the verge of discovery here, and you tell me to stop? Are you stupid? This is only one more obstruction on the path to truth. Why would you want to stop?"

"It is a sign from the Goddess, Mark," was Arianna's reply. Omens were right up her alley, and it seemed to make sense that these blank pages were a warning. Perhaps the knowledge had tempted them both too greatly. "We were wrong to open it in the first place; it is a matter for the masters."

Abruptly, Mark spat "Fuck the masters" and went right on with his typing.

Angrily, Arianna stood up and walked over to her satchel to acquire her ritual daggers. If Mark couldn't be reasoned with, he'd have to be stopped by other means.

Clutching one dagger in her hand, the other with her teeth, Arianna reached down and yanked the tome from Mark. He rose, spitting threats. "Give that back, or I'll fry you like those D7 pricks in the street, I swear to god!"

Arianna backed up toward the window, clenching the book close to her breast. She silently prayed to the Goddess that this could be resolved without violence, but her instincts plainly told her that the possibility was remote. It didn't matter, though. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that this was what had to be done. The book was not for them to disturb, she knew that now. Mark wouldn't listen to reason, not now. He was driven completely by his own selfish curiosity. At first it was *their* curiosity. She knew she was part responsible. She knew there was no choice. She had to do this.

Mark screamed something in protest as Arianna jumped out of the hotel room window. A three-story drop onto concrete and broken glass wasn't something that a normal person could shrug off and walk, let alone run away from.

Arianna, however, was a far cry from normal. A quick healing prayer and she was up and running like a cheetah. She knew that she had to get over to the Dormitory in New York if she wanted this to end without bloodshed.

***

Mark hurriedly snatched up his laptop and went to pursue her. The nerve of that bitch. Taking what was his for doing what she had wanted him to. Mark had mastered a large portion of the Order's teachings, and that was by no means a small task. Still, he swore, enlightenment or no, he would never understand women. If he went down the stairs, Mark knew that he would lose her. As fast as she was, and with that much of a head start, she'd be halfway to New York by the time he got out front.

Having little choice, Mark calculated a quick formula to summon an air elemental that would carry him to the alley below. When he reached ground, Arianna had already rounded the corner. Being six in the morning, the commuters would already be out, which meant that like it or not, both of them would have to lay off the Magick. Mark saw this as a blessing and a curse. Without her little prayers and incantations, the Guardian would be easier to catch, but without his spells in play, Mark was a terrible fighter. He decided that it would be best to cross that bridge as he came to it, and took off like a dart after Arianna.

***

Arianna knew that Mark was right on her tail. No way was that psycho going to give up the book so easily. The streets were very much alive by this point, which gave her the upper hand. She was in much better shape than Mark, and she knew it. It was all a matter of remaining in plain sight until she could reach the Dormitory. Knowing that it would be packed this time of day, Arianna dove down into the city subway tunnel. Pushing and shoving her way through the faceless droves of wage-slaves embarking on another journey into the land of suits and ties, the land where her Magicks were unwelcome, she made it to the stairway. As she rounded the corner onto the stairwell, she noticed that Mark was about a block behind her. A block wasn't nearly enough distance to discourage him. This was going to get ugly.

Arianna knew that Mark wasn't insane enough to start a Mystical duel in a crowded subway tunnel, so she decided that now was her time to make a stand. Stuffing the book down the back of her pants, Arianna pulled out her ritual daggers and held them in preparation. At first the action had gone seemingly unnoticed, as the sleepwalking proletariat dredged on their respective ways. As Mark approached, enough people had noticed that she reasoned that by the time any violence occurred, some police officer would be arriving to arrest her. She hoped so. At least then she wouldn't have to deal with Mark.

***

Mark stepped onto the gray subway platform in search of Arianna. The crowd seemed to part around her. Fear had quite a debilitating effect on the masses. It was an awful lot like an entire family of deer, all caught in the headlights of a Mack truck. Mark lunged at Arianna with insane fury, ignoring his surroundings. Witnesses were of little consequence to him. All that mattered was getting the book, passing this test laid before him, and finding the knowledge that he was so close to. Arianna tried to twist her body out of the way, but she wasn't quick enough. Mark's fist caught her in the shoulder, forcing her to drop the knife in her left hand. She stabbed at him with the knife in the right. Mark, having nothing else to block with, attempted to parry the blow with his laptop. Instead Arianna wound up driving her knife right into the computer.

Discarding the laptop, with her knife still stuck in it, Mark realized that he and Arianna were both without weapons, and any spells that they needed materials for. Knowing the futility of a physical fight, Mark opted to cast a simple, but blatant, and deadly spell. To hell with the consequences.

***

The fireball bounced off of Arianna's chest, scorching her and sending her flying toward the subway track. A quick command brought the Goddess's air sprites to catch her in mid fall, and land her safely on the other side of the tracks. Luckily most people won't see the sprites, so it appeared as though she had been knocked all the way across the track. Mark must have really been crazy, using that blatant a spell in public! The people were bound to freak out! It had already begun as the few people who weren't paralyzed from shock began running off in all directions, screaming like madmen. Being burnt had taken Arianna out of the physical fight. There wasn't enough time to heal herself, especially with all of these witnesses.

Arianna had no choice but to fight fire with fire.

Mark hopped down onto the subway track to get closer to Arianna. He barked some threats as he walked closer, but Arianna couldn't make them out over the screams of innocent bystanders. Many of them were in that place where shock and disbelief meet in the middle and become desperation. She only had one hope. One spell that she could cast without components. Calmly she produced the tome.

"You want this Mark?" she shouted as he stepped over the first track. "It's all yours." With that she squinted and tossed the book at him.

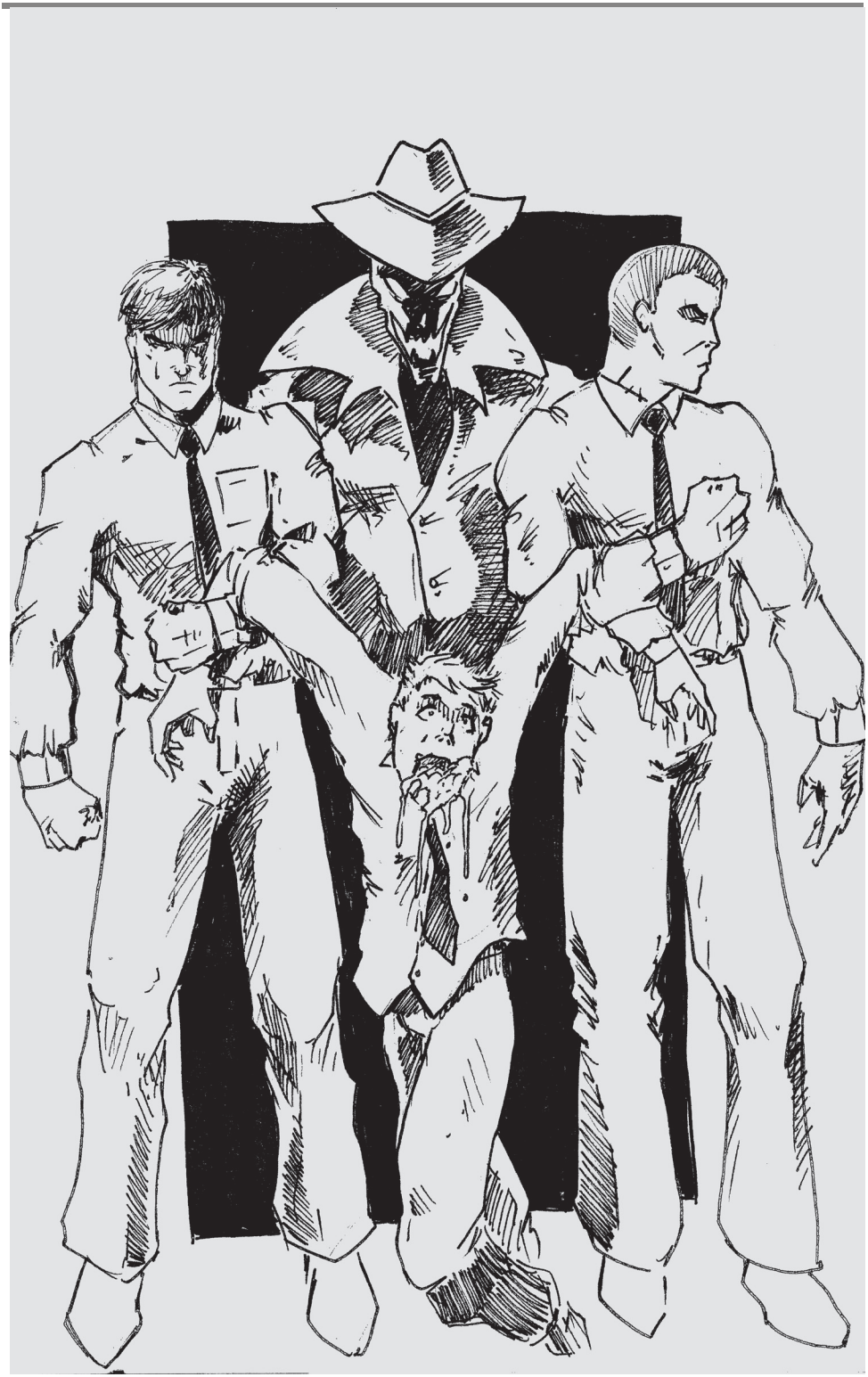
As Mark stepped forward to catch the book, Arianna reached out with all her willpower. Her faith carved her a path into Mark's bodily workings. In an all-or-nothing effort, she manipulated his essence until, through it, she had gained control of his leg. The spell itself was weak, but it was just enough to bring his foot down where she wanted it to be. Right on the third rail.

Mark's hair caught on fire and his eyeballs exploded, scattering tears, blood, flesh and retinal tissue across the tracks, as the millions of volts ripped

vengefully through his body. Fortunately, most of his grisly death rattle was drowned out by the screeching wail of an approaching subway train, robbed of its guiding energy. Mark's face contorted into a thousand masks of pain. He raised his arms, attempting to defy the primal force coursing through him. The pain was so intense that he tried to claw his own skull out of the skin, in one final escape attempt. As if by removing his brain he would save his mind from the pain. A few seconds later, he fell flat on his bloodied, twisted face, book still in hand. One last death rattle jerked the tome from his grip.

"I warned you about the rule of three, Mark," said Arianna as she hopped off of the platform and went to retrieve the book "You should've listened."

Arianna bent down and picked up the book, which despite the electrical shock had not been harmed. Power and curiosity had almost gotten the best of her, but in the end she overcame them. She only wished that she could've said the same for Mark.



# Somewhere South of Heaven

By Christopher J Pisano
& Brian Koscienski

You will think that sanity abandoned me at the last. Or, perhaps, that we were never companions at all. I implore you to judge neither with haste, nor with blind criticism. And I ask for but a brief moment out of the many years of your future. For in a moment dreams are begotten, lies fabricated, and truth misconstrued.

The fact that this manuscript has made it into another's hands means that I am already dead. I did not seek pity in life, nor shall I in death. All was by design. At first, seeing that I had not yet chosen a side, they sought to convert me. I refused the corruption they sought to propagate. This forced a change in tactics: what they could not adulterate, they would discredit. Profuse effort was spent on tales of my insanity. "His is a mind ensorcelled with flights of fantasy, lost to other worlds, beholden with wayward dreams. A classic dementia." I assure you; my mind was clear and focused. But I see things that you do not—things they have kept hidden from you. I would descry their veil of illusion if you will but give me the chance. My time is short. They realize now that all the attention they have lavished on me was a game of misdirection on my part. I kept their focus on me, but one among many, while the masses were left largely undisturbed. I hear their footsteps reverberating down the hall even as I write this. No longer will they seek to probe and prod me in an effort to win me over. Today is the day of my execution.

You do not know me and doubtless will find no record of me, so my name is meaningless. I am from humble origins and my limited years of maturity are equally nondescript, failing to distinguish myself until college and even then having attended a seldom heralded university. The majority of my studies focused on the pursuit of philosophy, which is in itself a quest of self-evasion, my own version of the fabled knight's obsessive search for the Questing Beast. As the day of graduation drew ever more proximate I turned enough of my attention outward from my main focus to receive qualification as a teacher.

My first job was teaching history to High School students in a small community, but the falsities of history began to wear upon me. I soon found that one must speak with the tyrant's tongue, thick with the political proclivity to lead rather than govern a society that wishes to progress at any cost at the behest of one faction or another, until there is scantly any veracity remaining. Yet to undermine the popular fancy would be to set a nation upon its ear. And as Americans are content in their ignorance, to mention that George Washington never cut down

a cherry tree would be to unravel the fabric of their existence. The words "non fiction" in relation to the subject of history became as dandruff in my mouth. It was this alienation from what I considered my core beliefs that served as the impetus for my chrysalis into an English teacher. Writers unabashedly lie without the pretension of any higher purpose than entertainment, thus seldom need to hide behind a lengthy preamble to better explain their continuing expenditure of efforts, yet further lack of progress. Furthermore, the prevarication of "fictional" writers achieves the nomenclature of "passion" by their critics, a word that is far more palatable to my sensitivities.

And so it began, behind the closed door of a faculty room, during a conversation about the painful, though necessary subject that is Shakespeare, that I first began to notice the flagitious attitude of my colleagues. It began quite innocently enough that I at first dismissed it as the natural tendency of the tenured to nurture the fledgling, but soon it became apparent that my misgivings were more than simple paranoia. Upon receipt of the banned works list I was not surprised to see Huckleberry Finn at the top of the list. I made mention of the fact that the underlying current of the novel is the maturation of an individual in the face of a less willing society and that it was through this personal application of philosophical choice that makes change possible. Finn matures into a young man who sees Jim as a man full of individual thought and personality and worth, quite independently from what the society of the time would lead him to believe. The author's questionable word choice is necessary to establish the progression of the character Finn into a model more true of a benevolent creator; thus, a better son of the demiurge; thus, a better component of society; thus, a better man with more speakable thoughts; thus, a true human being, for only a man who is capable of being ashamed can learn and; therefore, is worthy of life. It has, in fact, always been something of a curiosity with me that the general belief among instructors is one that states it is easier for the learned to succumb to the offended mind, than it is to educate, which, as I had always presumed, should be the focus of a teacher's efforts. It is better to strike from history that which offends rather than to learn from our mistakes; thus, an apology becomes as hollow as our abridged history. And yet without regard we are forced to preach to impressionable minds the flagrantly salacious prose of Hamlet, mindless of the moralistic lacunae of the issue.

I broached the subject innocently and without provocation, yet no less than three of the most tenured teachers present turned on me. I had expected a partial malaise to lace their response, but instead, they were vociferously vitriolic in their condemnation of my stand. So forceful was their assault, that I was almost perceptibly pushed back into my seat, crushed beneath the weight of their invective. I restated my position at this point so there would be no doubt as to my motive: language has only what meaning we give it, yet instead of teaching that

mastery to all, we are reduced to mere coprology while society turns a blind eye on our country's declining literacy rate.

Would that I was simply given to cowardice or that I was known by my peers as an oversensitive type, but the simple truth is that one, even a human chrysalis, does not undertake the study of Philosophy and metamorphose into a sensitized being. That such educated persons should inveigh me in such a personal nature, all the while completely ignoring the foundation and basis of the argument left me largely disturbed. Within moments I was labeled a reprobate, declared persona non grata, and forthwith asked to leave. Not leave the lounge; mind you, but the grounds entirely. Not simply these immediate grounds, but any and all establishments of a serious and studious nature. Mine was not, it seems, a mind that should be allowed to fraternize with impressionable youth, lest I brand them with an indelible scar that no amount of "proper" education could fully eradicate.

Despite my modicum of intelligence, I could but gape as one unenlightened. Could they truly be serious? And certainly such a minor disagreement did not warrant banishment from the profession. In a saturnine state I returned to my classroom to gather my few belongings. As the room was currently empty I believed there would be no repercussions. My dejection, it seems, led me to tarry about longer than was acceptable and before I had even reached the room, I was met by several teachers who seemed intent on remanding me to the principal for proper castigation.

Three brutish male teachers led me straight down the hall, then after some distance, we made a turn at a right angle. Nary a second went by that one or more of them had a hand draped across one or the other of my shoulders. Neither of them was familiar to me by name, though I had an indistinct memory of one of them as passerby in this very hall. At length they came to discuss my heritage in a most ignominious fashion, speaking of me in the third person as though I were oblivious. It was during this period while they were engaged as interlocutors that I gained some knowledge of my escorts.

They were all of similar stature and build, being slightly taller than I am (when not slouching I am of normal height for a man), but much more stout around the chest and with legs that even professional athletes would envy. About the face was a curious lack of hair. Herewith I do not simply speak of the places where one might fully expect a man to shave, but their eyebrows were thin and lightly colored as compared to the dark, coarse hairs that sheltered their heads and disguised their arms. I was only able to notice on one of the individuals, but the man to my left who had constant hold upon my sweater had hands of an ursine nature with hair so thickly grown together as to resemble thatch. His skin flashed through in only the briefest of glimpses and was positively incarnadine in hue as though it had been perpetually sunburned; though I doubted it had ever been

exposed to harsh sunlight.

Without me quite realizing it we had reached our destination and they posited me against a wall while one of the men went inside the office doubtlessly to inform the principal of our arrival. The other two affixed themselves about my person on either side in the manner of hideous caryatids. I took a moment to ponder the vagaries of my position. We had walked a good distance and yet I had taken in so little detail of the troupe presumably due to the grotesque nature of their abomination. Never before had I seen men such as these. As we stood there I became aware of a smell that hinted at sulfur, curious in its distinctness and surely emanating from my guards. I suspected that I had been unaware of it previously due to our constant motion, but the current lack of airflow had created a backlog that assailed my senses. Presently it began to overcome my eyes and tears sprang to them as they threatened to dry out from the pungency. It was as I reached to dab at them that the adjudicator appeared soundlessly in the doorframe.

He bade me enter with neither word nor motion. Forsooth, the sparseness of his actions led me to wonder as to the nature of his overall mechanics. But no sooner had I begun to examine him for deformities than he took to staring at me. In that uncomfortable instant I understood the meaning of an old Coleridge passage for he had positively fixed me with his eye. Indeed, with a glare he compelled me to enter his office.

The room itself was bland and furnished in a most austere manner. A wall of humidity met me at the entrance and upon entering, I noticed that the walls perspired perceptibly until a slight sheen made the tiled floor slick. It was as though I had entered a jungle and the potted ivy that grew up the corner of one wall seemed almost indigenous. The walls were a graying off white and perhaps it is my cynicism alone that leads me to believe they had been purposely grayed, but unless I had become myopic within that moment, I detected the tell tale swirls of brushstrokes within the mottled color.

From behind he pressed down on my shoulder indicating that I should be seated and presently he passed by me towards a seat on the opposite side of the massive desk that would serve to separate us. The door, I noticed upon examination, was closed, before I turned my attention back to my erstwhile superior. He regarded me for some time with a stern look until I felt that we had passed the point commonly referred to as uncomfortable and presently he must certainly speak. Beneath the weight of his gaze I felt myself pressed further into my chair, which was made of a yellowed wood and not correctly sloped in the back so that it made for a torturous seat; thereby, exacerbating the situation.

When it was clear from my cramped posture that I was thoroughly miserable he began to speak in a deep monotone that was obviously meant to soothe me to the point of relaxation. He did not vituperate me on the

aforementioned subject, but instead spoke to me easily of ideals and dreams that he had had when first he entered the "order" as he referred to it. Throughout the discourse he made many references, as he did, as to how one could change or modify his attitudes to become more socially acceptable. At first I thought I understood where the monologue was headed, but then the cloying rotten egg stench of sulfur interrupted my concentration. He continued to speak to me in a stern and commanding manner for some time until I could no longer disguise my discomfort.

Perhaps he caught sight of my tearing eyes or, despite my disguising efforts, it could have been that he witnessed me pinching shut my nose. Whatever the circumstances, upon discovering the ill effect of that stench upon my physiognomy, he flew into an all out rage. His face visibly grayed and his hands began to tremble as with a violent palsy. The room grew static as his rage mounted and I began to rise in an effort to leave before there was a corporal discharge. I quickly muttered my apologies for the disruption my words created and turned to face the door, but when I had spun myself around he had already left his position on the other side of the desk and had positioned himself with extreme celerity in front of the closed aperture. His physical condition at this point had changed in such a severe way as to make him completely unrecognizable to me. In fact, I could not arrest my natural reflex to turn my back on the beast before me and verify that this was not a second creature in the room with us and not, in fact, the man who had been lecturing me.

When I say that he was a man, I refer only to the fact that he carried himself as a man would, displaying humanistic mannerisms and remaining bipedal in form. But here the comparisons quickly end. His arms became a deeply pink color and had thinned out even as they elongated in a rope-like fashion. His hands became as flat as spades, bearing upon their backs a bifid barb, reed thin and longer than my centermost finger. No longer were they vascular in the fashion of a human hand. Instead, cylindrical holes burrowed from fingertip back towards the center of the mass. When he gesticulated with his arms they made an eerily similar sound to that of hollowed reeds waving in a steady breeze. His face had become ruddy and pocked with holes similar to those tunneling through his arms. The eyes that smoldered within their sockets were oddly dilated and the iris and pupil had seemingly reversed their roles. Of his mouth I became aware that his teeth were chiseled fine and the whole lent his face a feral look when he snarled at me.

It seemed obvious that fury made the transformation occur, though what allowed such a thing remained a mystery until some time later. The stench of sulfur became unbearable and I could not stop the stray thought that wondered if the smell would ever wash from my body, though the absurdity of such an inconsequential query set my mind in motion, though instead of working rationally,

it merely quivered in much the same manner as my limbs. At this point the beast hollered at me in indecipherable syllables for several moments until the surreal nature of it all overcame my sensibilities and I began to collapse. My consciousness seemed to escape from my body and it was if I were hovering above myself looking down upon my crumbling body, but before the floor rushed up to meet me the man-thing roped its arms about me and supported my unconscious shell.

Though it is very difficult for me to admit that I swooned like some bubblegum chewing, pusillanimous, half-wit from decades long past it is, in fact, true that unconsciousness accepted my hat and coat in exchange for a ticket identifying me as their owner. The existentialist in me will simply not allow me to distort the facts. Further, there is no other plausible way for me to explain that the next thing I remember is waking up in the school infirmary behind drawn shades and locked doors.

In the next room, kept voices talked in tones that I presumed were meant to be hushed, though reality knew them to be too guttural and animated to be quiet. The fact that I could not understand them in the least led my mind to imagine that they concerned my fate and my imagination confirmed countless fears, one following another, until a figure that was a mere mockery of a human female clad in a nurses' uniform entered the room in which I lay (hereupon I noticed that I had been constrained by numerous straps crossing my body and lashing me to the child sized cot upon which I reposed unwillingly). For a brief instant I entertained the idea of pleading for freedom, but she entered the room with an air of determination and strode towards me with such determined, heavy strides that I knew any such entreaty on my part was doomed before it left my throat, which I suddenly realized was parched beyond any desired level of saturation.

In haste the would-be woman approached me and at the last I realized that she held in her right appendage (for "arm" did not truly describe the limb that she possessed) a vial of blue liquid incongruous with the setting. In my mind, I screamed at myself not to drink of the suspicious fluid for I was sure it would prove to be neither treacle, nor nepenthe. There are times when man finds that the body is desirous despite the minds commands and this was one such instance. I drank with a lust that could only be described as gluttonous. I knew the potentiality for disaster was high, but recognized only the needs of the body. As I write this retrospective, I know the meaning of regret.

The draught turned out to be potable despite my most dire concerns to the contrary; however, it did, in fact, have a most undesirable side effect, though I did not know it at the time. For the nonce, let it be said that the drink neither killed, nor incapacitated me and I could not help but let my thoughts turn to escape despite what I had to reasonably consider insurmountable odds. The nurse, upon

administering the drug, left my room posthaste. Sure as I was that I was meant only to imbibe and pass on, I could little help myself but notice that the clamor in the other room became more tumultuous when I had drained the draught and the woman re-entered their locale.

After several agonizing minutes of struggling against my bonds, which I did with my eyes closed until they were barely slits, two of my original three captors appeared in the room with me and strode right up on either side. Immediately upon seeing them, I stopped my struggle and quickly feigned sleep. I lay there limply as they began to unfasten the straps that detained me. Neither of them spoke during the entire process and despite the fact that there were in completely human form, not capreolate as the nurse; thus, they worked the straps with completely dexterous hands, though it took several minutes for them to accomplish their task. As I lay still waiting for them to complete this chore, hoping it would not lead to a more grim undertaking, I realized for the first time that I could hear none of the children. Surely by now the lunch period was ended and they would have returned to their classes, but as I had lain there for some considerable period of time I would have thought it likely that classes would have switched at least once and the school halls burgeoning with traffic. If escape proved impossible, then perhaps I could communicate the gravity of my situation with at least one of the attending youths and secure the means of a rescue.

Upon completion of removing my tethers, the two brutes lifted me up with their gnarled hands, though I of course exerted no effort to help them. Rather than pull me along with my feet dragging, they proceeded to carry me by hooking my arms inside theirs and hoisting me so that my extremities were quite removed from the ground. The logistics of this position did not help my cause to escape. I would never have been able to generate the necessary strength to break free from my captors and any severe alteration of my bodily orientation was likely to alert them to my intentions.

I was taken in this manner to the beast that had posed as principal. He examined me forthwith, constantly peering up into my closed eyes even as he turned my head with some violence from side to side. My mouth was as dry as cotton and it was all I could do not to make a pronounced effort of swallowing what little saliva remained to me. When I impressed him as being sufficiently incapacitated, he withdrew several paces from me and drew himself up to an impossible height. He growled something to my guards; I presume it was his blessing, and, after receiving brief instructions, they proceeded to lead me through the infirmary and out into the silent hallway.

We set out in the direction of the boiler room, which I had seen only once in my brief tenure and seemed to recall as a cavernous and dank area situated under the school proper. What torments awaited me there I could only imagine.

My throat burned with a need to swallow that the dearth of saliva remaining to me could not satisfy. A bubble of air, demanding exhalation, rose up in my gorge, though I was not wont to allow it to escape my lips. This further accentuated my already extreme discomfort. Images incongruous to my plight swirled about my mind and it became nigh impossible to concentrate on anything more than the interminable journey upon which we had embarked and for the next several minutes I found myself in torpor.

Mired as I was in lethargy it seemed that it would require a minor miracle to rouse me, but that wonder presented itself in the sound of the warning bell that informed teacher and student alike that classes would be switching presently. It was not a particularly loud sound, but to my leaden ears it was a stentorian sound that echoed around in my head like an avian trapped by four walls and seeking a solitary window. I know not what power watched over me, but let it never be doubted that I was grateful to be of any interest to a celestial being. I shifted my foot faintly, but it was sufficient to catch the underside of a knee with my toe and cause one of my bearers to stumble slightly. In this moment they readjusted themselves and presented me with the opportunity I had sought. For a brief instant my feet planted firmly on the ground and I sprang to action. Summoning a strength that belied my frame, I wrested myself from the grip of their crushing hands and tore myself free of captivity.

Never before had I been so fleet of foot. With reckless abandon I ran back down the hall. The captain of our little entourage it turned out was trailing behind us and despite his snarling efforts to cow me back into subservience, I resisted his attempts to detain me, nearly bowling him over with my adrenaline encouraged strength. As I passed him by, I opened my mouth to laugh at him, but no sound issued forth. Instead the bubble that had resided in my windpipe burst in his face. A surprising amount of liquid came out with the passing wind and I hoped briefly that the whole was supremely fetid. With the back of my hand I wiped at my chin as I ran towards the nearest classroom, but I must have continued to wretch. I was powerless to stop more liquid bubbling forth between my lips, despite my best efforts to clench my teeth.

As I rounded the bend and approached the classroom I briefly caught sight of the students still at their desks. Never more blessed was my creator for salvation was imminent. Or so I thought. I had not stopped to take into account the optical presentation I would be making, let alone the effect that my present condition might have on young minds. I merely knew that I perceived them as flotilla for a drowning man.

Without hesitation I burst into the classroom. I tried to speak but the syllables were indistinct and all that was audible was manic gibberish. There was a collective intake of breath as the students as a whole drew themselves up

in their chairs. The sudden frustration of not being able to communicate one's plight to a potential savior, particularly for one as accustomed to speech as me was unbearable. Many of them pointed at me and in mimicry of their communicative gestures, I began to wave my arms about in a vain attempt at expression. Several of them began to scream at this point and a few of the males students stood and took a defensive posture in front of their more hesitant classmates. I tried several more times to make myself understood, but my repeated failure caused accentuated aggravation. I began to pull at my hair in frustration and I could the veins in my neck pulsing with my growing agitation. The students who had gone to the forefront of their class formed a wall between the door and me and many of the other students began streaming out of the room in haste and with great clamor.

The teacher of the class, meanwhile, a compelling woman with a youthful appearance and a way of finishing a sentence with a punctuation mark that the listener could feel, stared at me without recognition. Her mouth was agape throughout, but she held one hand upraised and all but shoved inside it to stifle her scream. Her eyes performed a seamless search of my face as though intention could be read in the crow's feet and desire could be traced along a laugh line. We were colleagues in name more than in association, but we had a passing familiarity with one another that shortly bred identification.

I continued to stammer and make ineffectual noises from my throat for surely I was living on borrowed time. I had not left my pursuers far behind and I had left no doubt as to my location. Still, I hoped they would search me out while the students remained in such a heightened state of insecurity for to apprehend me would be to reveal their own little cabal.

The room had become horribly quiet, but from without there was a tremendous clamor. The students who had fled had obviously sought safety in other classrooms and the story would spread out of hand. I wondered briefly if I would be exalted loudly as the hero or if hushed voices would name me as a pariah. I turned towards the doorway and noticed that the last of the students was exiting the classroom. In a panic, I turned quickly back to face the pale-haired teacher, anxious that she too might seek asylum elsewhere.

She had drawn closer to me and, consequently, the door, but it did not seem that her intention was to retreat from my presence. She approached me cautiously and gingerly reached out a hand towards my shoulder as though to assure herself that her senses had not utterly failed her. I needed to assuage her to assist me, to implore her advocacy of my legitimate right to escape the persecution from which I fled, but the harder I attempted to communicate with her the more I failed my own cause. This time when I attempted to speak to her, my failure of course was imminent due to the continued congestion in my mouth and throat, I felt more liquid run the course of my chin and drop audibly to the ground like a great wad

of phlegm. I wiped at it and continued the course of my hand up towards my lips. When it reached my mouth I was horrified to find a mass of froth and foam.

Seeing the confused expression cross my face--surely I had anticipated something along these lines to be the case, but the breadth of my discovery was far greater than I could have imagined—she retreated to her desk and opened one of the upper drawers. From it she removed her handbag and retrieved her small compact and mirror from within. She opened the cosmetics case and held it out to me. The face that peered back at me in the exposed glass could not have been my own. The swollen eyes and puffy cheeks and deep lines my mind could assimilate and explain, but the veins in my neck stood out like cords and I frothed like an animal diseased. In effect, I was my own effigy and it should not have surprised me to see someone plunging pins and needles at odd angles into my flesh while another version of me danced and howled in pain. Not knowing what else to do, I pinched my cheek hard to dispel my disbelief, but only succeeded at enlarging the puddle of liquid pooling upon the floor.

The female teacher held me with a sympathetic look as scores of students contributed to a discordant cacophony that would have the infernal choir seem tame by comparison. Reality took me with a firm grip and I came to understand that my pursuers had already caught me. They had given me the look of a madman, then turned me loose amongst the students who knew naught but the misconceptions and lies they had been taught. And I, in my desperation, had cemented my own fate as surely as if I squeezed my feet through the twin passages of a cinder block, then cast myself into the ebon sea of oblivion. Still my companion displayed enough empathy to stay with me through the interminable wait that followed. She spoke to me in soothing tones and her voice penetrated my skin, calming my nerves and stilling my mind, allowing me to think. I still lacked the faculties for coherent speech and all strength had left me, so that the thought of further flight had perished. I knew I would have to wade through a hundred or more students and…

And then came the revelation that I could help them. While I was no longer capable of preserving my future, I could, in effect, provide sanctuary for the students. It would require self sacrifice, but I was compunctious enough to seek atonement, not for anything that I had done, but for what would remain unfinished: for discovering a truth I would not be able to share. I had always wondered if, when faced with the end of my existence, I would be able to hold true to the values and philosophies that I held dear, Objectivism notwithstanding. Now that I stood upon the precipice of that very chasm, instinct took over with a surprising ease and contumelious remained only and adjective in my vocabulary, not an actual descriptor for me.

It took many minutes, during which time the shrieks of students had

reduced in number, replaced by ill-formed jokes and the cackles they induced, for the beasts that haunt my waking mind to gather me up and lead me off. Students were led from the halls into their classroom, the one I was presently occupying being the lone exception. More jokes followed, all of them at my expense, but I my anger never rose for I understand that it is an inchoate human condition to joke away that with which we cannot come to terms.

After the students had been spared any further sightings of my freakish self, the beasts that pursued me arrived. Behind them loomed the school principal, bundled as he was in the obscurity of a full trench coat and with his hat pulled down low over his features. No words were spoken to me and the handful that did pass for conversation were for the sole benefit of the woman who had stayed with me: conciliatory tones meant to assure her that I would be taken for the help I so manifestly required. My hands were bound behind me with a stout piece of hemp, until a more proper straitjacket could be applied; all of this under the sanctimonious condition of protecting others and myself from the madness that compelled me.

In the time since my removal from the school I have come to learn through snippets of various conversations that the students have been told I underwent stringent testing and evaluation. Following this, as the story goes, I have been receiving the most superlative psychiatric treatment available. This is, of course, all a clever ruse on the part of my captors, who, in truth, took me into the deepest recesses of the boiler room. For a period of time that must have been several months, I was visited hour after countless hour by the beasts that posed as members of the school staff.

They tended to my needs, though just barely. I was given only the very basic physical necessities. Of my mental needs I can only phrase it that they attempted to rehabilitate every nuance of my mind, both waking and sleeping, though I was permitted to do that only at odd intervals and for so short a period of time that I came to understand how one could fall asleep while astride a horse. Someone or some thing was with me all the time until I reached the point of complete physical exhaustion and escape was no longer a possibility. I had managed, through the loss of much skin from my fingertips, to scratch out the mortar surrounding a solitary brick in the wall behind me. I was fortunate that was thereby revealed a small void, into which I shall put these papers and make plenum. It is the nature of man to look back upon his life and long to have procreated. What horrible irony that my mind should allow me to make such salacious metaphors, yet I shall engender the wall with my words as my final act.

During our long tenure together I came to observe at some length various members of the staff as they watched over me, so that I can testify with complete veracity that a full dozen of the teaching and administrative staff were not human, but of some vile ilk. For the first week I screamed as loudly and as constantly as

my throat would allow. They ceased giving me water after the first day, so it should not require me to say more specifically how my cries trailed off both in volume and frequency over the course of that week. When I had first come to the school I had overheard students telling of a strange wailing that would carry through the air ducts. Some former teacher turned banshee that haunted the school halls. Then it was but another ghost story that youths tell each other as a rite of passage. Now I berated myself for not calling in the authorities to conduct a full investigation. They might have thought me mad, but to insure the safety of their children, I may have convinced the requisite number of parents to demand such an inquiry. I consider these times of self-chastisement to be periods of weakness, for surely it is not a rational condemnation on my part, merely wishful thinking with no true basis. I have dismissed these thoughts repeatedly in an effort to keep my mind clear and sane in the hopes that when an opportunity like this presented itself that I would have the clarity of mind and fortitude of spirit to complete my mission of protecting others.

It is due to my pathetic condition, largely real, but with some small part of acting on my part, that the guards have long since lost their vigilance. It was vital to my cause that I not act too hastily in scrawling this, lest I be duped into thinking them less observant, and I forfeit what I consider my only opportunity to educate others in this matter.

For all that I had studied and considered myself to be learned and open-minded in most matters, and despite the breadth with which I pursued philosophy, still I had never explored religion with any great depth. I repeated philosophical tenets to myself as mantras, until at length, I switched to the Lord's Prayer, though in truth, it was more likely but a sad version of it, as I'm not sure I ever said it the same way twice and it is even less likely that I ever once got it correct. I had never sought to step foot upon this battlefield. Some battles, it seems, come to us instead, regardless of our preparedness.

In hindsight we descry all deception. Be not deceived any longer, dear reader. I have kept their attentions firmly manifested on me for as long as I could hold out. I owed it to all involved. Please do what you can to ensure their continued safety. The footsteps are nigh upon me and I must hide this in the wall behind me and replace the brick I removed with what little time remains. My captivity in this purgatory ends and I rejoice with an exaltation normally reserved only for the angels. I am and shall likely remain somewhere south of heaven.



# DARGONI

By Royal McGraw

Hush. Silence filled the arena. Mic Dargoni lay motionless, decked flat on his back, head spinning. *Three,* said the referee, *four, five.* José Consuela had already begun circling the ring, arms outstretched, claiming his victory in front of the capacity crowd. José bent over Mic and jeered, called him weak, spat. He taunted the veteran fighter to get back up, to go another round, to make it a respectable fight. *Six,* said the referee, *seven.*

Mic Dargoni stirred. For a moment it looked like he might recover. His gloves fumbled at the ropes, his feet found purchase solid enough to support his massive frame on quivering knees, and then whatever well of energy he tapped ran dry. Mic Dargoni collapsed to the mat. As he lost consciousness, Mic felt the stench of a death not his own cloud his nostrils. *Eight,* said the referee, *nine…*

Ten minutes to twelve. The fight had ended hours ago. The stadium was empty. The fans, agents, staff, news crews, and moneymen all long gone. Mic Dargoni sat in the locker room, alone, massaging his wrists and icing down purple bruised knuckles, when a stink like stale cabbage or baby sick pierced the heavy odor of sweat and steam. Mic glanced over his shoulder to the entrance and watched as a man, short and round, bundled within a long navy overcoat and the generous folds of a red scarf, waddled through the double doors. The scarf covered the man's cheeks and neck and his nose brushed against a pair of dark reflective aviator sunglasses perched beneath a sloping wide-brimmed hat. As he stepped forward to address Mic, the smell of him blew stronger; his stink now suffused with undertones of sulfur, sod, and naphthalene.

"A lotta people lost a lot of money on you tonight," the stranger said. His voice buzzed like mud daubers swarming from a stone-struck hive.

"Then you shoulda bet on the other guy," Mic answered, standing up to his full height. At six-feet-four, he towered a full foot and a half above the diminutive intruder. "You should know, only athletes and league personnel are allowed in the locker rooms. You could get in a lot of trouble being back here."

"I'm not looking for trouble," the stranger answered, flashing an access pass. "I'm looking to make you an offer, Mr. Dargoni. And I think you'll want to hear me out."

Mic squinted but his eyes could not bring the name or the photo into sharp focus. "You a manager or something?" Mic asked. "'Cause you should know I already got a guy."

"No." The stranger's laugh rang like a whipsaw grinding through timber. "Nothing like that, although my function is managerial in nature. My name is Sasha.

You've heard of me, perhaps, from the other fighters? I know they speak of me."

Though Mic had no hope of reading Sasha's expression underneath the yards of concealing fabric, Mic supposed the man was smiling. Sasha's was a name spoken in hushed secretive tones, the whispered last glimmer of redemption for wearied fighters too beat down for Horse or hope. Mic heard rumors that Sasha orchestrated a number of impossible comebacks in exchange for debt collection and other odd jobs not for the faint-of-heart or the straight-and-narrow. And Mic had himself witnessed a number of ten-time losers reborn in late-career ripostes who attributed their youthful vigor and animal passions to deals unspecified with the man standing before him now. Mic felt a pang of yearning slaked by a sudden distinct unease.

"Yeah, I've heard of you," Mic answered.

"And?" Sasha pressed closer.

"Not interested."

Mic gathered his gear into his gym bag, slipped into his shoes, and moved toward the door. As Mic crossed past, Sasha whipped his hand out of his glove and, moving faster than Mic could register, seized his bare forearm in a fleshy tentacled jellyfish grip.

A sudden electric charge shuddered through Mic's shoulder and down his spine, wracking his body with a dull numbing throb. Mic froze in his tracks, unable to move or speak or even cry out in pain. He dropped his ice pack to the floor and it split open, scattering cubes across the tile that melted and boiled like butter on a hot plate. Mic slumped to the floor feeling far removed from the sensation of his chest heaving in and out and it was not until he felt the oxygen circulate through his strangled bloodstream, bringing clarity to his thoughts and precision to his movements, that Mic realized he had been holding his breath.

"Now that I have your attention, Mr. Dargoni." Sasha released his hold on Mic and quick as a flit had his hand once more concealed inside his glove. "We have an important matter to discuss concerning an acquaintance of yours."

"What the hell was that?" Mic stammered.

"The pain will pass in a few moments," Sasha answered. He bent down, bringing himself face to face with the prone pugilist like a spider scrutinizing its immobilized prey. "I would hope that it the meantime you might listen and reflect upon my offer."

At such proximity, Mic found the stench nauseating and he strained to turn his head away. Sasha removed his sunglasses, revealing sunken cherry-hued eyes burning like taillights in a sebaceous grey fog. "Your friend, Mr. Robert Gully," Sasha said, "owes me a great deal of money."

"You want me to collect on a friend?"

"Nothing so direct," Sasha answered. "I had hoped to propose a trade. You

provide me with a service, simple enough for a man of your abilities, and I forget his debt." Sasha kicked away the last lone cube of ice still unmelted at his feet. "And I'll even pay you for your time in cash." Mic supposed Sasha smiled once more. "Or in trade."

Mic splashed on all fours through the puddle of icy cold water toward the rear emergency exit. Sasha did not block his path, but snapped his fingers. The emergency door blew open and José Consuela entered. He held a 9mm pistol fast to the temple of Robert Gully who, though by no means a small man, dwarfed to the bulk of the Columbian middleweight who gripped his neck.

"Jesus, Mic, you OK?" Gully choked out.

"Hey, Gully, been a long time," Mic wheezed.

"This guy is a real serious character, Mic. Don't do that thing you always do."

"What thing is that?"

"You know, piss him off."

"Yeah, I was starting to figure that out."

"So? Do we have a deal, Mr. Dargoni?" Sasha asked.

José kicked Mic across the belly, knocking him over onto his back, and seized him by his collar. José spoke as if in a trance, "He asked you a direct question, *esé*. You answer Mr. Sasha when he asks you a direct question."

"I don't kill people." Mic spat blood onto the tile.

"I wouldn't ask you to," Sasha preened. "And as you can see, I employ other men who possess that instinct."

"Don't do women either," Mic added. "Not even to rough 'em up."

"All I require is that you monitor the movements of an associate of mine and make sure no one attempts to harm him."

"Just a protection gig?" Mic wiped his mouth.

"Yes, with two small conditions. First, you will supervise the security measures without alerting your charge to your presence. You see, despite my insistence, my associate retains a hesitancy to employ protection." Sasha chuckled like he and Dargoni were in on an old joke, then continued, "If no danger presents itself, you do nothing. However, if the unfortunate should occur, you will employ whatever means necessary to ensure that my associate remains unharmed."

"So what's the second condition?"

Sasha nodded towards Gully. "He is."

"Gully?"

"Take him with you."

"That's it?"

"Yes." Sasha handed Mic an 8½ by 11 manila envelope. "Inside, you will find everything you need to know." Sasha crossed past Gully and José to

the emergency exit. For the first time, Mic realized that the opened door had not triggered the fire alarm. "You may let him go, José," Sasha hissed. "And Mr. Dargoni, we'll meet again soon."

Mic bent Gully backwards over the hood of his black Cadillac Fleetwood convertible and raised his fist to smack his estranged acquaintance a good one. "I don't see you for ten years and you show up with a gun to your head," Mic fumed. "What the hell is that?"

"Mic, I didn't mean it to go down like this. Honest."

"Honest? What the hell did you get me into?"

Mic punched the hood right beside Gully's head, his knuckles imprinting four evenly spaced marble-sized divots in the steel. Gully shook free and scrambled a few paces back, waving his hands to ward Mic off. "Hey, calm down, buddy," Gully said. "Take a second and think this through."

"You told Sasha you knew me."

"Yeah, no. I mean, I did. But not like that."

"Not like what?"

"It's not like I told him about you to get me outta this jam. It came up before when I placed the bet."

"The bet? What bet?"

"You a jackass? The bet. The bet where I put down ten grand for my old pal Mic Dargoni to knock the teeth outta José Consuela's head. Shit, I'da known Sasha had Consuela in his pocket, I'da saved my money, but *que sera sera*, huh?"

"You're in this trouble because you bet on me?"

"Hey, not like that, though. It was a good fight."

"Shit," said Mic. "Get in the goddamn car."

"This the place?" asked Gully, cruising shotgun as Mic wheeled into the parking lot across the street from the Calamity Bar & Grill. Mic had thrown back a few beers there on occasion and knew the joint for a waystation between the strip clubs on Savereign and the gutter out back. They were far enough from the strip that the flashing neon still painted the sky dustbowl yellow but didn't bounce back down to illuminate the shadows. Mic shifted the engine to idle and leaned back low against the seat.

"Yeah," Mic growled, his voice resonating barely above a whisper. "We keep lookout 'til the guy leaves and then we tail him wherever he heads next."

"And you know what he looks like?" Gully rapped his knuckles on the handle bar. The wait was gnawing at him already. A few more hours and he'd be more trouble than good, too scared for a fight and too jumpy to stand lookout.

"Got a picture." Mic pulled a glossy color 8 x 10 from the manila envelope

and dumped it onto Gully's lap. "Take a good look and then keep your eyes peeled on the door, OK?"

"This guy got a name?"

"Menatech. Lazlo Menatech."

The photo showed a meeting between two men. The first, Menatech, was handsome, blonde, tall and well built, wearing a three-piece Italian suit and holding a black leather attaché. Menatech was shaking hands with the second man who stood with his back to the camera, face cloaked in shadows that rendered him completely unidentifiable save for the circular tattoo on his forearm depicting an arched blue doorway intersected by filigreed spears of red and green.

"Now that's a suit. What d'ya figure, Italian?"

"Sure."

"Drugs, right? I mean that's what you're figuring?"

"I figure it's none of my business what he did to be where he is and all of my business to make sure he gets where he's going." Mic answered, then fell silent.

Two minutes passed. Then twenty.

"You think it'll take long?" Gully asked.

"As long as it takes."

"Yeah." Gully paused. He popped in the dashboard lighter and fumbled a Lucky Strike out of a crumpled soft pack. "Christ, this is a mess I got you into."

"Don't smoke in the car."

"I'm nervous, OK? I'll roll down the window."

"Sure."

The dashboard lighter clicked out. With trembling hands, Gully took it and lit the tip of his cigarette with one hand while rolling down the window with the other. He sucked in a lungful then exhaled, arching his head to blow a plume of smoke out the window. "This is like, I mean orders of magnitude difference, but the thing is, y'know, you being there for me right now is same as when we were kids, right? Dallas, what was his name, Kassabah, remember that? Used to kick the shit out of me all the time until that day you dropped a right hook square to his jaw and he went down crying. I saw that and I knew you was gonna be a big boxer some day. Saw the future."

"Forget about it."

"Yeah, but the same thing now. You helping me out."

"Don't ash on the upholstery."

Gully swiped the ash from the seat between his legs, leaving a long black smear on the tan leather. He turned to Mic, instantly apologetic, bouncing back and forth between emotions, laughing then scared then wistful then choked up.

"Shit. Man, I'm trying, but I'm a mess here."

"You'll get over it."

Gully squeezed the burning cherry from the stub of his cigarette then flicked the filter out into the alleyway.

"No, no, not this time. What I seen, Mic, you don't get over that. That shit gets burned in. Ingrained, you know what I mean? You saw Sasha. I mean, you got a good look."

"Yeah."

Gully dumped out a fresh cigarette into his palm.

"You know what I'm saying then? He ain't human."

Mic sat in silence, not answering.

"Aw, c'mon, little guy like that drops a mountain like you, a professional boxer for Christ's sake, with just a touch of his hand and you don't think maybe something unnatural is happening?"

"Maybe he had me by a pressure point or something."

"Pressure point? Christ, Mic, you really think that?" Gully waited, but Mic did not reply. "OK, fine, think that" Gully continued, "But the difference is, when he had me chained up in his place, y'see, I saw him. Without his get up, right? I got a good look at what he looks like underneath all of that and whatever he was, I'm telling you, he wasn't human."

"Maybe he was burned. Lotta burned guys look funny."

"I'm telling you he wasn't burned. Something else."

"I told you not to ash on the upholstery."

Gully flicked away the second cigarette half-smoked.

"This is bigger than the goddamn upholstery, Mic. Something real goddamn spooky is going down and -- "

"Ss*shhh*. Keep it down."

"What? What?"

"I thought I saw something."

Mic leaned forward and looked up in time to catch a dim flicker of movement at the rooftops directly above the alleyway. Mic gently unlatched the door and stepped out toe-to-heel to quiet the dig of his boots on the loose gravel. Each step was loud, too loud to his own straining ears, but maybe drowned at a distance by the thrum of the idling engine.

"What are you doing?" Gully pleaded. "Leaving me?"

"I'm checking it out. Anything happens to me, you get out of here, OK? We meet back at the Abbey on Cloverfield back in the old neighborhood."

"Hey, be safe, alright?" Gully rolled up the window.

Mic moved away from the car, crossing to the far side of the Calamity Bar & Grill. Beyond the swash of yellow streetlight framing the mouth of the alley, there was only impenetrable darkness. Mic perked his ears, searching for the source of a sound he could not a place. It was an intermittent heaving, like a man

sucking air through a respirator, but organic, wetter, meatier. He heard scrambling from directly above him. He spun around and caught another glimpse of someone or, recalling what Gully had said, maybe some *thing*, moving with a loping animal stride, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, and then in a single impossible leap clearing a gap ten feet across. Mic backed toward the entrance of the alleyway, keeping his eyes peeled for signs of motion, ears alert and listening, blood baked by adrenaline to white-hot fire.

"Is that your car?" The voice came from behind him.

Mic swirled around, raised a right fist to throw the first punch, and seized hold of Lazlo Menatech by his tie.

Menatech started, holding up his hands in plain view.

"Please, I didn't mean to upset you," Menatech said.

"Yeah, sorry." Mic let go. "Snuck up on me there."

"Again, I apologize." Menatech fixed his tie, then indicated the idling Cadillac Fleetwood across the street where Gully waved for attention. *A little late*, Mic thought, *but Gully was new to this line of work*. Menatech went on. "You see, I couldn't help but noticing you and your associate surveilling the bar and I wanted to know who sent you."

"Sasha."

"I told him not to send anyone."

"Guess he figured different."

Menatech pulled out a money clip fat with hundred dollar bills and counted out a neat stack. "How much do you want to leave me alone? A thousand dollars? Two thousand?"

"Look, I'm not taking your money."

More hundred dollar bills. "Five thousand."

"It isn't like that. No deal at any price."

"A man of honor. How rare." Menatech followed Mic's glance to the Fleetwood and zeroed in on Gully. "But there is something at stake here greater than money, isn't there?" Menatech folded the hundred dollar bills back into his money clip and crossed deeper into the alleyway.

"Hey, you shouldn't go back there."

"But I have you for protection, don't I?"

Mic stumbled down the alleyway, his feet snared in garbage bags, shins striking trashcans. "Yeah, and I'm saying we should go around. For your protection."

Menatech pressed deeper, a shadow merging with shadows. Good eyes or no, Mic thought, rubbing his bruised knees, nobody should be able to see their way through this kind of dark. Menatech turned back to face Mic, his eyes gleaming in the darkness like blue-green traffic signals.

"You would do anything for a friend, wouldn't you, Mr. Dargoni?" Menatech said, and layered underneath his words Mic heard a subtle rushing of great wings and the barcarole chatter of crows in the distance. Menatech placed a cool velvety hand to the boxer's neck. "Even a friend you haven't seen in ten years like Robert Gully?"

"A friend is a friend, you know?" Mic shrugged.

"I suppose you are correct. A friend is a friend."

"Hey, did Sasha tell you about Gully and me?"

Menatech turned and walked on.

"Hey, wait a minute. I asked you a question."

The last traces of illumination winked away as a great hairy beast plunged from the rooftops above the alleyway, passing for an instant between Mic and the moonlit sky. The beast landed with perfect feline grace, exhaling on impact a thick swash of musty steam from its moist black nostrils. Mic yanked Menatech behind him for protection, stepping between his charge and the hulking wolf with snarling, gnashing, sinewy jaws that padded towards him. In the quick flash of distant headlights raking past, Mic could see before him a wolf-like creature neither altogether man nor altogether beast, but a horrific syncretized abomination of the two.

"What the hell?" Mic muttered under his breath. And that was all the time he had before the beast was upon him with red dripping fangs in a yawning gash of a mouth, a savage travesty of human form gorged with primal bloodlust. Then a great paw the size of a catcher's mitt swatted him aside, slicing a deep gash in the meat of his shoulder and sending his two hundred and twenty pounds of bulk sailing like a baseball.

The beast pounced forward toward Menatech then dropped, paws splayed out, whimpering. It scurried backwards with frantic hurried footfalls, writhing like a rat with its neck hooked in a spring trap. At that same moment, Mic felt himself grow ill. Bile rose in his stomach. His breath grew still in his chest and his exposed flesh tingled as if abraded with wire brushes soaked in bleach and brine.

Mic doubled over in agony, but could not look away. He watched as Menatech held out his hand, as if reaching into an invisible cabinet, and then retrieved from empty space a golden-hilted Katar. Menatech raised the ceremonial shortsword high above the head of the simpering beast and then brought the blade down, breaching bone and brain and brick with one able blow.

Menatech withdrew his Katar from the still shuddering corpse and traced his fingers along the blade. Where his hand passed, the sword was no longer stained with clotting blood and fibrous clumps of brain but transfigured to a radiant polished glow. Menatech smiled at Mic, who now heaved the contents of his stomach onto the ground at his knees, and then took a large step back into a blue-

white shaft of moonlight.

"We will meet again, Mr. Dargoni." Menatech said and, as if lashed by a thousand tiny whips, his suit began shredding into tatters of fine merino wool and Villa Del Prado silk. The tatters were then caught up and carried away by unseen cyclone winds that rose from empty space and loosed their fury in an expanding tornado of debris. Menatech arched backwards, standing now on the balls of bare feet, then not standing at all but floating inches above the ground. A hollow crackle, like an electrical transformer discharging its load shook the air, vibrating stone and steel with concussive force. Windows shattered, dumpsters toppled over. Brilliant flashes of searing white light broke open the heavens and poured down a pillar of churning flame. And then Menatech was gone, disappeared into thin air, dissolved by fire perhaps, but leaving no trace save a ring of char and ash where he had stood moments before.

Mic clutched his hand to the wound in his shoulder, feeling the blood pass freely through his fingers. He stumbled, dropped to his knees, and then collapsed on his belly, helpless. His arms were stiff, unresponsive, and incapable of the strength necessary to pull him to the street with even clumsy leaden strokes. Mic tried to call out to Gully, but his throat could form no words.

Mic rolled onto his back, his eyes finding where the beast had fallen. Lying there in its place was a man, naked, pink, and helpless, eyes glazed and fixed and open, weakly hacking out blood into a shiny black pool on the pavement.

Mic heard footsteps approach.

"Help," Mic choked out. "I'm hurt."

"Yes, you are," said a female voice. Mic turned his head to the side. A pair of black leather boots laced to the knee crossed into his field of vision. "Badly." The nearest boot lifted and descended onto his cheek, rubbing the inside of his mouth raw against his molars. "And I should leave you here to die for what you have allowed to occur."

"Should or will?" Mic coughed. "Let me die, I mean." Following the leg upwards, Mic found a blonde girl, no more than twenty-five, towering above him, her expression cold and dispassionate, but possessed of a striking classic beauty. The girl rolled Mic over onto his stomach.

"Hey, what's your name, sweetheart?" Mic asked.

"Kess."

Kess kicked him in the head. Twice.

Even before his eyes fluttered open, Mic felt a draft of stale air blast across his cheeks and the sandpaper grind of bare flesh pressed tight to chilly concrete. When his eyes finally opened, he found himself shackled to the floor of a walk-in meat locker. He fought against his chains for nearly twenty minutes before

reclining, exhausted, against a metal shelving unit. Stripped of his personal effects, Mic had no means to gauge how long he had been unconscious or how long it took for the door to finally open and reveal his captors.

"My tests show you to be human," said Dr. Ballantine, a small grey man. He removed his eyeglasses and wiped them on his lab coat as he stepped in from the hallway. "Although I would not have believed that a human would willingly betray his own kind had I not seen it with my own eyes."

Kess entered behind Dr. Ballantine. She crossed to Mic and lifted his face to inspect the overlapping bruises rising across his right cheek. "He showed instinct for combat," she said. "Perhaps he is a servitor in the Legion."

"Yes, perhaps," Dr. Ballantine considered. "But perhaps not. Tell me, your license says you are Mic Dargoni. Is that your true name or one given you by your keepers?"

"Only name I got," Mic returned. "And the only one keeping me anywhere is you. So how about you let me go?"

"First tell me how you came to be in the service of Menatech the Constructor, First Apostle of Maplhas."

Mic looked to Dr. Ballantine and then to Kess. "Is he serious? Look, whatever crazy thing you got going here against that guy I got no part of, OK? A shark called a blood debt on a friend of mine and I was doing a protection job to cover the balance. Beginning and end of the story."

"Why would Menatech need your protection?"

"I don't know. He didn't even want me there. Tried to pay me off, but I stuck around because I didn't want any trouble with my buddy from Sasha. Then some rabid dog or something got the drop on us and the next thing I remember is precious here introducing her steel toe to my face."

"Then you do not know what you have done?"

"Got my buddy whacked, most likely."

"Perhaps." Dr. Ballantine stood up and crossed to the doorway. "Come, Kess, follow me. We have much to discuss."

Kess lingered. "If what you say is true…"

"Yeah?" Mic glared coldly.

"Then I apologize."

Kess turned from him and exited.

Once again, Mic was alone.

It was hours later before the cell door opened once more to banish the shadows in harsh sunlight and replenish the air grown close from confinement. Kess stood in the doorway, carrying a small chrome surgical tray that held calipers, a roll of white gauze, and a small ornamented jewelry box. She wore a laboratory

coat with latex gloves folded into the pockets and her hair braided back in a ponytail.

"Here to take my kidneys?" Mic mumbled.

"I have convinced Dr. Ballantine to allow you an opportunity to trade for your freedom," Kess answered, setting up the tray on folding legs. "You would do wisely to accept the terms as they are presented."

"I ain't going anywhere."

"Very well," Kess paused for emphasis, "Our Order has been given reason to believe that the man you were protecting, Lazlo Menatech, as you know him, is endeavoring to do great harm to this world."

"Like what, hoss?" Mic jangled against his restraints. "He gonna poison the reservoir?"

"You make jokes?"

"You wanna just cut the crap."

"Listen well." Kess jammed her thumb against the bruise still swelling under Mic's eye and applied pressure.

"Ow ow ow, OK. Jesus, I'm listening."

"The beast that attacked you in the alleyway was an agent sent by our Order to eliminate Menatech before his plans could be set in motion. His failure, and your complicity in that failure, provides Menatech with a window of opportunity in which to complete his work."

"So I'm getting blamed for his screw up?"

"You are to blame." Kess regarded Mic coolly.

"So what's the deal?" Mic asked.

"The deal is if you complete the mission and eliminate Menatech, you will be set free."

"I said I don't kill people."

"Or you may choose to remain here without food and water until such time as you are dead. These are your choices."

"I don't kill people."

"Menatech is not a person."

"Even if I believe you about that, it still ain't much of a choice by any even way of figuring."

"Yet it is the only choice offered to you."

"What says I don't just bolt when you let me go?"

"This," Kess answered, removing the lid from the jewelry box and revealing inside a small red-brown maggot, an inch long, squirming in loam. Using the calipers, she pinched the maggot by conical protuberances on its hindquarters and held it to the light. Mic could now make out a pair of vestigial forearms set low behind the shoulder plate, two rows of domed black eyes, and raking mandibles

that spun against the maxillae like the blades of a blender.

"This is a boerwurm." Kess whispered.

"Hey, uh." Despite himself, Mic found he had grown very nervous. "What are you planning to do with that?"

"The boerwurm enters the spinal column through the base of the neck and affixes itself to the first and second vertebrae where it will burrow through your cerebellum and into your occipital lobe, first affecting balance and fine motor control and then affecting vision. I am told the experience is quite painful and fatal if not treated."

"That thing is going to eat my brain?"

"It will try to, yes."

"I'm thinking I'll take the slow death."

"First understand, if you complete your task within the space of twenty-four hours, we will remove the boerwurm and repair the damage done. Your life will continue as before."

"And if I skip town?"

"You will die the most excruciating death imaginable."

"So, if I do this," Mic considered, "And I'm not saying I will. But if I do, you say there'll be no permanent damage?"

"Very little, I would think."

"You would think?"

"No one implanted with a boerwurm has ever returned."

"No one?"

"Knowing this, do you still wish to proceed?"

"Do it."

Kess nodded. "Be very still."

Mic braced himself, tensing his neck and back muscles as Kess leaned over him. He felt the cold steel of the calipers brush his hairline and then the tickle of frantic hair-thin antennae whipping at the goose flesh at his collar. Suddenly, the tickle became a dull pinch and then the dull pinch became a sharp brain-shattering agony as the boerwurm ripped its way through flesh and burrowed to denuded bone.

"It would be best not to fight it," said Kess. She ran a wet cloth against his sweaty brow and held his head locked between her arms as Mic reared and bucked, teeth grinding and chomping his tongue to a swollen bloody pulp.

"Oh god oh god oh god," Mic stammered. Mic felt tears streaming down his face. Then like a wave receding from shore, the pain began to subside. No longer sharp and immediate, the hurt was now a cycle of dull and persistent throbs that shadowed his thoughts and motions.

"Do you know who you are?"

"Yeah."

"There is some danger of temporary disassociation."

"No, I'm fine now." Mic spat out a glob of blood.

"You are free to go."

Kess disconnected the manacles. Mic stood up, rubbed the redness at his wrists where they had been bound, and then seized Kess by her throat and slammed her to the wall.

"Now, you wanna tell me what's really going on here," he asked. "Or do I have to squeeze it out of you?"

"I have told you no lies," Kess sputtered.

"You expect me to believe all that?"

"*Revereor*," Kess intoned. Her hair, tussled by an unfelt wind, whipped across her shoulders. Her skin radiated light, her eyes burned wildfire, and her voice dropped an octave as she spoke the command: "Unhand me."

Unthinking, Mic obeyed then realized he was not in control of his own actions: his body had moved like a marionette on strings, wooden and clumsy, puppet to an alien will.

"What I have told you is truth," Kess continued. "And I assure you, that were you to kill me now, your own death would be an inescapable certainty. Do you not feel the boerwurm gorging on your flesh? Even now, your muscles tense. Soon, they will ache to respond and, finally, right before you die, your vision will collapse in on itself, losing all color, all depth, and all distinction."

The pain had not returned, not yet, but Mic could hear the boerwurm chewing in the back of his head, a sound like a garbage disposal pulping soft tissue and grinding bone to powder.

"OK, so you're telling the truth."

"I am," Kess said. Her luminance faded away.

"And you really think I can do whatever it is you're asking? I mean, I don't even know how to find the guy."

"Take this. It will guide your way." Kess withdrew a small glass bauble, an orb no bigger than a tennis ball, and placed it into Mic's outstretched palm. The bauble glinted as it caught the light from the doorway then flared with a brilliance all its own.

"Did you just see that? How did it do that?"

"You waste time with questions, Mr. Dargoni."

Mic was back in the alley behind the Calamity Bar just before sunset. His car was still there, keys still in the ignition like he'd left it. Mic figured the car had stood where it was, engine running, until the tank had run out of gas and choked

the throttle. "Gully, you still around?" Mic called out, but no answer came. Mic was grateful that Gully had bolted. Now that the job was botched, Sasha had no reason to keep Gully alive and every reason to protect his reputation. Mic decided after this was all over he would lend Gully a few bucks to get out of town and disappear.

Mic started into the alley. Before he had gone a dozen feet, he felt a burning from within his pocket. He removed the glass bauble Kess had given him and found that it had grown hot to the touch and now radiated brilliant white light. The light extended from the surface and traveled along the air in front of him creating a wispy snaking mist that slid purposefully through the alley ahead of him.

"Neat trick," Mic said. He followed the trail on foot, moving through back alleys and bus depots until the ground under his feet grew familiar. Without realizing it, he had returned to his old neighborhood. Catching sight of the main street theater, the five and dime with busted windows, and the run down tract housing linked at the walls like boxcars, Mic floated back to his youth.

The smoke trail Mic followed wisped down a narrow isolated *cul de sac*. And then a sudden awareness of his destination roused Mic from his nostalgic reverie. He broke into a run, racing full-tilt down the middle of the street, his feet thumping over uneven pavement. As he ran, his body whipped the mystical smoke that preceded him into great whirling eddies of light and splendor that encircled his straining limbs. Soon, Mic stood before the wasting foundations of Cloverfield Abbey.

The Abbey was an abandoned stone cathedral with blown out windows gaping like gouged sockets and walls still charred black from a blaze that long ago gutted the building from the floorboards out. The resulting inferno had been a portent of waste and decline and soon the Abbey's bell tower stood as a stark grey anachronism on a neighborhood skyline of liquor store fluorescents and Triple-X neon.

The tall wrought-iron gate surrounding the perimeter of the Abbey was chained and locked, but from childhood Mic knew of a break large enough to accommodate a full grown man along the southwest corner of the compound. Within seconds he was flying through a hedge garden grown wild with weeds and brambles and rounding the shed on the eastern wall. Directly before him and facing away stood Gully, edging quietly along the narrow footpath. Mic took a step toward Gully and then stopped, stricken by the sight of a horrifying beast of algae-colored scales, blue-black wings, and bone-white claws dripping with strips of red sinew, swooping down on Gully from above.

"Gully," Mic called out. "Duck."

Gully whipped back, saw Mic with his face gone pale tearing towards him, and then traced the boxer's eye line upwards to the shadow of doom descending upon him with gruesome surety. At the last possible instant, Gully bowled over

backwards, dodging by mere centimeters the gnashing harpy claws.

The beast, prey now grounded, beat tornados with its wings and lit to the ground. Mic felt an unnatural pressure rise behind his temples that inflated his eyeballs near to bursting. The whole of reality seemed to warp into a madness of converging horizons and then standing before Mic was no longer the winged beast but Lazlo Menatech, nude and sexless, flexing honed muscles under tan unblemished skin.

"What are you?" Mic asked, choking back his fear.

"A devil, Mr. Dargoni," Lazlo split his lips in a wide Cheshire smile to reveal teeth filed to points. "I would have guessed that you would have known that by now."

"What do you want with Gully?"

"I am simply claiming what is mine by right." As before, Menatech passed his hand into an unseen oblivion and withdrew a scroll yellowed with age and inked in blood. "Your Mr. Gully owes me a great debt. And with the appropriate urging from the one you know as Sasha, you were kind enough to deliver him to me whole and intact." Menatech returned the scroll to its invisible purchase.

"Help me," Gully burbled as Menatech pinned his neck underneath the weight of his powerful claw-like foot. "P-p-please."

"Sasha already had him. Why come to me?"

"There are rules we must all follow."

"Whatever he owes, he ain't paying," Mic countered.

"And you are here to stop me?" Menatech removed his foot from Gully's throat and then hooked him by the roof of his palette with a long clawed fingernail. Gully gasped and flailed for air like a walleye perch in a fish kill as Menatech wrenched from his quivering maw a single imbedded rear molar. Gully vomited red tendrils of blood and mucus then fell again beneath the life-crushing weight of Menatech's heel. Menatech clutched the tooth within a balled fist, narrowed his eyes to yellowed slits, and tapped the fingertips of his other hand across his knuckles in a strange arcane gesture.

"*Ballista*," Menatech intoned. The molar, now roiling in sky-blue liquid fire, levitated an inch above Menatech's open palm and then shot forward at twice the speed of sound. The molar passed unhindered straight through Mic, plowing from his belly a hole for seed and harvesting from the small of his back a crimson carnation of flesh and gore. Mic pitched back, spun head over heels by the force of the missile, and landed sprawled out flat on his belly. Mic looked on helplessly as Menatech seized Gully by the collar and somehow vanished, taking Gully with him, into an invisible doorway opened up in the space beyond seeing.

Mic woke with a start, sucked air into lungs no longer fouled by congealing

blood, and blinked until the world racked to steady focus. Kess looked down on him and Mic realized his head was cradled in her lap. Much time had elapsed since Mic lost consciousness and, in the half-light of dusk, Kess's golden blonde hair was haloed by a setting sun that framed her face in the dusty-pink hues of a Botticelli angel.

"For a boxer, you spend much time unconscious."

"Story of my career." Mic muttered. His head pulsed with each new quivering heartbeat. "What hit me?"

"You were badly wounded."

"Yeah, but what hit me?"

"Powerful flesh magick. A tooth."

"I thought I was dead."

"You will know when you are dead."

"Lucky me he missed the vital stuff."

"Platonic Demons seldom miss and seldom leave their foes alive. That you still breathe speaks that Menatech has further plans for you, though what they are I do not yet know." Kess placed her palm to Mic's forehead. Mic felt heat and then the throbbing ache in his head subsided. "For the time being," Kess spoke, "I have healed your injuries as best I can, but you must do your part to rest until your strength returns or risk unweaving the magick worked."

"What about Gully?"

"Taken by Menatech when he teleported."

"Why?" Mic asked. He sat up, turned to Kess.

"Please. You must remain still."

"I asked you, why?"

"Because he bartered his immortal soul."

"You're saying Gully, my friend Gully, made some kind of deal with the devil with this Menatech guy?" Mic looked away, incredulous. "For his soul?"

"Is that so much harder to believe than all else you have witnessed today? The one you know as Lazlo Menatech is but a servant of sinister forces far greater than any you can imagine. Doctor Ballantine believes that he works to create a vortex, a passageway between this world and Abbadon, forged from human souls willingly surrendered."

"And this is for real? People can give up their souls?"

"To build a bridge conjoining two realties requires the potency of souls willingly given. It is our fear that Gully will provide the lodestone soul necessary to complete the ritual."

"What happens if he, y'know, repents?" Mic asked.

"He foreswore all redemption when he inscribed his name in the Book of Death," Kess said at last. "His destination is unquestioned. All that we may hope to

alter is the path by which he travels. I am very sorry."

"It's OK," Mic answered. "I needed to know, y'know." Mic inspected his stomach and found no wound, only a small bruise still sensitive to touch. "But if what you've said is true," Mic added, lurching unsteadily to his feet, "Then I figure we need to find him before Menatech does whatever he has to do to finish the job."

Kess put her shoulder underneath Mic's arm to help support his weight. "It is not so simple. The magick in the bauble I gave you to track Menatech has been dispelled and cannot be used again. I am afraid we now possess no means of tracking him."

"So it's over."

"Yes."

Kess opened the gate to the adjoining street. Mic, still limping but much improved, followed her to the curbside.

"Hey, you picked up my car." Mic stumbled over to his Fleetwood convertible and crossed to the driver's seat.

"I must drive," said Kess.

"Nobody drives my car but me."

Mic turned the key. The throttle sputtered and died.

"I meant the tank contains no fuel."

"Yeah, then how'd you get it here?"

Kess ran her hand along the windshield. "*Proficiscor*," she said and, instantly, the headlights flipped on, the ignition rolled over, and the V-8 engine roared to life.

"Yeah, OK, you drive."

"As you wish."

The Cadillac Fleetwood cast a momentary black blur in the intersection of Topeka and Landwood, zooming effortlessly through the Friday night bar and casino traffic like a devil ray navigating the corridors of a sunken ocean liner. Mic watched Kess, sitting with her hands in her lap, eyes pressed closed, and mumbling inaudible words, but somehow steering the car all the same.

"Where we headed next?" he asked.

"Back to the Laboratory."

"What are we getting? Weapons?"

"I will remove the boerwurm."

"You're saying I'm free to go home?"

"Yes, you are free to go where you will."

"This a polite way of telling me to get lost?"

"You fought with Menatech bravely and demonstrated your loyalty to the cause of light. There is no more that we can ask of you than what you have already

done." Kess flicked her index finger and an approaching streetlight clicked from red to green.

"What about Gully?"

"We will do what we can."

"Doesn't sound like you got a lot of ideas."

"It is true that we do not know where Menatech constructs his vortex, but our augurs work diligently to interpret the omens we have witnessed. Although magick works on a timetable unknowable to mortals, they hope to provide us a location within days or possibly weeks."

"Gully doesn't have days."

"That may be so."

Mic thumped the side of the car.

"Goddammit," he said. "Take a left up ahead."

Kess allowed the car to make the turn. "You must know," she said. "There is little time left to safely remove the boerwurm. At the end of twenty-four hours, you will die."

"And if Menatech builds this vortex while you guys are hanging around playing pocket pool, what happens then?"

"Hell and Earth will become as one."

"I figure that I'd rather not live to see that."

"Very well," Kess answered. "I accept your offer of assistance. May I ask you where we travel?"

"To see a guy knows more than he's letting on."

Headlights out, engine off, the Cadillac crawled to a dead stop behind a thick hedge of cultivated palms. From their concealed vantage, Mic could observe a white stucco mansion placed atop a steep hill and overlooking a well-manicured lawn. A ten-foot concrete wall lipped with ornate and deadly iron spikes neatly circumscribed the perimeter.

"And you believe this Sasha plays a greater part here than he has admitted?" Kess asked.

"I'm not sure what I believe any more," Mic answered, climbing onto the hood of the Cadillac. "But I've got questions and I think Sasha has some answers." Mic gripped the lip of the perimeter wall with cautious fingers and wrenched himself up, knees straddling the deadly spikes, into a kneeling posture on the narrow landing and then extended downward a helping hand for Kess to take.

"I cannot pass," Kess said, her expression suddenly dire.

"It looks higher than it is. I'll help you up."

"No, you do not understand," Kess answered. "It appears an enchantment surrounding this estate prevents those of my Order from entering under our own

power. If I am to enter, you must carry me across the threshold."

"I can't lift you up here if you don't move closer."

"And I cannot move closer."

"No shit?" Mic paused. "So what do I do?"

"I am not certain, but I now believe that the one who lives here may indeed possess the answers we seek."

Mic looked over his shoulder across the compound. "Stay there. I see a gate around the back and it doesn't look like there're any guards on duty." Mic dropped down on the other side of the fence, falling out of view.

"Be careful," Kess whispered out loud, though Mic could no longer hear her. "Not all those who stand guard are born of flesh and blood and some who died still walk this earth."

Mic stole quietly across the grounds, his backed pressed flat to the wall, sliding furtively through pools of dull moonlight and slipping relieved back into the cold comfort of shadow. Twenty yards from the side gate, Mic broke into a crouched run, clearing the remaining distance in a dozen great strides. As his fingertips tapped against the silver handle, he felt his ankle seized within a vice-like grip and wrenched out from underneath his body. Mic impacted the lawn with all the force of his forward momentum. The air expelled from his lungs, leaving him flushed, dyspneic, his body trembling with throttled adrenaline. Flipping on his back, he caught sight of the horror that gripped his ankle and a frisson of nauseating dread electrified his bones. A skeleton, still draped in the putrefying tatters of its earthly shroud, rose from the roily mud and clenching Mic's flailing leg with needle-sharp bone fingers, dragged him waist deep into the churning sod.

In falling, Mic had jostled the silver gate handle free from its latch and now a sudden gust of wind blew the gate wide open, revealing Kess standing at the other side.

"Help," Mic panted.

"I cannot cross the threshold."

"Then do something else."

Kess nodded and sprinted away.

"Not that," Mic moaned. He planted a fist hard across the skeleton's chin, kicked free, and scrambled toward the open gate. The toes of his shoes had only just traversed the threshold when he felt himself lifted from his feet by an inhuman strength and hewn skyward. He landed mid tumble and continued rolling down the slope of a gentle decline in a succession of graceless somersaults. His face and back were burned from the friction of the grass, his left arm clutched at a sudden sharp sting in his chest, and his mild reeled with some unfathomable question it could not wholly comprehend. A stabbing pain shocked Mic back to consciousness.

*A broken rib*, Mic thought. *It will heal*. But he had no time to think further before the skeleton was upon him again. From beneath splintered teeth, the horror gibbered secrets, faltering and uncertain and mixed with the incomprehensible slatherings of bestial bloodlust.

And then Mic knew.

"José?" Mic asked. "Jesus, is that you in there?"

But the thing that had once been a man no longer bore any more than a fading remembrance of its former self. Before Mic now stood only a rotting creature whose gory head lolled exanimate upon butchered breast, whose jaws spattered flecks of congealed blood and insensate jibberings in equal measure – truly, he had become a monster neither capable nor deserving of human mercy.

Mic circled cautiously back toward the gate, then bolted, pumping every ounce of strength he could muster into each pounding stride. But again, with impossible swiftness, lean wiry arms locked around him from behind. Jagged teeth tore scraps of flesh from his neck. Depleted of all strength, Mic could not loose himself from the wicked hold.

"Mic," Kess called out. "Get out of the way."

Mic turned back to the gate in time to see his Cadillac burst through the perimeter wall, bearing down on the two combatants with impossible speed. Mic freed himself from the skeleton's grasp and inched clear of the onrushing vehicle, narrowly missing the spinning tires and heavy blocks of falling concrete that first shattered and then dashed his attacker to splinters of bone and pancake flaps of rotting flesh.

"You must carry me over the threshold," Kess cried. "My car," said Mic. "You wrecked my car."

"Hurry," said Kess. "Before we are detected."

"I'm hurrying." Mic sprinted through the gate, lifted Kess into his arms, and raced back onto the lawn. Holding her this close, his sinuses delighted upon the scent of her hair, a delicate blend of berries, agnus castus, and orris root. "But one question," he said. "Why my car?"

"Would you rather I let that monster kill you?"

"Depends, y'know. I'd have to think about it."

The earth at their feet blossomed with bone hands, rising from the lawn like skeletal bladderworts.

"Put me down and stand back," Kess commanded.

"What are you going to do?" Mic stood back anyhow.

"*Ornus aduro*," she shrieked.

From his window in the library, Sasha watched as his side yard erupted into a volcanic inferno. The pitching blaze was all-consuming, devouring grass, shrubbery, trees, and fixtures into a single massive conflagration and then burned

out, leaving Mic and Kess standing ankle deep in ash.

"Do you think he noticed?" Mic asked.

"It is a certainty."

A gentlemanly Butler, elegantly attired in a black tuxedo and white gloves, rock-hopped down the cobblestone path towards them, careful to avoid stepping in the smoldering vegetation spread thick as pozzulana before him. "Please, follow me" the Butler said, indicating the front door with a flick of his head. "The Master would like a word."

The Butler escorted Kess and Mic down the great hall.

"I would have you know," the Butler began, "That you ruined an especially lovely topiary garden that I was most fond of walking in at sunset. I suppose I shall now have to accustom myself to an evening constitutional through fields of ash."

"A lot better than creepy skeleton guys," grunted Mic.

"I apologize for Mr. Dargoni," Kess said, cutting Mic off. "Know that we are grateful to be granted an audience."

"Right this way," said the Butler, his face drawn into a thin-lipped smile. "Through this door is the library."

The Butler opened heavy double doors, revealing a massive library, over three stories tall and deep as a football field. The walls alternated between intricate stained glass windows and cherry shelving crammed to capacity with leather-bound volumes and culminating in a vaulted ceiling painted with an exotic mural of the Fall.

"Hey," Mic asked. "You see a place like this and you gotta ask. Did Sasha ever get around to reading all of these or is this all just for show?"

"I assure you," the Butler replied. "That these books are just for show. Now, would you care to enter or shall I hold this door open all night while you hover like a moth at flame?" The Butler grimaced with strained civility.

"Sure. Just asking," Mic said, entering. "Let's do this." When Mic and Kess had both cleared the threshold, the Butler closed and locked the door behind them.

"No, wait," Kess cried. "It's an illusion."

But it was too late. The door disappeared, leaving in its place only a sheer rock wall. What had been a library was now a dank cavern illuminated by torches set in bare rock. Great cobwebs draped overhead, water dripped from stalagmites into tepid pools on the cave floor, and the walls seethed with the undulations of a billion quivering eight-legged harvestmen flicking their antennae.

"Cave hair," Sasha mused, crossing into the cavern from a small adjacent corridor, "Is what cave divers call the phenomenon. But their common name, harvestmen, I find to be particularly apt. They feed on decaying vegetation and animal matter."

"We came to talk," Mic said.

"And first you will listen," Sasha snapped. "You should know that despite schoolyard rumors, harvestmen are not poisonous. Nor are they spiders. They are Phalangids. Scavengers. With simple lives and simple hungers. However, if you put enough to the task…" Sasha paused, then clapped his palms together.

Mic and Kess recoiled as the harvestmen scattered, revealing what great feast had assembled so many of the them into such confined space – a long row of twenty flayed human corpses, each disemboweled, and pinned to the earth wall with metal spears as insects are mounted to cork. Sasha continued, dryly, "Even the smallest creature can devour a human within minutes." Sasha turned his attention back to his visitors. "Now, I believe we can safely assume from your presence here, Mr. Dargoni, that you did not complete your task as assigned."

"Menatech didn't need protecting."

"But it would appear that Mr. Gully did."

"You knew I would lead Gully right to him, didn't you?"

"Perhaps." Sasha drew closer, removed his sunglasses. "It pleases me to orchestrate events for the damned. The results are always," Sasha's raspy voice raised an octave, assuming a chittering mecopteran timbre, "So very unexpected."

Sasha cast off his overcoat and scarf, revealing underneath the unified head and breast of an arachnid and a wide fleshy abdomen elongated and distended to simulate the shape of a human torso, waist, and hips. From behind his back unfurled four hairy limbs, each one constructed of four jointed segments and padded in coarse black hair. Sasha stepped from the concealment of shadow into the orange glow of torchlight and gazed upon Mic with a dozen black lidless eyes set above great mashing jaws and quivering palps.

"Your death will be a pity." Sasha's voice buzzed. "I always did enjoy watching your fights." He leapt at them, propelled into the air by eight ball-jointed legs.

"*Terra pollex mobile*," Kess growled and cast from her pocket eight yellowed toenails and a small silver ring.

The earth trembled, then split wide open. Great claws of earth erupted from beneath the cave floor, shooting shards of the sedimentary rock upwards with the force of artillery shells. *Tat-tata-tat* - half a dozen fragments punctured Sasha's unprotected eyes. The spider fiend trembled, flipped over in mid-flight, and dropped belly-side-up to the unsteady floor. His flailing limbs clutched frantically at his mutilated head and his agonized howls rose to an intolerable crescendo, squealing high above the drone of swarming harvestmen.

"*Evincio*," Kess called out. Each of the eight earthen claws summoned clamped tightly to a spider leg and then drew it outwards, wracking Sasha across eight directions and stretching his limbs to snapping.

"Why didn't you do that earlier?" Mic asked.

"It was my wish that he might choose to cooperate."

"And now?"

"I have chosen for him," she said. The color in her eyes drained away. "*Veritas vos liberabit*," she intoned.

"What did you just do?" Mic asked.

"A spell of truth-telling. The beast will answer once truthfully and no more. Phrase your question carefully."

"You should ask the question."

"It takes all of my concentration to bind him."

Sasha gibbered, burbling occasionally as the viscous fluid released from its punctured eye sockets dripped across its massive palpidae. It spit, gnashed blindly, and strained its muscles as Mic approached with small and tentative steps.

"Come closer," Sasha gurgled.

"Tell me where to locate my friend Gully."

"You demand an answer where none can be given."

"You gotta tell the truth," Mic pressed.

"And I have done so."

"Goddamn you. Tell me where he is."

"Though I am no longer bound by magick to speak the truth, it humors me that you should know how close your cause was to discovering the location of the vortex before my children lap the fluid from your still living bodies."

"Where is it?"

"In the cellar of the abbey where you fought Menatech."

"On consecrated ground?" Kess hissed. "He lies."

"It would now be in my power to do so, but I speak the truth. The foundations of the abbey were built on ruins of an ancient temple dedicated to the service of Baal. In the caverns beneath the sanctuary, the unholy may step freely. This is where Menatech builds his vortex to Abbadon."

The scattered harvestmen had begun to reassemble, their slithering blackness extending from the shadows to investigate the sickly sweet odor of ichor rising from Sasha's fractured frame. They nursed fresh sustenance from his wounds and prepared to attack the human intruders.

"We must run," Kess whispered. "There are too many."

"Run, if it pleases you," Sasha spoke, his raspy sandpaper utterings now barely audible above the clamoring din of his progeny. "But know that my children have slumbered in the earth for undisturbed millennia. Now that they have been roused, they will need to gain strength. They will need to feed."

"I can't find the door." Mic slammed his hand against the bare cave wall. "But these are our footprints so this is where we came in. Right here. I know it."

"Close your eyes," Kess said. "And take my hand."

Mic looked back over his shoulders. The sea of harvestmen had finished feasting upon Sasha, their insatiable hunger leaving him no more than a chitinous shell stitched with strings of pus and collagen.

"You sure we got time for this?" Mic asked.

"The illusion takes physical strength from our confusion," Kess answered, extending her hand. Mic took it. "If we close our eyes and ignore what we see, then we may tread through what is here and not through what appears to be."

Mic closed his eyes. "I'm trusting you on this one."

"There," Kess smiled. "Do you not feel it?" She waved her hand through what had moments before been solid rock.

"Yeah. I think I found the doorframe over here."

Mic and Kess stepped out into the hallway and looked back through the doorway, only now, instead of a library, they saw the cave entrance without its camouflaging glamour.

"A clever weaving," Kess remarked, "To conceal its presence from my detection. I am impressed."

"Be impressed later," Mic said, breaking into a run. "I'm not sure we're in the clear just yet."

Kess followed Mic as he raced down the hallway. From the doorway spilled a tidal wave of harvestmen, a jet-black luffing sea of feelers and legs, surging after its prey with single hive-mind consciousness compelled only by hunger.

As Mic and Kess turned the corner, they passed the Butler attending to a grandfather clock with a duster.

"Impressive," said the Butler. "To see you uneaten."

"Wasn't for lack of trying."

Mic and Kess ran on. The Butler continued dusting, pausing only to investigate the sound of a hundred billion filament legs tapping closer. He crossed to the corner, peered around, and stepped face forward into the onrushing flood of harvestmen. He was picked clean in seconds.

"*Niveus*," Kess chanted.

"I need your help over here," Mic called out, sitting in the driver seat of his Cadillac Fleetwood. "No gas, remember?" The starter coughed and wheezed but did not flip over. Mic lifted the hood to inspect the battered chassis. "Whole goddamn engine block is probably shot to shit."

"*Niveus tempestas*."

"I thought you said you couldn't kill them all."

"That is correct." Kess slumped to her knees.

"Then, just a thought," Mic slammed down the hood, "but don't you think

you oughtta be helping me beat a hasty retreat out of this beat up piece of junk?"

"It is done."

"What's done?"

Kess smiled and turned to Mic. "Look up," she said.

Mic felt a pinprick of cold against his cheek and raised his head to the sky. From directly above, a blanket of white snow descended on a downrush of frosty winter air.

"Snow?" Mic asked. "That's the big thing you were doing while we coulda been getting our wheels back in action?"

"The harvestmen will be confined to the warmth within the house until such time as my order can find means to exterminate them."

"Oh," Mic said. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Come," said Kess. "We have no time to lose."

The Cadillac Fleetwood shot fire from beneath its wheels as it burned across town, moving so fast that pedestrians registered only a fleeting dark blur tinting their field of vision. Motorists traveling in the same direction had slightly more time in which to process and then reject the subliminal flash of a boxer and a pagan zipping down Fremont Street at hypersonic speeds.

"You should know," said Kess. "There is a very great chance that neither of us will survive a direct confrontation with Menatech. He is very old and powerful."

"That ain't exactly pumping me up."

"If we do survive, I would see you again. Socially."

"You asking me out?"

"You have proven able in confrontation."

"It sounds like you're asking me out."

"And your children would be both tall and strong."

"Yeah, OK," Mic said. "We can go out sometime."

With that, the Fleetwood arrived at the Abbey.

Mic and Kess crossed to the eastern wall of the Abbey.

"Kinda quiet," said Mic.

"It is as it should be."

"You're supposed to say, too quiet."

"That would be an incorrect assessment of our tactical situation." Kess ran her hand along the foundation, tracing mystical lines to their convergence. "Were there loud noise, something would be amiss."

"Yeah." Mic paused. "I was just saying that it seems like for this being a big ho down with all the legions of the damned getting ready to party their way to earth, you'd think they'd want to make a little noise."

"Yet it is not so. Here," said Kess, pointing to a small sunken doorway hidden away behind a bramble bush. "This is the place. I feel it now. We must open this door."

"I think I can handle that." Mic wrenched a rusted spike from the wrought iron fence and jammed the spear-point between the lock and the wood, prying the latch free from its hold. The door creaked then blew wide open, propelled by a gust of pungent air. Behind the door, a narrow staircase stretched down beyond sight into the bowels of the earth.

"Jeezus." Mic fanned away the dust. "Sure this is it?"

"I am sure."

"'Cause it don't smell too good."

"I am aware."

Kess took the wrought iron bar from Mic and tapped the spear-point with her ring finger. "*Illumé*," she intoned. The spear-point turned on like a light bulb, shimmering with emerald-colored flame. "Follow close behind." Kess brushed aside the cobwebs lying thick across the doorframe. "We should not wish to be separated in a place such as this."

For Mic, the staircase seemed endless, twisting downward in a grand spiral, mining ever lower, ever deeper, without interruption or variation. Kess bore the mind-numbing repetition quietly. In turn, Mic concentrated on her unwavering momentum, matching her stride, placing one foot down in front of the other, and doing it all again.

"Look, we've been walking for hours." Mic jumped at the sound of his own voice. Each word exploded like a canon in the dead quiet. Kess turned and pressed her palm to his mouth. "Do not speak," she whispered. "We are very near."

Looking forward, he could see that the staircase now leveled out into a narrow tunnel supported by struts of rotting timber. A remote flickering suggested fire or candlelight.

"Yeah," Mic spoke quietly. "Sorry about that."

Kess nodded, removed her fingers from his lips slowly. She smiled, showing Mic a display of tenderness he had not yet seen. Mic cradled Kess' tiny hand in his own and Kess did not pull away. Mic drew her close until Kess' face was so near that he could feel her sweet breath flutter against his lips.

"We should not let our concentration waver," she whispered, her voice hushed to breaking. "Nor lose the advantage of surprise."

But the advantage of surprise was already lost, for at that moment, the walls tumbled away around them, belching forth an unholy day of judgment as an army of undead soldiers forged of wood-like flesh and brittle bone clawed madly into the tunnel. Mic leapt into the fray, shattering the faces of those nearest with

pounding fists until their concave skulls lolled freely on fractured neck bones. He knocked them down, hurled them back, but they rose and came on again.

From the hollows of the earth they came clambering, burning red eyes trained unflinching on the feast of living flesh set before them. They knew no feeling but hunger and no thought drove them but to feed. Were it possible, those in front were even more horrible to look upon than those behind. Their skulls were burst by hammering blows, the skin on their faces stripped away by sandpaper knuckles, and their limbs hung stretched and broken over calcareous knees. But still they came on, talons tearing at their flesh, flaccid lips sucking at their wounds while those behind reached across the shoulders of the broken to claw free strips of flesh with cadaverous hooks.

"Stand back," whispered Kess.

"Ain't nowhere to stand but where I am," Mic answered. He pressed his back flat against the earthen wall and swung the wrought iron pole at the approaching undead horde. "You got something you want to do, any time now would be good."

Kess withdrew a small silver dagger from a sheath on her belt. "*Occumbo pulvis*," she chanted. The length of the blade burned deep red. As an undead creature raked its brittle fingers across her back, Kess thrust forward, driving the dagger blade deep between its desiccated ribs. The belly of the undead creature distended and then burst open, releasing a musty cloud of dry earth and buzzing flies, leaving in the aftermath a leathery husk of skin like a spent spore sac.

Kess gored another undead creature and another, striking without pause and without mercy, a macabre reverie of glinting sliver punctuated by explosions of dust that dimmed the flickering half light to shadow. She reduced each new wave of undead to no more than a thick haze of vermin, grime, and soil. Yet still more came.

"I will hold them back," Kess grunted. "While you continue onward. Follow the tunnel to its end."

"You said we shouldn't separate," Mic answered.

"There is little time left."

"I'm not going to leave you."

"Yes, you must."

"What can I do?" Mic asked.

"You can do more than you know." Kess answered without hesitation. "Now, hurry, I promise to join you when I can."

Mic backed away slowly, watching the huddled cluster of grisly shapes suck and tear at the live thing between them. When he was so far that he could see no more than shadows billowing and hear no more than flies teeming, Mic turned

and raced down the tunnel until the corridor dead-ended at a small arched stone doorway.

Through the doorway, Mic entered a large domed basilica fashioned from the natural hollows in the bedrock. On all sides, the walls and ceiling were painted red and adorned with human bones arranged to give the impression of standing within a splayed chest cavity. In the center of the room stood a black marble altar emblazoned with arcane writ and consecrated with human blood dried to powder by millennia.

The air was moist, redolent with incense and rot, and
Mic gasped to breathe. Standing in this place sapped the will from his heart and poured ice water through his veins.
Near suffocation, Mic turned back to the doorway through which he had entered, but found it vanished into the rock.

"I told you we would meet again."The voice came from behind Mic. He turned to find Menatech now standing at the base of the black marble altar, holding his golden Katar to Gully's throat. Gully trembled, his face pale as ivory.

"Save yourself," Gully sobbed. "Get out of here."

"Let him go." Mic choked on the words.

"Now? When I am so close to completing my masterwork?"

Menatech waved his hand and the floor at his feet opened up into a yawning pit with sides stitched of leathered human skin and sewn with knots of human hair. Under the translucent weaving wriggled fleshless human forms crawling on their bellies in the muck of their own suppuration and from the depths below rose the rank fetor of putrescent figs and ordure. Menatech stepped closer. "You are privileged to see this, Mr. Dargoni," he said.

Mic stifled the urge to sick himself. "That it? Big hole in the ground?"

"This hole descends to Abbadon, Mr. Dargoni. When it is completed, it will connect this world to its shadow and signal the final triumph of the prideful over the meek."

"You see, that's where you lose me." Mic pulled himself up to his full height. "The part about you letting all these big demons into our world. Right now, you're one of the big kids on the block, maybe the biggest. But once that door opens, you're talking about a whole new school and safe money says you don't look so tough stacked against whatever got itself stashed down below."

"You play for moments, hoping your precious white witch will rescue you. But look." Menatech waved his hand, revealing Kess standing at the open doorway calling to Mic. Her lips moved but no sound passed over the threshold. "She cannot enter of her own free will and you cannot escape. This room is protected from her kind." Menatech waved his hand, concealing the doorway once more. "There are none left to prevent me from executing my designs." Menatech pressed

the Katar to Gully's throat, the fine edge drawing blood from the soft flesh under his chin. "You cannot stay my hand and you cannot sway my resolve. Tonight I commence the end of time."

"Oh God oh god," Gully whimpered. Blood trickled down his throat. "Mic, help me, please. Do something."

"No, wait. Take me." Mic spoke before he even realized the weight of his words. But now, in understanding, he knew them to be true. He would not watch Gully die.

Menatech paused. "You would willingly take his place?"

"Let him go," Mic paused, "And, yes. I will."

"You have served me well, puppet," Menatech sneered to Gully. "You have brought me a willing sacrifice."

"What?" Mic asked. "Gully, what is he saying?"

"Mic, I'm sorry," whimpered Gully. "I had to. It was either that or I go down there for all eternity." Gully flushed with shame. "I'm sorry, Mic. I am."

And then Mic understood. Sasha, Gully, and Menatech had worked together in concert, playing Mic off one another, until he had believed the threat against his friend was real and certain and would enter this place of unholy worship and offer himself, a lamb with heart untainted by corruption, to die in Gully's stead.

"You will take his place as a willing sacrifice," Menatech sneered, "But you will die knowing you both share the same fate." Menatech lifted the Katar high above his head and thrust it down with tremendous power, burying the blade handle deep in Gully's throat. Gully's face writhed in a death snarl, lips flecked with foam, pupils glazed to the color of hoarfrost, and then he fell limp. Menatech unsheathed the blade from its charnel scabbard and turned, eyes narrowed to thin smoldering slits, to face Mic.

"You got what you wanted," Mic spat the words. "You should have let him go."

"My actions are in accordance with the one true law."

"Then I got another law for you. Gravity."

Mic withdrew a small leather coin purse from his pocket. From the coin purse, he poured out six toenails and a simple brass ring. "*Terra pollex mobile evincio,*" he cried. The words flew from his mouth with two thundering voices, female and male, in staggered duet: the power Kess lent him channeled through his body and exploded outward with concussive physical force.

The earth pitched and buckled. Great clay pincers erupted from the cavern floor, seized Menatech by the waist and neck, and flung him down into the bowels of the pit. The Platonic demon shrieked in agony as the fire stokes of hellfire charred him flesh from bone and bone to cinders.

Mic dropped to his knees, drained to exhaustion by the psychic energy necessary to focus the borrowed magicks. It was long weary minutes before Mic could divert his eyes from the pit, finally certain that Menatech had been truly cast down, and when he turned back, he found Gully crawling on hands and knees towards the black alter.

"Gully, you're still alive."

"No, Mic, stay back," Gully hissed.

"What are you talking about? You're hurt."

As Mic approached, Gully turned to face him. The gash through Gully's throat had transformed into a tangled web of tiny filaments flagellating wildly, knitting themselves together, and stitching closed the mortal wound. The spilt blood covering his face and neck boiled away to reveal clean unblemished skin.

"Only one thing in the world, you can always count on," Gully said, rising to his feet, "You do business with a demon and he'll try to double cross you. Which is why I always come prepared." Gully unbuttoned up his shirt to reveal a ragged hole in his left breast where gnarled bloodless veins throbbed in rhythm with a heart absent from its purchase. "See, my heart is safely tucked away very far from here. Never even skipped a beat. Stab me, burn me, chop off my head. Go ahead. I know you want to. Don't you, Mic?"

"What are you?" asked Mic, backing up a step.

"Same as you," Gully answered. "A man, more or less."

"In my book, you're either a man or you're not."

"Which is exactly why you're here, Mic." Gully rolled up his sleeves revealing a small tattoo, a circle depicting an arched doorway crossed by spears. "I never could have done this without you, without a pure soul freely given."

"What if I take it back?" Mic countered.

"You came, you saw, you said the words. Not my rules, big guy, but we all have to play by them. Even you." Gully closed the distance between them. "But, hey, you get to die an important death. Who gets to say that? When I kill you, your immortal soul will forge the final lodestone that will secure the bridge between our two worlds. We're talking Armageddon. And it's all you, big guy."

"So you were behind everything."

"Behind? No, I nudged, I suggested. A push here and a shove there. But everyone had their part to play. Sasha gave you a reason to get involved, Menatech built the vortex, and even the Order of Ouroboros played its part."

"They weren't a part of this."

"Would you be here if not for them?"

"Gully, it doesn't have to be this way."

"No? You sure? Because for a second there it looked like you were suggesting I forget everything and go back to being good old Gully the pathetic

fucking pushover. Make fun of him, kick him around. It's OK, he doesn't mind." Gully sneered. "And even if he does mind, what's he gonna do?"

"I liked you better when you talked less."

With lightening speed, Gully shoved Mic to the wall, holding him fast with colossal strength. "Do you have any idea what I will become when this vortex opens?" Mic heard his sternum bend and crack, his ribs splinter. Gully flipped the Katar into his right hand and raised the gleaming blade. "But you know what, Mic? For old times' sake, I'll make this a quick and painless death. Consider it a favor for saving my ass all those times back when we were kids."

"Once you kill me the portal opens?" Mic choked out.

"And I become a god."

"Too bad for you then."

"What?"

"I'm saying," Mic eked out a wry smile, "That I got a boerwurm in my brain that already did the job. You don't get to kill me," Mic said. His eyes blurred and lost focus. "Because I'm already dead."

Mic teetered, hanging weightless in midair for an instant before his tense aching muscles surrendered their responsibilities. Mic slumped forward, face slamming hard on the dirt floor. Blood poured from his nose, mouth, and ears and formed congealing pools on his temples and eyes.

"Do you have any conception of how long it takes to orchestrate something like this?" Gully frothed. "This was my big opportunity, you fucking cocksucker. You don't get to take this from me. Not you, you big stupid -- "

Gully kicked Mic in the ribs, but the hurt was dull and distant. With the last traces of sensation still transmitting through his brain, Mic felt the boerwurm burrow through the roof of his mouth and escape into his throat. Blood burst in a torrent from between his lips and he expelled the gorged maggot onto the ground. As his vision faded, Mic witnessed the boerwurm expand in size until it towered high above his prone body. And then Mic saw no more. Mic was dead.

"Mic, can you hear me?"

"No," Mic said. "Where am I?"

"You're in the headquarters of the Order."

"Back in the cell?"

"No," Kess smiled. "In the infirmary."

The room was white and sterile. There were no machines to monitor his condition, no charts at the foot of his bed, but this was a place of healing all the same. Mic tried to sit up, but fell back to his pillow, clutching his head.

"Oh god," he moaned. "What happened?"

"Move slowly. You have been unconscious for several days. The damage to

your brain was severe and many of us worried the rites of resurrection might leave you permanently impaired."

"I was dead?"

"For many days. But as a new spring follows winter, life too can flow from the wellspring of eternal slumber."

Mic paused, "What about Gully?"

Kess shook her head, no.

"How did you cross the threshold?"

"I didn't."

"Then who saved me?"

"I did," said Dr. Ballantine from the doorway.

"It was not a true boerwurm that I implanted in your head," Kess said, "But Dr. Ballantine transformed into that aspect. When you crossed the threshold, you carried him with you."

"And in the event Kess was unable to invoke the counterspell, an automatic safeguard built into the weaving released me when you died. Once in my true shape, dispatching the unfinished vortex was no great challenge."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Mic asked.

"At the time we were not sure you were to be trusted."

"Then why did you offer to remove the boerwurm?"

"She would only have pretended to do so. Had you been in league with Menatech, once freed you would have carried me directly to the vortex."

"And if I had been telling the truth?"

"It was a calculated risk."

Mic waited ten minutes to make sure he was alone then dressed himself and escaped out onto the window ledge. A few minutes later, he was crossing through the parking lot toward his Cadillac Fleetwood convertible. He heard a jangle from behind and turned. Kess held up his car keys. "I put gas in it for you. And fixed the damage."

"Hey," said Mic. "Sorry about leaving like this."

Kess offered Mic the keys. "This is not a prison and we are not holding you here against your will. If you want to go, you are free to do so at any time without explanation."

Mic balanced the weight of the keys in his palm. "Yeah," he said. "I got some stuff that needs taking care of. Finances, rent, stuff like that."

"If you would like," Kess replied, "I can speak to the council regarding compensation. I'm sure they would be willing to offer whatever you would ask as repayment for your services."

"Nah, I figure we're about even."

"You are sure?"

"Yeah, you and your buddies got your vortex handled and I got a car that moves like a jet plane and never needs refueling."

"That was a temporary weaving, Mic. The magick has already dissipated."

Mic tossed the keys back to Kess.

"*Proficiscor,*" he intoned. The Cadillac roared to life.

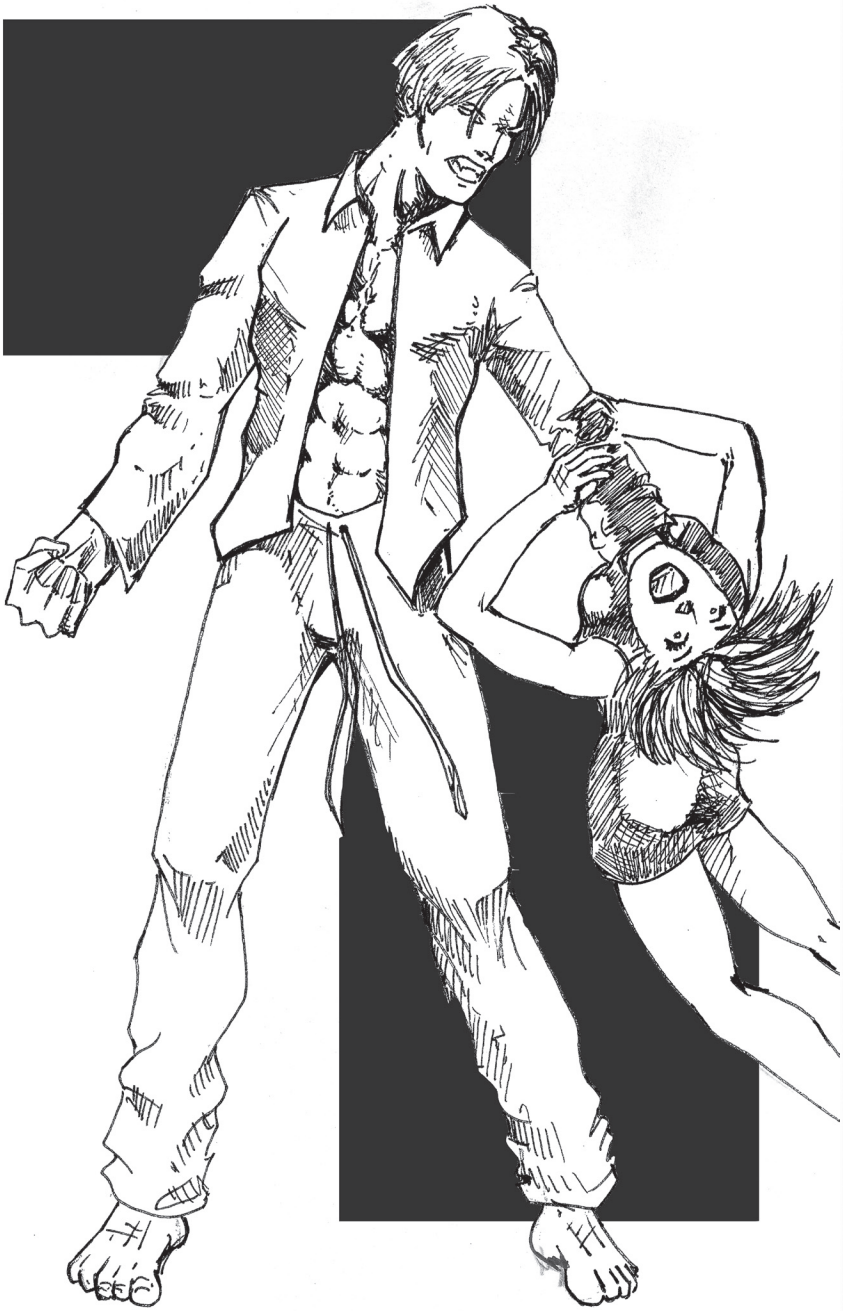
Kess' eyes filled with wonder. "How did you do that?"

"I'm a quick study." Mic said. He climbed into the driver's seat, adjusted the seat back and the rearview mirror.

"You impress me, Mr. Dargoni," Kess said.

"Call me Mic," he said.

The Cadillac was a blur and then it was gone.



# The Inauguration

By Cathleen Stark

"It's been nearly a year since I took over and he still won't talk to me. It's insulting. My Lieutenants are starting to talk. Half of them want me gone. The other half is still loyal, but my hold on them is tenuous. I need him on my side now." He ran his hand through her black hair feeling the warm silkiness on his cool fingers.

"But how are you going to convince him? He remembers being under Edwin's rule. He doesn't want that again." Her slim, warm hand slid up his thigh, making his breath catch.

"Please Natalia," he stopped her hand from going any further. "I must think about this."

"But I'm tired of talking. We've been talking business for hours. I want to play."

"My inauguration is in one month. I want Gary Lawrence at my ball, on his knees, pledging to me his undying loyalty."

Natalia pulled her hands away from Vincent's and curled them between her head and the pillow. "So how are you going to make it work?"

"Several ideas have been thrown around, but it's hard to plan anything when we don't know what his agenda is. He is watching his people so closely that it's hard to get spies into his territory. And if we were able to get a spy in and the Mayor found out, our spy would be dead."

Heat rose into his blue eyes making Natalia shiver. It was a familiar look. She had seen it many times before, and it always made her feel flush and her pulse quicken. She pulled one hand from under her head and ran it from his cheek to his neck, down his shoulder to the small of his back. She felt his muscles tense as he moved his hand to intercept hers. "Natalia, love, let me think."

"Later. Now, let us *play*." She snuggled closer feeling his coolness, trying to remember when it stopped feeling strange to lay next to a cold body. She brushed the thought away as she rubbed herself against him.

Vincent tried to stop her again and then gave in. Feeling her warm body next to his cold flesh almost always drove his thoughts away. In the ten years they had been together, there had only been two times he had hated her heat. This morning, it felt wonderful, and it was nearly sunrise anyway. He wouldn't be up for much longer; he might as well enjoy her. Natalia purred as his hands slipped around her.

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Joseph was shaking him awake, calling to him in a worried tone. Vincent struggled to hold onto the lovely vision of Natalia and her tanned skin, but Joseph's

voice broke through and finally penetrated his brain.

"what…What…**WHAT?**" He screamed at his trusted friend.

"You are needed sir, in the meeting room. There is trouble." Joseph's still worried voice slammed away the rest of the cobwebs and Vincent was awake-and angry. Whatever the trouble was, he would spill someone's blood. He hated being roused in the middle of a pleasant dream. And where was Natalia anyway? Six days ago she had slipped out before he was awakened and had not been home since. He sighed as he grabbed his silk pajama pants and jumped out of bed, following Joseph out of the room and down the steps to the double doors of his main meeting room. The doors were closed but he could hear voices. Joseph was standing in front of one door; hand on the knob waiting for his master to compose himself. Vincent stood for a moment staring at the mirrored door. He had not yet eaten, so his reflection was almost ghostly. A smile floated to his lips as he thought of the many vampires that had been unprepared for the mirrors. Not many of his kind had them in their homes. Vincent thought mirrors a useful tool against his enemies.

Vincent stood before the mirror making himself look more imposing and trying to collect his thoughts. He was almost as tall as the door and his shoulders were almost as wide as the mirror. Using his fingers, he messed up his blond hair even more than it already was, making it look wild. His hair had been compared to a lion's mane on several occasions, even though he usually kept it short. At the moment he was rather perturbed, so looking wild was probably to his advantage.

Although Vincent didn't need to, he took a deep breath. After all these years he still felt that taking a deep breath was the best way to calm himself. He closed his eyes and felt his chest rising and falling unnaturally, felt the tightness around his scar as the skin stretched. He placed his right hand over the scar and smiled. He could heal the scar but didn't want to. It was a reminder of one of his greater moments. He had gained Joseph's undying loyalty and the scar in the same instant.

Joseph had been ordered to kill Vincent by their Captain. According to Tourgin, young Vincent was too flamboyant and public with his abilities. To weaken him they had trapped Vincent in his room. After five days Joseph had come to him offering false friendship and staked him. When Joseph had stumbled into him, Vincent had felt the wood pierce the skin and part his muscles. But Vincent did not turn to dust. When Joseph stepped back, Vincent had let the wooden stake dangle from his breast. He had smiled languidly, held Joseph's stare for a full minute and slowly drew the stake out. Joseph had fallen to his knees, begging for forgiveness and pleading for his life. Vincent had smiled, forgiven him, and given back the stake with the understanding that it was to be used on their Captain. Joseph had readily agreed and Tourgin had been dead within hours. Joseph had been by Vincent's side ever since.

Joseph never asked how Vincent had been able to feed, and Vincent had never offered to tell him. It was a rather simple reason, one that his Captain and future bodyguard had overlooked. Joseph and Tourgin had made sure that Vincent could not get to the rats in the wall, but had neglected to realize that he was not above drinking the blood of his own kind. The guards had been ample food. Vincent smiled a hyena's smile as heat surged through him. He strode through the now open door to his meeting room.

Joseph did not follow but closed the door behind his master and went off to watch the festivities from a secure location, where he could call for help more easily, if it were needed.

Vincent looked about the room and understood that the plan was being executed tonight. It was earlier than he and his Lieutenants had anticipated, but that was fine by him. There were about twenty people gathered in the meeting room. He recognized four of his Lieutenants, three of who were holding up one wall with three of their own Sergeants. The rest of the group, new vampires by their attitudes and look, were gathered at his throne, which Morgan was sitting on. A low growl escaped Vincent's throat

He had bought the throne long ago in China. The armrests were dragons, the right open mouthed, the left closed. The feet were claws and the cushions were red silk. It had a high back and was made of oak. It had cost him a lot of money, but it had been worth it.

And now Morgan was defiling it.

He composed himself and advanced toward Morgan. One of Morgan's younglings stepped into his path and tried to stop him. Vincent threw him across the room with little effort. He smiled when he heard bones break. The gasps from the rest of Morgan's entourage made Vincent grin in anticipation. He would have blood tonight, even if it wasn't exactly…fresh.

Morgan was gripping the armrests. Was it fear, hatred, anger or all three that made his green eyes blaze? Vincent wasn't sure and really didn't care. He grabbed Morgan by the lapels of his three-dollar thrift store suit and pulled him out of the chair. The cheap suit ripped in several places.

"Your rule is over Vincent. It's my turn now. Give up! We have you surrounded!" His voice cracked, making him sound no older than sixteen.

"Morgan," Vincent said calmly, knowing he still had the upper hand. "Get out of my chair." He threw him aside like a rag doll, into his entourage, who steadied him. "Now then Morgan, do you mind telling me why you roused me out of a wonderful dream," he glanced out the large, tinted bay windows to the setting sun, "before the sun set?"

"You've been Captain a year and the Mayor still hates you. It's my turn now." His whiney voice was grating on Vincent's nerves.

Vincent took a step forward and Morgan stepped back. "Your turn? Do you remember how I took control? Or has your hunger for power impaired your memory?"

He took three more steps forward, quickly, causing Morgan to stumble. The third step found Vincent standing over the man. He leaned over carefully, bending almost in half to bring his face within inches of sweating Morgan. "I had to kill Edwin to gain control. Would you like to try and kill me?"

Vincent sensed movement to his right and bent his knees. When he felt the would-be assailant on his back, he simply stood up and used the moron's momentum to send him sailing across the room. No bones crushed this time, but the thud was still satisfying.

"You apparently feel that one of your younglings-"

"Disciples." Morgan stated from the floor.

Vincent snorted. "Disciples?" He raised an eyebrow then shrugged. He stepped away from Morgan toward the man's younglings. "Alright then, disciples. You feel that one of your disciples will be able to take me out?"

Vincent was standing in front of the rest of Morgan's younglings, presenting them his back, almost daring them to try something. "I'm going to give you a chance to talk with me rather than just killing you right now Morgan. Despite your lack of loyalty, you have shown yourself to be a rather valuable source of information. But you are replaceable. So, you, Anthony, Kari, Markus and I will sit down and have a nice quiet chat. Agreed?"

He heard movement behind him and a voice spoke up, pretending to sound tough.

"We're not going anywhere. We stay with Mor-"

The youngling's sentence was cut off by Vincent's hand squeezing his throat. Vincent pulled the young vampire to his face and stared the ignorant fool down.

Vincent snorted at the ridiculous man before him. He had white makeup all over his face and neck, black eyeliner, mascara and black lipstick. He wore black leather…everything. He was what humans called Goth, and what the vampires called an easy meal. Vincent briefly regarded the remaining eleven boys and girls that for the first time seemed to be realizing what was going to happen to them. All were easy meals. He understood now, how Morgan had gotten them. He hadn't been looking for worthy candidates. Morgan had been looking for easy targets: cannon fodder. These children were to keep him occupied while, what? Morgan tried to get the drop on him? Vincent glanced at Morgan. The man was still on the ground. He hadn't even bothered getting up. Vincent turned back to the young one in his hand. The boy was struggling, clawing at Vincent's hand, trying to pry open the vise-like grip of his long fingers. Vincent had barely noticed.

"What"s your name boy?" He asked, like a teacher asking an unruly student on the first day of class.

"damien"

It was a whisper. Vincent barely heard him. He loosened his fingers and asked again.

The boy took a deep breath and in a terrified voice that was trying desperately not to sound frightened, "DAMIEN LORD OF DARKNESS AND ALL HE SEES?"

Vincent started laughing. He couldn't help it. The boy was pathetic. Still holding onto "The Lord of Darkness," Vincent continued to laugh. He heard Kari laughing as well. Morgan finally picked himself off the floor and stood, trying to look dignified. Since his hair was out of place and his shirt was untucked, he failed magnificently. It made Vincent laugh even harder. He heard a few of Morgan's meals tittering nervously. Vincent felt the heat rise in him again along with a hard heavy need. He had not eaten upon waking, and his body was starting to protest. Still laughing, he looked back into the eyes of Damien, Lord of Darkness. Vincent did not like to drink the blood of his own kind, it never tasted as fresh, but the boy would also serve as a lesson to Morgan and his disciples. Lightning quick, in the middle of a laugh, he pulled Damien's neck to his mouth and pierced the soft skin with his sharp teeth. He drank deep, so absorbed by the hot liquid running down his throat that he did not enjoy the screams of the other young ones.

Vincent pulled away a moment later licking his lips. "How old was he Morgan? Couple hours?"

The body dropped to the ground in a heap. If the boy was not dead, he soon would be. The blood had tasted too fresh, too human for the boy to live through that much blood loss. Vincent wiped his lips with the back of his hand and then licked the back of his hand.

"YOU BASTARD!" A girl screamed. She came at him with a small knife. When she was within arms length, Vincent reached out, grabbed her head in his hands and twisted hard to the right, breaking her neck. It was rather easy. Vincent had once seen a just fed vampire pull off the door of a safe room, but breaking a human's neck just didn't take that much pressure. Her body fell on top of Damien's, chest down, but face up with her eyes staring at the ceiling.

Vincent felt battle heat coursing through his body, and wondered again where Natalia was. He would want her when he was done. He frowned in frustration then turned his attention to a grumbling Morgan.

"You didn't have to kill them."

"You killed them when you changed them without my permission." Vincent's voice was calm, but there was a sharp edge to it.

Morgan backed away from the bodies and looked down, falling to one

knee. The look on his face suggested he had come to a conclusion. "I apologize, Captain. Please accept my respectful request for forgiveness. I don't know what I was thinking."

Vincent folded his arms and called out to Joseph, whom he knew was watching from the closed circuit security system. He waited in silence until Joseph opened the doors. Vincent sensed that he had brought guards with him. He smiled and waited until Morgan finally looked up at him.

"Sir? Will you accept my apology?" There was just enough pleading in Morgan's voice to throw off most people. But Vincent was not most people. He had learned how to spot men like Morgan long ago and knew all their tricks. This was the bargaining stage. If Vincent were in a better mood, he would play it out, see what the man was offering. But he was tired of Morgan, and had already picked out his replacement.

"Take the younglings to the cellar. Find out if any of them are worthy." It was a small command, nothing that needed to hold his attention for long, but he did not speak again until the room was cleared of all the children. Three of the remaining eight had tried to fight, but the guards were old vampires, and had no problem gathering up the children and getting them to the cellar.

Vincent spoke again before the door closed. "Put this one in the oubliette."

Morgan's eyes grew wide. "No. No Vincent, please. Don't…"

Joseph was by Morgan's side picking him up by the armpits. Morgan, still pleading, tried to fight.

"You can't do this. You said yourself: you need me. We can work something out. I'll give you anything you want. Please Vincent, JUST TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT!"

Joseph and Morgan were out in the hall now, and Morgan's shouts were getting softer. Vincent was not worried about Joseph. His friend was older than he and far older than Morgan.

Vincent regarded Kari, Markus and Anthony. Kari was holding back laughter, Markus was snickering, but Anthony looked mildly annoyed. He was the oldest of the group.

"Kari, Markus, Anthony, please send your Sergeants out, you can bring them up to speed later."

Anthony stepped forward. "Sir, Julia has news you need to hear."

Vincent cocked his head. He knew Julia. She was actually who he had chosen to take Morgan's place. She could find out anything. "She may stay. Any other objections? Good. Shall we continue then?"

The others left of their own free will. They had been here before and knew where to go. There was always food and drink in the kitchen for welcomed guests. The door closed behind them and Vincent went to his chair to sit down.

"Julia, what news?" Vincent was not prone to waiting for information.

Julia stepped from behind Anthony's right shoulder, a startled look upon her face. Anthony noticed the difference and felt a change coming on. He stood taller and waited for Julia to speak.

Julia stammered trying to get the words out. Vincent never spoke to her directly; she always told Anthony her news and he would pass the information on to their Captain. Unnerved, Julia did not start well.

"Morgan is planning on killing you."

Vincent raised an eyebrow. "Really? Hadn't noticed."

Julia shook her head then closed her eyes and concentrated. Vincent watched her compose herself, wondering what the game was.

"This was supposed to be fun, a diversion. He's hired a Slayer."

Vincent sat up straighter. Markus and Kari looked stunned. Anthony waited for the rest.

"Do you know who he hired?"

"Name, address, phone number. Where and when he's supposed to kill you."

"Do you think you can take care of him?"

Julia's eyes grew wide. "Y-yes. Yes I can sir. It would be my pleasure."

Vincent stood and took two steps bringing him face to face with Julia. He placed his hands on her shoulders and leaned in to whisper into her ear. "Bring me his head and everything that was Morgan's will be yours. All his possessions, all his servants, and his title."

Vincent kissed her cheek then went back to his chair. A stunned Julia bowed and stepped back. She tried to step behind her sire, but Anthony would not let her. Her place was now beside him as an equal, not behind him as a lesser.

"Now, then. Why didn't anyone tell me that Morgan was going to bring twelve young ones? More importantly, why wasn't he stopped?" Vincent now sounded perturbed.

"Sir we didn't know." Kari had locked her eyes with his. He read the truth in her eyes and was satisfied.

"When did you learn?"

"When we met him here tonight."

Vincent got up and started pacing. Anthony took two steps back and pulled at Julia's elbow, moving her back to his side. Markus and Kari looked at each other but otherwise did not move. They had center stage now; it had been left up to them to watch Morgan. They had done a poor job of it, and knew it.

"Did you have any spies on him?"

"Yes, two. One at his home and one at his favorite club."

"Did you have anyone following him?"

"No. We didn't think it was necessary." This brought a hard stare from Vincent.

"You didn't think it was necessary? This is a man who was planning on killing your Captain, and you didn't think it was necessary?" Vincent had been halfway across the room. In two seconds he was standing menacingly in front of Kari and Markus.

"I am not happy with this news. Tell me why I shouldn't strip you of your ranks right this moment."

Kari and Markus fell to their knees. They were still alive which only meant he still needed them. Markus spoke first. "Give us another chance to show you we are worthy."

"We honestly didn't know what a danger he could be. Please sir, give us another chance."

"What I find interesting," Vincent went back to pacing, but slowly and more deliberately, "is that Anthony came to me five days ago with this information. I didn't do anything about it because my hope was that one of you would find out about it as well. Your spies are worthless. You should have taken care of it yourselves. Anyone else would think you had deliberately done a poor job. How are you going to prove to me it wasn't deliberate?"

"I have an idea."

Vincent turned with a smile on his face. Natalia was back, and looking beautiful in a pinstripe skirt suit and black stiletto heels. He strode over to the entryway and took her in his arms. He kissed her long and deep, feeling her heat against his bare chest. There was coughing behind him and he let her go, a smile on his face.

"You have a plan my dear?"

"Don't I always?" She smiled coyly and slipped out of his arms, walking toward the others. He followed like a wolf stalking his prey.

"What have you been up to?" His voice, thick and deep, swept over her skin.

"I put a plan into motion and found out some important information." Natalia walked past the vampires to the chair. She ran her hand over the left armrest, around the back and then down the right armrest, giving Vincent a look as she fingered the exposed dragon teeth. "I now have a job in the Mayor's office… I'm his new secretary."

"What did you do?" This was from Anthony. He did not trust the human and always suspected Natalia was working for one of Vincent's enemies.

"I have been friends with his secretary since I came to the city. When Vincent took over I saw the friendship as an opportunity and let her know that if she ever needed a replacement, I could fill in. She planned a vacation for this week

two months ago, and it started two days ago." She paused, started twirling her necklace and smiled, "I killed her an hour after her vacation started. I will make sure the Mayor likes me and wants to keep me."

Vincent was standing by his Lieutenants, trying not to look worried. "And what makes you think I'll let you continue this dangerous scheme? If I won't let one of my people-"

"Last time I checked, I was still my own person." Her voice was still soft, but she started twirling the necklace faster. Vincent wanted to argue, but this was not the time. So he let it drop.

"Have you at least learned anything of value?" Vincent refused to make a scene but he would not hide his opinions.

"He has two Slayers on his team, and a priest. He is going in for heart surgery in two days and will have the priest and one Slayer with him at all times. The other Slayer will be outside the door, watching. The Mayor is telling the hospital that they are his bodyguards." She slowed the twirling necklace, letting the light catch and bounce off the crystals.

"How did you learn so much?" Kari sounded suspicious, awed, and a little dreamy.

"She can talk her way into or out of any situation she pleases. I've seen it." This came from Anthony, who had been there ten years ago when Natalia had seduced Vincent at one of his own clubs. She had talked her way past the human bouncer at the door, the vampire bouncer at the stairs and past the demon bouncer at the door into the private room. The bouncers had lost their life for that mistake and Natalia had gained Vincent's bed. Anthony still believed she had an ulterior motive. He had yet to discover if his hunch was true.

Vincent moved to behind Natalia and paced, slowly. Only Anthony was watching him. Julia, Markus and Kari were entranced by the sparkles bouncing around Natalia.

"How do you know who these people are?"

"I called their names into the hospital. Carl Garvin, Father Sulta, and Donavon." The room became hot and sticky with the news. Carl Garvin was more bounty hunter than Slayer. He could be bought off easily; double the bounty usually did the trick. Father Sulta was a crackpot. He didn't seem to understand that the usual tricks did not affect all vampires. Then there was Donavon. He had been around for twenty years and seemed to understand too well how a vampire moved, thought and acted.

"So now we know where he will be. A hospital. If not for his guards, I would be able to sneak in. We can take out Garvin and Sulta, but there's little chance of anyone taking Donavon down. If I won't risk my life, I won't ask it of anyone else." He paused, looking at Markus and Kari, who were now mostly asleep.

"It will be their job to take out Sulta and Garvin, when Gary has been taken to the recovery room. That will help a little. But what about Donavon?"

"I have a plan in the works." She nodded toward the sleeping trio. "Shall we leave them or should we continue talking here?"

Anthony looked at her, confused. He turned his head then hurriedly backed away, shocked. Markus, Kari and Julia's heads were touching their chests, as if they had fallen asleep on their feet.

"What witchery is this?"

"Not witchery, hypnosis." Natalia sounded like a child with her favorite toy. She twirled her necklace for emphasis.

"That's how you do it? That's how you talk your way into and out of everything?" Anthony sounded upset to learn that she had such a simple trick.

"Mostly. Congratulations, Anthony, you are now one of four people to know the secret. Keep it well." Natalia held out her hand to Anthony. He took it reluctantly, allowing her to kiss his hand.

"So what does this mean? Have you done this to me?"

Vincent stepped forward seeming to protect Natalia. There was a look on his friend's face he did not like. "Twice this was done to you. But you are not very susceptible to hypnosis. And you knowing means that I trust you enough to allow you to stay and plan with us. Or did you think that I thought of you like I think of them?" He waved contemptuously at Kari and Markus. "You've proven yourself time and time again. I am not just promoting your Julia at my inauguration. You are gaining a new title as well."

Anthony stammered, not believing a word, but knowing his Captain would not lie to him. He gave his leader a deep bow. "Forgive me sir." He paused and looked toward Julia. "What of her? I don't like seeing her like this."

"Then we let them go and talk amongst ourselves." Natalia clapped loudly and the three others woke up. The double doors opened simultaneously. Before any word could be said, Joseph had ushered the younger three out, and Vincent led the way to the deck, where food and drink for three were waiting.

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Vincent smoothed out the deep purple shirt, tucking it into his waistband. He strapped on the cummerbund and slipped on the fine Italian suit jacket, buttoning two buttons. He took a calming breath, feeling the scar tighten and the cummerbund squeeze his mid section. He was staring at the deep purple dress hanging on the door to his closet. Natalia was not here. He had not seen her since the night he had placed Morgan in the oubliette. She had left while he and Anthony had been talking, saying she needed to retrieve something from the bedroom. She had taken some of her clothes and had left with no word.

In the ten years they had been together, they had only been apart once.

Then, it had been an unpleasant two days. This time, excluding the two short hours he had seen her the night Morgan had tried to take over, he had not seen her in almost a month. It was unbearable.

But it was the night of his inauguration ball and everything had fallen into place. Mayor Lawrence was in his thrall, Father Sulta was dead and Garvin was hanging in one of Vincent's dungeons, skinned alive and awaiting more torture. Donavon had disappeared. Even his best spies couldn't find him. Everything had fallen into place, and yet he still wanted her. He clipped on his cufflinks and walked out the door. His guests were waiting.

He could hear the voices from the top of the stairs. Everything had been opened as soon as the sun had set. There were over one hundred people gathered, including his Lieutenants, except for Markus who had fallen to Sulta's stake before Kari could kill the priest. The loss was not small. Vincent had seen great potential in Markus. He knew he had to find a replacement, but he was having trouble with it. Vincent stopped in the middle of the stairs and cleared his head, pushing aside the dire thoughts. He would think of it later, after the party. Joseph was at the bottom of the steps waiting to announce him. Vincent gave him a sharp nod and strode down the steps.

He entered a quieted room. The Mayor was the first to approach him, groveling as they walked toward the throne, which had been placed on a stage for the occasion. When the Mayor tried to walk up the stairs with him, Vincent gave him a look. Gary cowered at the foot of the stage until Vincent sat down. Vincent nodded and the Mayor fell to one knee, babbling. Vincent rapped his knuckles sharply on the head of a dragon and the broken man fell silent.

"You have something to say to me."

"Yes, sir," said a groveling Mayor. "The city is yours. I am but your servant here to give you anything you desire."

He would have gone on but another rap stopped him. "Good boy. Now run home and await my instructions."

The man backed out of the room, bowing the whole way. He bumped into the doorframe and everyone laughed. He had been reduced to comic relief. Vincent's hyena smile was back. Those close enough to see it shivered, just a little bit afraid.

"Now that that unpleasantness is done, we have a few things to celebrate. Anthony, Julia, front and center." Anthony and Julia came forward, dressed in the same colors, blood red. Vincent had sent them the matching suit and dress. He liked his people to dress with style, especially when being promoted. Vincent stood and took a small dagger from his side. He jumped down from the stage and walked to the duo.

"Julia, you have proven yourself worthy of being one of my Lieutenants.

Finding out all you did about Morgan and then taking out his Slayer has earned you a place by my side, in my circle. Step forward. You will take Morgan's place as Reconnaissance Lieutenant. All his holdings, all his possessions are now yours. Drink and accept my offer." Vincent sliced open his wrist and held it out to Julia who placed her lips to his wrist. He brought her closer to his body, feeling her chill. He had not been with Natalia in so long that he let Julia drink a little bit longer than necessary. It felt good to have a woman in his arms. He pulled his hand away and closed the wound. He had drunk extra before the ritual, but it still left him a little lightheaded. Julia licked her lips and took her place beside Anthony, feeling a little drunk.

Anthony stepped forward when he was bid and bowed. "Anthony, with the exception of Joseph you have been by my side for longer than anyone. You have also proven yourself beyond question. You will be my First Lieutenant. You will be the one everyone else reports to. Stand and accept my offer."

Anthony's head bowed lower as his whole body sagged. "I cannot accept, sir, as I have not told you my greatest fear." He raised his eyes to his leader. "I do not trust the human that shares your bed."

"He knows." A strangled voice broke the quiet and then made it even denser. Heads turned as Natalia stumbled into the room. She was a mess. Her throat looked odd and bloody. Her clothing was ripped and dirty with dried blood and she had no shoes. She was leaning on the doorframe with one hand behind her.

Vincent dropped his knife and walked toward her. "Natalia, love, where have you been?"

"Taking care of business. I have something for you." She stumbled, trying to walk closer.

Vincent caught her before she hit the floor. She dropped whatever she had been carrying. It made a wet thud on the floor. There were gasps and a woman let out a small scream. Vincent glanced at the object, almost gasping himself. It was Donavon, or what was left of him. The eyes were glazed over, there was blood all over the decapitated head, and the mouth was open enough to see the sharpened teeth. Vincent's eyes grew wide. Had Donavon been a Slayer pretending to be a vampire, or a vampire pretending to be a Slayer? It didn't matter now; all that mattered was what the pretender had done to Natalia. Vincent stopped himself from being rough and carefully moved Natalia's head to one side. Her neck was ripped open, but the assailant seemed to have missed her jugular.

"Natalia, love, tell me what happened." He moved her carefully trying to find a better position for her.

"It's your inauguration present." Her voice was fading.

"But how did you get close enough?" Joseph and Natalia were the only ones close enough to hear the fear in his voice.

A small laugh escaped her. "He wanted me the first time he saw me. I just had to remind him of who I was."

"Natalia, you're not making sense." He cringed when she shivered. "Natalia let me change you."

That small laugh again. "Why not?" Her hand went to his cheek, leaving a bloody print. "I don't need to be human anymore."

This was the closest she had ever come to saying yes. He closed his eyes and prepared himself for the bite. His lips were touching her throat when he remembered his rule. His Lieutenants could not change a human without his approval and the approval of one other Lieutenant. He could not change anyone without the approval of all his Lieutenants. He had learned that keeping the numbers small kept his people safe. It also stopped his people from changing anyone on a whim.

Vincent pulled back and noticed his Lieutenants were all standing in a large circle around him. He caught Joseph's eye and motioned the man to take Natalia. He stood after making sure she was comfortable. She had passed out. He hoped this would be quick.

"I told you once before of my intentions of changing Natalia. I now ask outright for your approval. Any objections?"

One by one his Lieutenants gave their consent. When they were done, Vincent turned to Anthony, awaiting the man's words.

"Anthony, speak your mind."

Anthony stood silently, looking at Natalia with unmasked distrust. He looked up at his Captain and through clenched teeth proclaimed, "I give my consent."

Vincent could have accepted the lie, could have picked up the woman he loved and changed her, could have had her forever, but his relationship with Anthony would never again be truthful. He looked at his friend, walked over to him, reached his hand out and slapped Anthony across the face.

"Do not lie to me again. I know you do not trust her, so tell the truth. Do you give consent?"

Anthony was rubbing his reddening cheek. He looked at his friend again and once again proclaimed, through tighter teeth, "I…give…my…consent."

"Anthony, if you lie to me again I will cut out your tongue so you can never speak again! I know how you feel about her, SPEAK THE TRUTH!" His voice echoed in the room, reverberating against the various windows, causing some of his newer Lieutenants to step away.

Anthony unclenched his teeth and stated angrily, "I do not give consent! I do not trust her and still believe she is out to hurt you!"

"This is why I am making you my First Lieutenant. I trust your judgment,

even when I do not agree." He sighed deeply, startling some of those present. "Since I do not have your consent, I will not change her. Order must be maintained. Now if you'll excuse me, I wish to be with Natalia. This may be my last chance."

He was quiet for a moment then turned toward Natalia and Joseph.

"Sir, let me change her." The quiet voice crept up his skin and pierced Vincent's eardrums.

"Joseph? What did you say?" His voice and body were shaking, tight with anticipation.

Joseph stood, cradling Natalia like a child. "I ask my Captain to give me leave to change this woman into a vampire. To make her my child, so that she will live. I believe she would be an asset to my family. I ask further that one Lieutenant step forward and give their consent as well."

"I consent!" Kari spoke quickly, hoping to gain favor with Vincent.

A fire burned within Vincent. Hope blossomed. "You have my consent. Go quickly before it's too late."

Joseph nodded and walked out of the room, taking his precious cargo with him up the steps to Vincent's room.

Anthony started turning away, perhaps to leave, but Vincent's hand on his shoulder stopped him. "We're not done."

Anthony turned and locked eyes with Vincent. "I didn't know if the ritual was to continue."

"I decided three weeks ago to make you my first Lieutenant. You finally telling me the truth about your feelings of Natalia sealed the deal." He used his fingernail to rip open his wrist. It hurt like hell, but it proved a point. He held his bleeding wrist out to Anthony. "Drink and accept what I offer."

Anthony stood looking at his Captain, watching the blood drip from the open wound, realizing, for the first time, what the position meant. Vincent was grooming him to be his successor.

Anthony fell to his knees, letting the blood drip onto his head, and then licked the blood off the floor. There were only a few drops, but he did it anyway. When the floor was clean, Vincent offered him his wrist. Anthony took three swallows then pulled back. Vincent willed the wound closed and held out that arm to help Anthony to his feet. He pulled his friend to him, kissed both cheeks and pulled back smiling. This day was getting better and better.

Julia started applauding, reminding Vincent that he did have guests. He turned, bowed, and started mingling. His inauguration was a success.



# This House For Sale

By MaGnUs

"This story is dedicated to my son Gabriel."

*deet* *deet* *deet* *deet* *deet* *deet*

The sound of the alarm clock flooded the room as Paul Quentin got out of bed at the same time he did every day, 7 AM sharp. That was the time he got out of bed, because actually, he always woke up a good ten minutes earlier and went over the things to do on that day. The only day he broke this routine was Sunday; his day off. Every year, he took two weeks of vacation, always the last two weeks of December, but he still kept true to his Monday through Saturday routine, even tough he usually stayed home.

Still in his pajamas, Paul walked to the bathroom across the aisle that connected the living room and kitchen with the rest of his small apartment in Queens, a few minutes drive from Astoria Boulevard. He walked back to the bedroom after washing his face and turned on the CD player. Brushing his teeth while listening to Tesla's "Edison's Medicine" he said out loud "Nuffin' duk sum eidies medal un de modnin!"

A shower and ten minutes later, Paul got dressed in one of his best suits, black, that went well with a dark green tie and a white shirt. He needed to look his best today; he had an important client to meet. A beautiful two story house, three bedrooms and a nice backyard, the client had inspected it a few days before and had called him afterwards to tell him she had decided to buy it. Today they'd meet at the house and sign the contract.

His client found the house perfect for her needs and who was Paul to disillusion her. The art of selling, particularly in the field of real estate, was all about presenting something as more than it was, or different from what it actually was. Let the client be satisfied with what he was buying, then when the deal is closed, and there's no room for complaints, the flaws will start to surface.

Thirty minutes past seven, he sat down in the kitchen to have his breakfast. Two slices of white bread, toasted, and a glass of tomato juice. He smiled slightly at the sight of the red contents of the glass and drank its contents quickly, but carefully. At seven forty five he was behind the wheel of his Fiat; ten minutes later he'd be at the house.

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On the other side of the East river, in the penthouse of a Manhattan skyscraper, Shirley Benson got out of her bathtub, which was the size of a small pool. For a moment, she let the virgins' blood slide down her curvaceous body and drip onto the floor. Then, she walked towards the shower, and washed the blood off her skin. It wouldn't do to go around all bloody; subtlety was the key to success in this day and age.

Thousands of years old, Shirley Benson was not her real name, her real name was Kranath. She was a demon, and for the past fifty years (a mere blink of an eye to her) she had headed a cult in New York City. The cult was just a scam to get people to sell their souls to hell, and by providing wealth and power to key members it had worked perfectly. Poor and rich humans alike; all gleefully traded their immortal souls in exchange for material wealth and earthly influence. Those who lived in poverty wanted to rise above their station; rich people just wanted to be richer.

She took the time to dress up in a nice little Dior number. A black two piece suit and a matching black pearl necklace, all accentuated with a fine mist of Channel N° 5. Rather than using her powers to get dressed automatically, like some of her fellow demons, Shirley preferred to do it the human way. Since her first contact with them, she'd been fascinated with the little creatures, and enjoyed their comforts and trappings.

Soon, in a few weeks, the astrological conditions would be favorable for the ritual that would allow her to increase her powers on Earth. Her followers had been scouring the state for the piece of land with the proper mystical energies, and they had recently found a house in Queens that had exactly the kind of dark resonance she needed. The real estate agent had been most obsequious; he'd shown her the house once, and today they would close the deal, in the house itself.

That was a necessary step for the ritual, closing the deal on site, and so was signing the contract with her real name. For that, she'd ordered that a special pen be made, one that made it look to regular mortal eyes that she signed with her human name, but to a mystically trained eye, her true, demonic name would be revealed.

Breakfast was, as always, enjoyable, laying a hand on the young woman in

her bed, slowly sucking a portion of her life energy. She then washed it down with a glass of red wine, and chuckled at the sight of the glass. "The blood of Christ… heh!" Shirley got into her blood red Lamborghini Diablo (she did have a sense of humor, after all), and rummaged in the glove compartment, producing a CD. She inserted the disc into the dashboard player and as "Bicycle Race" started to sound she muttered "Queen, of course…" with a hint of disgust in her voice. The distance was not great, but the Manhattan traffic would make this a long drive.

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Paul arrived at the house, parking in the street, so as to leave the house's driveway free. From the seat of his car he glanced at the "THIS HOUSE FOR SALE" sign planted on the front lawn. Opening his briefcase, he carefully inspected the contract and the "SOLD" sticker, meant to symbolize the closing of the deal. Branding the house as sold, so to speak, was good for the business. Potential clients saw beautiful houses that had been sold by the agency Paul worked for, and that led them to consider buying properties through them.

Getting out of the car, Paul once again inspected his clothes for any wrinkles. Satisfied with his appearance, he walked towards the house. He turned the keys in their respective holes, and opened the door, walking inside. He gave the house one final inspection, paying particular attention to the basement. Everything was in place; his client would be satisfied with the house, at least until after the deal had been closed. In fact, Paul saw a second effect on sticking the "SOLD" sign to the "FOR SALE"; it was then when the client started to see little details about the house that had not been evident before.

Five minutes later, at 8 sharp, a red coupe pulled up in the driveway and stopped. The beautiful figure of Shirley Benson got out of the car's driver seat, and walked towards the door, where Paul was waiting for her, briefcase in hand. "Miss Benson, a pleasure to see you again." he said with a smile.

"Paul, please call me Shirley." the demon answered, a seductive grin adorning her beautiful face.

"Shirley it is, then."

"After I've settled in the house, I'll give you a call Paul. You must join me for a drink in the club I own downtown."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll get settled very quickly." Paul said, smiling.

"I'd like to go inside now, if you're ready to sign the contract." Shirley said, a hint of impatience in her voice.

Opening the door again, Paul took a step to the side "After you, Shirley."

"Thank you." the woman said as she stepped into the house.

Following her, Paul walked through the door and closed it behind him. He opened his briefcase and extracted the contract from it. "Would you like to examine the house again Shirley?"

Shaking her head, Shirley answered. "No, that won't be necessary Paul, thank you. I'd like to sign the contract now, if that's okay with you.

"Yes, of course. Here it is. Allow me to sign it on behalf of the agency." he said, as he scribbled his signature on the paper.

"My turn," Shirley said, taking the contract from Paul's hand, trying to control her excitement.

"Use my pen." Paul said, with his ever present smile.

Reaching into the inner pocket of her jacket, Shirley showed him a gold fountain pen, apparently a Mont Blanc. "No, I've got mine."

After a quick glance at the contract, Kranath signed it, seemingly with her human name of Shirley Benson, but, thanks to the magic embedded into the specially made pen, that was only an illusion hiding her true, demonic name.

"Done. The house is mine, at last." she said with a gleeful expression on her face.

"A pleasure making business with you Shirley, enjoy your new house." Paul said, shaking his client's hand.

"Believe me, I will enjoy it." Kranath said, already feeling the power flowing from the land and into her body.

Paul left the house, his hand inside his briefcase. He stopped in front of the "THIS HOUSE FOR SALE" sign and covered the last two words with the "SOLD" sign. The house glowed with a faint white light for a few seconds, as Paul watched with a grin on his face.

From inside the house, a scream echoed, both of pain and realization. Shirley Benson's soprano-voiced shriek gradually shifted into Kranath's bass rumble growl, as she noticed the change in the land's energies. The seemingly demonic energy pouring from the land into Kranath's body, the energy that would power her ritual turned into angelic force, anchoring the demon to the house, hopefully forever.

Paul kept his gaze on the house for another short moment and, satisfied by a job well done, walked back to his car. "See? You got settled quickly enough, didn't you, 'Shirley'?"



# Little Rabbit

By Kenneth Mack

It was six months ago to the day since certain events changed Hal Williams' life. Traumatizing events that changed him into a recluse. His days became filled with nothing but paranoia and schizophrenic episodes. The evenings were even worse, causing him to delve deeper into his psychosis and let his mind run rampant without any control or reasoning. It has been very hard for Hal to grasp reality seeing what he has seen, having been exposed to something he thought only existed in the dark recesses of men's minds. Something used as a scare tactic to keep people on the right path.

"What path is the *right* path?" He said to himself aloud. "Who the hell can I turn to? Who would believe me? What can I do?"

Before Hal could consider an answer, there was a polite knock on the door. He scrambled to the security monitor and realized it was his business partner, Jessica Peter for whom he had to thank for the madness.

"Bitch!" he uttered to the speakerphone. "What do you want? Didn't I make it clear I never want to hear from you?"

Playfully, she replied, "Come now little rabbit let me in and we'll talk about it, ok."

"Talk about what?" He shouted. "You're the reason everything is fucked up!"

"Listen," Jessica replied softly, speaking in the most soothing, elegant, and seductive voice. "I know it's been awhile since we've spoken, I had to give you time to calm yourself because you didn't take the meeting very well, but I'm giving you three weeks to make your decision. I want you to join us."

"Screw that!" he retorted venomously. "I'll let you know my decision right now! Hell No!!"

"Alright, well then I guess me and my **friend** we'll just come up now and finish things". There was a brief silence as Hal considered his options, his terror growing.

"Three weeks you say?"

Jessica looked into the camera and nodded her head. "See you then" she said with a smile, and walked away.

A deep sigh of relief shot from Hal. There was no way in hell he wanted to see that "friend" again. Hal couldn't help but think about that nightmarish evening when his world crumbled.

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Six months ago…

Hal was invited to a private party by his business associate, Jessica Peter.

"I think that this is something you'd enjoy a great deal," she had told him. He arrived at the Manhattan high rise aboard a private elevator with escort. Hal glanced around the room only to see that this truly was an exclusive gathering. The wealthiest and most affluent people in New York City were present; he felt right at home.

He saw Jessica in an elegant sheer evening gown, smiling with delight as she greeted him "I am pleased that you've made it, I promise you will not be disappointed".

"I'm sure I won't be," he said.

After mingling with a few admirers, Jessica grabbed Hal by the arm.

"The main event is about to start. Remember, whatever you do, no noise and no sudden moves."

The lights dimmed and a woman in a dark red robe appeared. She was tall, slender with strikingly beautiful facial features. Her eyes were like pearls that gleamed in the moonlight. She possessed long, wavy red hair. All the men, even the women stared in awe of her beauty. She disrobed and laid her naked body down on the smooth carpet.

Soon after, a cold chill filled the room and cloud of vapor manifested. The vapor dissipated, and a huge hulking creature stood over the woman. Hal tried to tell himself that this was just part of the entertainment. The creature grabbed the woman and spread her legs wide open, mounting her. Hal had been to freak shows before, but nothing like this. The creature began to thrust violently and started cleaving his victim's back with his claws. Hal looked around and saw that the audience appeared enthralled by the horror before them.

Hal was so horrified by his surroundings that he didn't notice that Jessica was fondling him and playing with herself! He became confused. He could either walk out or continue to watch the "erotic grotesque" show. Before he could move, the demon slammed his hand into the female's back and pulled out her heart; munching it down while it was still beating. The demon turned his head, stared at Hal, and suddenly dissipated.

Everything that Hal had read or heard about demons, conjuration and sacrifices had been nothing but fiction until now. He actually witnessed a demon being conjured, a human being sacrificed, and no one said shit.

Jessica looked up at Hal, "Did you like my surprise?" she said with a snickered look. Hal turned to her answering feverishly, "If this is your idea of a fucking surprise, I don't want anything else from your sick, demented, freaky ass; ever. I don't want to see you again; don't call, don't email, IM me, none of that shit. You keep all this weird shit to yourself!" Panicked, Hal ran out of the room.

"Run little rabbit, Run." Jessica said in a sultry voice. In the limo home, Hal couldn't help but play back what he saw over and over in his head. "Why did

he look at me?" When Hal arrived at home, he closed the door, locked it, sat on the floor, curled up began to cry.

"Why me?"

***

Reliving that fateful night brought tears to his eyes. "How can I stand up against something like that?" he said with a frightened voice. Hal ran every possible scenario in his head of how to make sense of his situation only to find no resolution. He picked up his Desert Eagle .50 caliber handgun and put it to his mouth. "Better to die my way than theirs!" he said with conviction.

In a final moment of hesitation, he had a revelation! The voice of his mother called out in his mind.

"Son what are you doing?"

"They won't leave me alone mama. They're trying to hurt me." He said in a childish voice.

"Remember, you are God's child! No one harms his children!"

Hearing a voice he had almost forgotten gave him comfort. He pulled the gun from his mouth, took a deep breath, and for the first time since the craziness he began to see things clearly. "Thank you mama." He said softly.

All this time Hal had been racking his brain asking "how" and "why me?"

"Well, why not me?," he thought. "What is it about me that makes me so damn special? They don't want to kill me."

"It has to be the money," he said with authority.

Hal realized that it was not his life, but his wealth and status that the demons had wanted. Greed can be a serious factor in life and business, Hal knew this firsthand. A strategy began to form.

"How can I use this against them?"

As Hal began to think of ways to manipulate the situation, he grew focused.

"I have to treat this like a business plan," he thought. He started to think about how he could barter for services, wondering how he could fraternize with the enemy and keep his immortal soul intact.

Hal knew about God, thanks to his mothers' teachings. Realizing that time was short Hal began to formulate a plan. He began researching the wealthiest people who were present that evening. Hal understood that only the elite travel, converse, and conduct business in their own small circles; the question was which circle?

One of Hal's greater talents was the ability to discern useful information. It was uncanny how he was able to decipher truth from fallacy, fact from fiction. It was one of the key factors that had made him successful; something he made sure to keep shrouded in secrecy.

He devised a way to gather information on these particular circles using technology; making it practically impossible for it to be traced to him. If one were to try, they would have to sift through so much underlying information that it would make the DaVinci code look like a Dr. Seuss book. All of Hal's potential business savvy and methodology became his strengths. He figured who was in deeper than others, who were just playing around, and who was for real. Most importantly, Hal had to find allies. Were there individuals out there who were in the same situation as himself? If there were, how would he contact them? Could he trust them? Hal knew this was the end game and he always considered himself an underdog, a million to one shot; Vegas odds. Hal didn't mind. Whenever he played, he played to win.

He reassured himself that this would be no different. With a few days before his deadline, Hal ventured out to travel to South Carolina to visit an old friend, a mentor of his, Herbert Langstrom. Herbert was like a big brother to Hal and gave him a chance when no one else would consider him.

It had been several years since they had spoken. As Hal became more successful, Herbert faded away from the picture. The more Hal was getting into his new lifestyle, the less visible Herbert became. Eventually, it became as if Herbert no longer existed and Hal never looked back.

It was hot and humid in Columbia SC. Hal was driving outside the city limits to a paved road leading straight toward a huge mansion. It had been eight years since he'd been here.

He knocked on the door; it was Herbert's wife Shelly.

"Hey stranger! Longtime, no see. What's the matter that New York living has made you bored?"

"No Miss Shelly, I came to see him."

"He's expecting you," She expressed with a joyful sigh.

Shelly directed Hal to the den where Herbert sat waiting.

"Before you start," Herbert began. "Let me say that it's good to see you and I'm glad you drove rather than fly. It's good that you're traveling under the radar."

"How do you know?" Hal said directly. "I don't have a lot of time and after I'm done speaking you have to leave!"

"I know there's much you don't understand now," Herbert responded anxiously. "But believe me you will when the time's right."

Herbert began to tell Hal of how he accumulated his own fortune and a certain young vixen who had claimed to help him keep it. The young woman that Herbert spoke of was Jessica, Hal's business partner! He described her as a siren with the ability to charm any man for what she wanted. Herbert had expressed how deeply he regretted the situation because it was he that introduced Jessica to Hal.

"Believe me Hal there was nothing I could do, I was powerless to resist her."

Hal responded, "Do you have any idea how fucked up my situation is? You couldn't have warned me, or stabbed the bitch, or something?"

"I fought very hard just to get away from her and almost died doing it." Herbert expressed with deep regret. Hal told Herbert what had transpired within the past six months; Herbert got up, went over to the wall and took out a small attaché case from the safe. He then gave the case to Hal and told him, "It's time for you to go! You'll know when to open it up and when to use it."

"Look man, you're practically the only family I have and I'm not going to lie to you. I'm scared to death! I don't know what I'm going to do, but I know it's something. I came to see you for your help." Hal said apprehensively.

"All the help you need is in that briefcase," Herbert replied. "Besides I'm already compromised."

He stared at Hal and motioned him to come closer. Hal watched through the opening of the study door to reveal Shelly talking to two men in suits whom Hal recognized as the security from the party that evening.

Herbert said, "Your car is in the back of the house, they don't know you're here yet. Take the back road; it leads into the city limits and the interstate."

Hal replied nervously, "What about you and Shelly?" "How're you getting out of this?"

Herbert looked at Hal and smiled. "No matter what, survive!" As Hal headed out the backdoor he heard screams coming from Shelly and then gunfire. As he looked in the rearview mirror he saw the mansion engulfed in flames. Tears fell vigorously from his cheeks.

Hal was no longer afraid, but angry. He reached home, quietly settling in, undetected. He exhaled as he opened the briefcase. What was revealed was beyond anything that he could've imagined. There were photographs, classified files on Herbert, Jessica, himself and all the elite circles. Who was richest, who despised whom, who fought for attention. There were also instructions on how to resist Jessica's charms. This information was definitely the ammunition that he was searching for. It even contained information on their enemies, something Hal made sure he paid attention too. Their enemies were his potential allies; he knew he had to be cautious about contacting them as well.

"Before this is all over, I'm going to drive a stake through that psycho bitch's heart!" He said in a perturbed voice.

Three weeks to the day, Jessica met with Hal at their office in Midtown. They looked at each other with unspoken tension. Hal sat erect but not looking as confident as Jessica.

She declared in her siren-like voice, "I'm glad little rabbit that you've

decided to join us. We're going to have so much fun you and me." She moved over to him, almost kissing him as she spoke, "You know you can't resist me."

In that moment he felt a tingle which turned into brief paralysis as her voice echoed throughout every inch of his body. At first, he felt compelled to obey. Remembering Herbert's files, he thought of pure thoughts. Suddenly the echoes faded and Hal regained control. Not letting on, he replied in a submissive tone.

"Yes mistress."

Having no further concern, Jessica called in the rest of her circle to introduce Hal. He still couldn't believe who had been part of this so called "elite" group. Jessica whisked him around the room briefly displaying him for her own amusement. Hal began to feel more at ease but never letting his guard down. He pictured himself as a dolphin in school of sharks.

"Vegas odds, remember?" Hal murmured under his breath, knowing full well that he was at his best under these conditions.

As Jessica took a private call, Hal scanned the entire room and took stock of each group member at the gathering. There were the Wilmores who owned all of Long Island's beachfront property; Russell Arlington, who owned every major retail chain on the East coast; Brian Summers and Lisa Manning; they owned most of Midtown's hotels. Leslie Rubin, President, New York Stock Exchange. It appeared Jessica had her hands in everything.

Hal figured out the group members had unlimited resources that Jessica ruled with a strong grip. Hotels, real estate, and the stock market were all part of Jessica's power base.

"I see Jessica picked a new plaything. She'd settle for anyone these days!" Arlington spat venomously.

"Don't mind him," Lisa answered. "Welcome to the Circle, Hal. Are you impressed?"

"I am," Hal replied confidently.

"Russell's upset because he's no longer Jessica's plaything," Lisa said laughingly. She was just bored with Russell that's all. Hopefully, she'll be in a good mood, so that we may correspond?"

Hal absorbed the conversation and realized that nothing was shared in the Circle unless Jessica permitted it. Also he'd recognized envy amongst these "elites" as well as greed. Each of them ranting about how much they're worth and who answered to whom and who was number one under Jessica.

Hal realized that their minute bickering over status was to his advantage. He wanted to cause dissention among them. He'd figured a way to have them turn on one another; to loosen Jessica's grip over them. The most important thing that binds them is money. This was the Achilles heel that Hal needed to destroy Jessica.

Jessica returned from her phone call with an excited look upon her face.

"So, it seems that you've started mingling already." She said in a sultry voice.

"Yes, it seems that way," Hal replied.

"Well, little rabbit, time for some fun!" Jessica said seductively as she turned toward Leslie and Lisa. "Hal, do you want them?"

"Not as much as you," Hal said convincingly.

"Good. You can want any woman, but you'll need me!"

The night was filled with the lusts and desires of the privileged. Hal sat on the floor with Jessica's legs above him as she watched her followers delve deep into every perversion the mind could fathom. Hal was underfoot, as a sort of "prize possession." He was allowed to witness, but not yet participate. He belonged to Jessica. At least he would allow her to think so.

As far as business went, Jessica needed Hal to facilitate all finances and transactions affiliated with the Circle members. He was to be her Chief Financial Officer. This didn't set well with the other members and it began to form a rift between them that Hal continued to exploit. He would talk to them individually; meet with them in their business environments. Hal would feed each of them misinformation about the others and spread gossip regarding who was in Jessica's good graces. Doing this fuelled a lot of animosity and envy. Aside from all things, Jessica trusted Hal; after all they were business partners. The other members were perturbed, but didn't show it distinctively until Hal pressed the issue. He figured out that every fiscal quarter they had to remit a substantial amount of their earnings to Jessica's corporation in Europe. It was a limited partnership that she'd set up over the years. Hal soon discovered that this European "business interest" was nothing more than a dummy corporation. Jessica was just pilfering capital and liquidating it into cash. Once she had siphoned all of their wealth, she would move on to another Circle.

Hal realized that the other Circle members would be livid when Jessica eventually instructed them to turn over their shareholdings to her corporation in Europe for consolidation. This would be Hal's moment of opportunity. He'd figured out that once Jessica was finished taking their wealth, she would disappear. She would resurface later as someone else. "Cash in carry?" Hal thought to himself.

Jessica arranged a gathering of the Circle members to discuss her plans for consolidation. Hal knew that his opportunity had arrived. As the members of the Circle entered the conference room, there was immediate tension in the air. Everyone's face had a look of malice. The Circle stared at Jessica; the long pause itself was chilling.

"You said that you loved only me, and I gave you everything," Leslie shouted angrily. "Now you've betrayed me!"

"Loved you? It was I who gave her the world," Russell shouted disdainfully.

"My wealth was hers to do what she wanted without question," Brian cried venomously. "And I still wasn't chosen."

All members began arguing and contesting one another for Jessica's "love."

"Silence all of you," Jessica said in a controlled voice. "There's no need to fight amongst each other." Her influence began to ebb. Hal had studied Jessica very well from what information Herbert left him. Pure thoughts of any kind could nullify her spell. Faith, hope, even anger in its purity is uncontrollable.

Brian walked over to Lisa and pulled out a hunting knife, thrusting it into her stomach. "Jessica, I wanted only us to be to together. None of them not even my wife, will stand in my way." His voice was eerily calm as he churned the knife deeply into his wife's stomach.

The other members began attacking each other furiously.

Hal seemed content as he watched the carnage with both terror and delight.

Jessica looked at Hal, unnerved with what had transpired. "You did this didn't you? Why?" She spoke in an angry voice. "I could've given you anything."

"I told you that I didn't want anything from you, bitch," Hal replied arrogantly.

The remaining members of the Circle, scarred and drenched in blood, turned to Jessica. "Get away from me you undesirable lumps of flesh," she said in a commanding voice. "How dare you touch me without permission! Get Back!"The anger in their eyes turned to pure hatred. The puppets began turn on their master.

Jessica laughed in a sultry and loud voice as they began ripping her apart. "You'd better run little rabbit! You'd better run!" The screams of Hal's former business partner and her minions continued, devolving into guttural grunts and howls of agony.

Satisfied with a job well done, Hal quietly walked out, closed the door, and proceeded to the elevator.



# Touched

By Luke Pierce

Christina Hudson had known about the truth for a very long time; she had been taught about the coming war between Heaven and Hell and that she would have an important role to play leading up to the prophesized apocalypse. What this role would be was unspecified, but Christina knew it would have to be important for the leading figure within the Sacred Order of St Michael to break ranks and let her know about this truth.

For her though, truth was just a concept, a way of telling one side from another. What she knew as the truth could just as easily be seen as lies by someone sitting on the other side of the fence. But she knew her own mind, the Order had raised her almost from birth when her parents had made the sacrifice to have her brought up within the traditions of the Order of St Michael, the Archangel of War; the Angel who had saved The Lords' life against the fallen angel Lucifer.

Christina closed her eyes, bringing her CZ-75 First Edition to her forehead. She breathed gently, almost offering a prayer to her unseen Lord as she carried on thinking about the path that lay ahead of her.

With a sudden snap, she opened her eyes, loaded the chamber with the 15 clip magazine, creasing her brow as she focused on the task ahead. The Order was not just a center for religious worship; the inner sanctum was also used as a tool for the Lord. Those humans who were not chosen to become Slayers would instead be used as assassins, exacting a terrible revenge on those who consorted with Demons and allowed themselves to become corrupted.

The assassins were few in number, but extremely proficient in their tasks. Christina was rated amongst the best and often entrusted with some of the more difficult assignments. Her natural athletic ability often saw her through some of the more challenging tests of faith. It was to her credit that not only had she survived the longest in a dangerous occupation, she had also managed to keep her beautiful looks, with the exception of a long scar along the base of her spine where she had almost died on her first mission. Christina brushed away the unpleasant memory as she flipped off the safety catch and slipped the pistol into the belt of her cream pencil skirt, the matching jacket covering up any hint of a concealed weapon.

Getting out of her car and catching the cool morning breeze, she strode purposefully toward a building made almost entirely from glass. As she carried on walking Christina swallowed hard, knowing that she now had no opportunity to turn back. Her arrival was now expected.

Nancy Prenton had not been with the company too long and she was trying not to curse too loudly as the computer screen had told her for the fifth

time that morning that the operating system had gone down once again after she had committed an illegal error. Nancy clawed at her face in mock desperation and gasped as she realized that she had been spoken to.

"I presume that you don't have a hearing test to work as a receptionist?"

Nancy looked up and groaned inwardly as she took in the sight of a glamorous Hispanic woman who could not be any more than three years older than herself. It now became a sore point that this woman had obviously been more successful in life than she had.

"No!" Nancy almost shouted, "No. We don't."

The woman grinned impishly as she tried plugging her ears with her fingers.

"And I don't need one either. No need for you to shout, right?"

Nancy looked down at her screen again and tried to avoid the glare she assumed she would be getting. As the woman had stayed silent she dared to look up once again and was surprised to find the woman smiling.

"It's alright; I made the same mistake last year."The woman winked as she confided her secret, "I'm here to see Bill Young, is he available?"

"I'm sorry, but that's impossible at the moment." replied Nancy, trying to disguise an almost whining tone.

"How come?" asked the woman.

Nancy vaguely indicated her computer screen.

"It's these damn computers again!" she said, trying to keep control of her temper. "They've gone down again for the fifth time this morning!"

The Hispanic woman shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly.

"I'm a friend of the family and you know Bill doesn't like to be kept waiting."The woman seemed to be confiding into Nancy again, making Nancy involuntarily lean backward.

"There's nothing I can do about that." Nancy whined.

Reaching into her cream jacket, the woman pulled out a silver pen and a notepad and began to write a number down before tearing off the sheet and handing it to Nancy, who looked at her with a nonplussed expression.

"So I tell him Christina is here?"

Christina nodded.

"That's right sweetie, I'll be waiting over there." She said, indicating the reception seats behind her with a nod of the head.

Nancy slightly dipped her head in understanding and watched as Christina made her way over to the seating area before dialing Bill Young's office. As she sat down, Christina began to drift once again to what brought her to these offices and to what had to be done. She then became aware of a young woman's voice.

"Miss Christina?"The receptionist finally spoke. "Mr. Young says he will see

you now. Floor seventeen and the office with the Oak door, you can't miss it."

Christina stood up and straightened out her jacket, she smiled towards Nancy knowing full well that the girl would probably be out of a job by the morning.

"Thank you."

Deciding to take the easy route, Christina took the elevator and used the time to take a quick, final check of her equipment. Taking out her CZ-75, she pulled back the magazine loading breech and made sure that the magazine was still loaded with the Holy Water bullets, an important form of either offensive or defensive situations involving demons or vampires. After making a third check of the magazine, she snapped it back into the chamber and put the gun back into the jacket once again.

The elevator door opened up and Christina stepped out, grateful that there wasn't any muzak, perhaps this one wasn't really *that* demonic after all. Taking quick stock of her surroundings, the Oak door was just a short walk across the corridor. Pausing before opening the door, Christina swallowed hard and felt for the reassurance of her handgun.

"A friend of the family?"

Christina paused and wondered what was going on as Bill Young, the President of the pharmaceutical company, swung around in his chair and faced her for the first time. He was relatively young and very well dressed in a manner which comes with unexpected success. He watched for a reaction and didn't seem disappointed when she didn't give him one.

"That's how you passed yourself off, isn't it?" Bill smiled in a non-threatening way, "I find most reporters do that when they want to get an interview with one of the richest young bachelors for their magazines."

Christina returned the smile and looked at Bill in an almost predatory manner.

"And what happens to those reporters?"

"Oh, I just end up eating them and having them scream."

"Is that what you're going to do to me?"

Bill stood up and paced around the front of his desk. He was quite a tall man, although not powerfully built, yet his very presence screamed danger towards Christina.

"Okay, hold it right there and stop playing this game."

Bill paused and smiled quite cruelly.

"There is no game to play. You die." He smiled a bit more openly, "It is quite simple really."

Removing the CZ-75 from her jacket, Christina pointed the weapon at Bill and tried not to shake.

"You've confirmed what I've needed to know. Now get out of that skin."

"You must have me confused with someone else."

Christina lowered her aim slightly and fired her first shot into Bill's knee. He dropped to the floor in pain and tried to disguise the fact that smoke was beginning to seep out.

"Bitch!" he screamed, "I'll kill you for that!"

Christina cocked her head slightly and smiled.

"I recall you were going to do that anyway."

She raised her aim and fired again, this time hitting the chest cavity. It was obvious that the human host was going to have to die, especially as he was so determined to hang onto whatever he bargained with. Bill, or rather what used to be Bill, lay on the floor, smoke seeping out more strongly and panting heavily. She stood over him and pointed the pistol at his head.

"Before I die and you send me back to hell, let me ask you something." He panted.

"Sure," replied Christina tartly. "Almost anything you want."

"Are you – are you sure that you're working for who you think you are?"

"I work for God under St Michael," she said. "I send demons back to hell."

Bill grinned and held his chest.

"I… I thought so." He gasped. "You have absolutely no idea."

Christina looked directly at Bill and wiped off her smile.

"Goodbye Bill."

Christina left the body and walked out of the door. As Bill Young was now literally a hollow husk, it was likely that the whole affair would be hushed up so as not to cause widespread panic. Still, it bothered her, what the demon had said, about her not knowing who she was working for. She had known all of her life and she had been schooled properly in the history of her order. Everything had to be true. It just had to be.

Walking into her small apartment, after a run-in with a possessed cat or two, Christina fell onto her bed and tried assessing her day. She had carried out her orders to the letter, but had committed the cardinal sin of allowing a demon to ask her a final question before it left the Earthly plane and sent back to hell. It was bothering her now and thinking about some of her previous targets, she now had cause to question them. She hoped those questions could be answered the following day when she went to make her report to the Inner Sanctum.

The Inner Sanctum was relatively hard to find, or at least it used to be. Christina remembered the old trick used in many a B-Horror movie as a book was used to access a hidden panel and into a room. It was the same in the old library of an abandoned school. She moved one lone book and proceeded to move behind it, she then followed a long corridor and negotiated the footswitch traps for the

unwary or uninitiated before making her way into the general meeting area and the pace to which she would be making her report to one of the many members of the Inner Sanctum. Sometimes it was like an extended version of an inbred family; with many members seemingly related to each other, within relationships or part of a dirty secret locked away in a darkened room.

Walking into the room, Christina took stock of her surroundings and noted the murals adorning the walls, depicting the visual history of the Order. From the initial foundation under Michael up to the 19th Century, where they began to let more of the lost knowledge filter through to the public domain; this policy had proven to enrich the Order and allow it to expand its network throughout the world, fighting evil every step of the way.

Now the word of a single demon had forced Christina to reassess what she had previously believed in.

"Christina?"

At the sound of her name, Christina turned around one hundred and eighty degrees to face the source of the masculine voice.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

Stepping out of the shadows, a middle aged Caucasian male dressed in a dark blue gown held out his hands in a gesture of peace.

"You don't recognize your own father then?"

Christina stepped back involuntarily, trying to digest the information she had just been fed, her systems overloaded with the shock.

"What?" she said, drawing in a short breath, "But my father is dead."

"A story which was fed to you in order that you should draw some focus." Replied the man purportedly Alan Hudson, "You always were unfocussed as a child."

Christina narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"Then why?" she demanded.

"As members of the Inner Sanctum, your mother and I were not obliged to have you trained in the old ways; to commit sin upon sin." Alan spoke as if he was reciting a long memorized mantra. "Protecting the knowledge from those who would go insane if they truly knew what was happening on this plane of reality."

"I killed people who had contracted pacts with demons," stated Christina, her eyes beginning to fill with angry tears. "They were the ones who had committed sin; by bargaining with their souls."

"You have a particularly tainted soul Christina," retorted Alan, "You have killed without a second thought, acting on blind faith, so truly, who are you to stand in judgment of others?"

"I know that I have never offered my soul to anyone other than the true Lord." Hissed Christina, she began to feel for the CZ-75 within her jacket a sense

of foreboding beginning to build. “Of that, I can be certain.”

“You work for this Order; can you be sure that it works completely for your Lord?”

The impact of the words seemed to have the desired effect as the implication began to hit home within Christina’s mind. Flashbacks of previous assassination hits replayed in her mind’s eye and she realized that not all of the contracts may not have been as they appeared, least of all that the demons that controlled some humans had either been on their way to attaining power or were the subject of message board rumors; either way she was indirectly protecting the more powerful demons from their potential usurpers.

Her tears filled her eyes further as Christina sank to her knees; desperately trying not to allow the sound of her anguished sobs fill up the room.

“You mean that… I have been working for the Fallen all along?”

Alan looked at his daughter and felt little remorse at what he had done to her, it was all to a means in the end.

“After the Christ had died,” he began, “The Archangel Michael came down forth to this Earth and began making preparation for the times ahead. For a time we protected the Holy Grail before we had passed it onto other hands in order to keep it safe from *undesirables*.”

Christina looked up once more, her gaze fixed firmly on her father.

“At first, the Order of Saint Michael was small, yet we were already a formidable opponent attracting gallant heroes who were united in the common goal of slaying demons.” Alan paused momentarily for reflection, sighing wistfully. “It was around this time that one of us had realized that killing demons was an act of evil in itself and that the true road to spirituality was of that of forgiveness. He traveled as far as he could, attempting to preach this message to humanity, although I am sure only a few listened to it.”

“Then what happened?”

“When the one man who had departed from the Order, a Demon made its way here, making a most extraordinary proposition: As an act of penance, it would lead us to the other Demons based on Earth.”

“And you *believed* its word?”

Christina began to rise to her feet, an aura of anger beginning to encompass her very being. Alan smiled tautly and swept aside part of the gown he wore to reveal a finely decorated sword.

“Please,” he said tartly, “Before you do anything rash, be aware that I am able to defend myself. I’m not as incapable as you might think.”

Christina paused momentarily, wondering what course of action to take next.

“So why take it at its word?” she asked.

"Even if it were lying, we could not allow the opportunity to make our job easier pass us by. If it was telling an untruth then we could easily have killed it, but the association has profited both ourselves and the Demon quite handsomely."

"What do you mean?"

"The Demon is protected by us and he leads us onto the next demon to assassinate; it works both ways."

Christina gritted her teeth and forced back her tears, her world had literally fallen apart and everything she thought she knew was right had, in fact, been proven a lie.

"I can't believe you," she sobbed, reaching into her jacket and pulling out her pistol. "I believed I was helping to protect a world from the truth and here I was just helping a Demon just grow more powerful."

"I did warn you about acting rashly," said Alan.

"I don't care!" Christina screamed, pointing the pistol at him. "All I know is that you've betrayed the underlying principles of our Order and for that, you must pay the price!"

As she squeezed the trigger, Christina thought for a moment that she was going to be killing her own father. He raised a hand as she fired and the echo of the shot resonated around the room.

Her face registered surprise as Alan unclenched a fist and let a 9mm bullet fall to the ground, its precious ammunition wasted.

"It pays the Demon to protect the Inner Sanctum as well."

Alan drew his sword and pointed it at Christina, a new kind of menace surrounding his very being.

"You know, if you hadn't listened you could still be alive right now instead of living on borrowed time."

"Daddy…" Christina involuntarily lowered her pistol, not quite comprehending what she had seen.

It took seven strides to reach her, before taking the fateful thrust through her lower abdomen which would end Christina's life. She screamed in agony. As she began to pass out from the searing white pain that encompassed her body, she took solace in the fact that she wouldn't be conscious for her final moments and it was then that she began to hear a voice.

"The magazine." It whispered almost as a hint.

"Is that you, mom?"

"The magazine. Change the magazine."The whisper became far more insistent and Christina tried to work out what was meant, before finally understanding and moved her right hand in an attempt to retrieve her pistol through what felt like a thick pea soup.

As she finally felt the familiar handgrip, she flicked the switch and allowed

the magazine clip to fall out before using her left hand to retrieve the other magazine from her breast pocket; the magazine loaded with the Holy Water bullets tipped with silver. Christina then heard the voice talk once more.

"Point the pistol; I'll take care of the rest."

Alan Hudson turned once more to face his daughter as he heard the butt of the handgrip hit the floor quite heavily as Christina shakily tried to aim her weapon. He pulled back his lips in a sneer and stepped forward.

"Give up Christina, you're already dead."

Christina said nothing as she carried on trying to aim.

"Da-daddy," she said finally, her voice trembling.

Alan momentarily felt his heart begin to soften as his daughter seemed to carry on trying to reach him and beg for his mercy.

"Daddy, I'm so sorry."

As Christina used up the last of her strength and pulled the trigger, Alan felt an upsurge of fear run through his body as he watched the bullet physically alter its' original course and head in his direction, momentarily pausing in front of his face.

"If you kill me now, Michael, you will be doing your Lord a great disservice."

Alan stared down at the bullet and glared as forcefully as he was able.

"Untold terror will spread throughout the world and there will be horrors hitherto unseen in the World as my agents seek vengeful retribution."

The bullet held itself in the air as it seemed to consider the words that Alan had used before resuming its' course and leaving nothing but a bloodied hole where the cranium had once been. Almost immediately, a dark smoke began to emerge from the fallen body and attempted to make its way to the prone body of Christina, yet an invisible force stopped it from reaching her.

The smoke began to dissipate and a strong wind began to whip up as it did so, almost making an enraged howling sound. As the winds blew, Christina was shielded by the invisible presence, preventing her from being torn apart by the maelstrom.

As the final wisp flickered out of existence, Christina awoke and weakly tried to sit herself up and lean against the nearest wall. She cried out involuntarily in pain as she made the attempt and then summarily decided that the best course of action would be to lie on the ground and stain the stone floor a nice shade of crimson.

"So I will soon be joining Daddy in hell."

The voice began to resonate in her head once more.

"No, Christina, you will not die."

Christina coughed slightly and wondered if she were hallucinating, if she

were not then she should answer, it was not as if she were in a crowd or anything.

"So what am I doing then?"

"Resting before your task."

"And what task is that?"

"You truly are a member of the Sacred Order of St Michael," the voice paused momentarily before continuing, "You committed sin in order to protect the souls of others, shielding them with your tainted hands."

Christina sobbed slightly and gulped in a breath.

"So there truly is no hope for me?"

Again, the voice paused before giving its considered answer.

"Yes, there is hope." It said, "Your salvation is that you *are* hope and one which cannot be extinguished lightly."

Christina made another attempt to stand and was surprised to feel no pain. She tore open the lower half of her blouse to discover her wound healed, replaced with a small tattoo of a cross over a handgun.

"You have now been marked by St Michael."

Christina decided to stagger out of chamber and back into the wider world, her body now filling with renewed hope and vigor, yet still trying to cope with the shock of it all.

Eighteen months later, the first and second retaliations were made in Lower Manhattan…



# Puzzle Pieces

By Anthony Andora

"So here I am."

Her clothes are torn, exposing tender flesh that her husband alone has been privileged to see and touch and love. Her eyes burn with sorrow and determination as she crouches in front of the door to her own home. Amelia Michaels. Thirty-three years old. Faithful wife. Mother of three. Successful business woman. Slayer in God's army.

Her eyes close. She takes the liberty to shut everything off for a little while longer; surely she has earned that much. She listens to the soothing quiet of darkness.... Then the rising drumbeats of her heart remind her that she has a purpose. She wipes her nose, still getting accustomed to the overwhelming perfume of blood splashed on her, a postmodern mess of crimson. Slowly, she opens--then closes--her hands to make sure they still function, to make sure they won't fail her now. As she lowers her head, tears trace translucent paths down her face and baptize the ground. This is it. This is the end.

It started four nights ago with a dream: alone in the darkness; a voice from behind; not just any voice, but the Voice, His Voice; she turns around only to be smothered by an unyielding light bright enough to envelope the sun; I need you, the Voice says; her body begins to tingle; she moves her arms back and forth, trying to find something to hold onto--nothing but light--then a tangible, unmistakable something reaches out to her; she feels a warmth different from that of a fire; her soul seems aflame.

She woke up four nights ago dripping with sweat, chest heaving and heart racing, left with an unexplainable aching for her soul to be set on fire again.

Her eyes open. She turns around and looks, possibly for the last time, at the world she's fighting to save. Stars riddle the sky in a grand design she hopes to hear the explanation for one day. The trees that line her street reach with outstretched arms of wood and leaf into the deep blackness. Everything melts away into the neverendingness of shadow.

The cool air caresses her lungs. Inhale. Exhale. Slow down. Just breathe. She kneels in front of her home in prayer, gathering the necessary courage and strength to perform God's will. Three days ago she left this place. Three days since the life she knew crashed down into little pieces, into a parody of a puzzle. She might not live after this. Death had already kissed her once.

Three days ago. Thursday morning was like every other morning: tender lips pressed against her forehead, bringing her back from sleep. She thinks back to that morning, back to her husband of nine years. Drake. How did they meet? A

freak encounter? A moment of destiny? A whim of Providence? Together, under that suspended pastel sun hovering in a sky painted with vibrant hues of purples and blues and oranges and reds. A surreal moment. They kissed for the first time then. Instantly she fell in love. She would be his--but that was his plan, wasn't it--and she would give him three daughters.

Julie the eldest, Emery in the middle and Stella the youngest. Triplets the result of a thirty-seven hour labor that brought Amelia to hell and back. An exchange well worth it. How many hours has she spent doting on them? Smelling their golden hair, rubbing their button noses, holding their plush little hands? Their sweet disposition refreshed her. Their innocence invigorated her. Their playfulness enlivened her. Her little eight-year old lambs. She adored them; and, as if this was the way of the universe, they returned her glowing love threefold. She kissed their identical faces for the last time Thursday morning.

She got into her car and took the freeway downtown to work for another routine day. Phone calls, reports, meetings. She looked at the framed photographs on her desk for sustenance. For them, she thought. More phone calls, more reports, and more meetings. Uneven arms ticked and tocked their way around an immutable face until Amelia was finally free. She slid into the driver's seat of her car and felt warmth inside at the thought of returning home.

Amelia wanted little more than the life she had. Of course, life was far from perfect. Drake could be overbearing. If he'd been alive hundreds of years ago he would have made a fine feudal lord. He dominated their family life. He isolated them from their neighbors. He demanded total control in raising their daughters. She had to let him win. She let him pick their clothes and pick their bedtime stories and pick their friends and pick their hobbies. But he kept them all happy. Wasn't that what mattered the most?

At half-past five Thursday afternoon, a hazy orange sun peeked through the clouds and forced Amelia to squint her eyes. She sat behind the wheel of her car humming along to music she did not know the words to. She smiled. Drake. Julie. Emery. Stella. That was her song. Their faces flashed in her mind with the recounting of each name. Twenty minutes later she exited the freeway, her car spilling onto Main Street in the cozy green town of Hillside.

The streets were mysteriously empty. No cars traveled in either direction. She considered the lack of traffic during rush hour a miracle. Even though no one else was around, she still signaled when turning right on Aegis Ave. She was ten minutes from home when something bobbing in the wide open asphalt sea demanded her attention.

A skinny teenage girl paced back and forth on the sidewalk wearing an exasperated expression on her face and hardly anything on her body. She didn't seem to know what to do and apparently didn't have a cell phone to call for help.

She opened her eyes wide and smiled when she saw Amelia park her car. Amelia opened her door, stepped out and yelled, "Hey there! You alright?"

"Oh my God! Thanks for pulling over to help me. I'm…I'm not from around here."

"It's okay," Amelia said as she approached.

"What happened?"

"My car died on me some streets back."

"Where'd ya leave it? I can take you there."

The girl nearly jumped on Amelia in gratitude.

"Thank you thank you thank you so much! I've been waiting for at least an hour for someone to help me. But the street's been empty the whole time."

Amelia glanced around quickly and said, "I noticed. That's strange. It's never been like this as far as I can remember. It's a good thing I got here right now. The sun's about to set. It's not safe for you to be here alone at night. There aren't any streetlights in this part of town."

"Totally! I'm so afraid of the dark," said the girl, hands moving as she spoke.

"What are you doing here anyway?"

The girl grew flustered for a second.

"Oh, umm…well, yeah. Like, I got lost… I met this boy online and…"

The girl let the silent seconds complete her sentence.

"Oh," Amelia said.

She paused for a moment. Kids these days.

"Okay. Don't worry. You don't have to say anymore. C'mon, hop in."

The girl nodded in relief.

"Oh my gosh, you are so the best!"

They walked back to Amelia's car and got in.

"By the way, I'm Amelia. What's your name?"

The girl smiled.

"It's Becky. Thank you so much Mee-lee-ah."

"Don't mention it."

Five minutes later they were at an isolated part of town populated by condemned buildings that hunched over sprawling dirt roads.

"There it is," Becky said.

Her dingy blue jeep sat helpless at the side of the road. Both rear tires had fought a losing battle with crusted nails. The hood was popped open and stood straight up in the air, a rusted metal headstone. The whole scene reminded Amelia of a grave. She pulled in ten feet behind it and set the car in park. They both got out and took a closer look.

"I'll check the engine for ya," Amelia said.

"Thanks! I'll just get a jacket from the back seat. I'm freezin'!"

Amelia watched Becky grab a black jacket piped in hot pink then walked to the front of the jeep. For a brief moment the idea of playing Good Samaritan bounced around in her head and settled comfortably. This feels good she thought. Should do this more often. Then she looked down and noticed the engine was missing.

"Hey Beck--."

Amelia never finished her sentence. The WHACK interrupted her. That was the sound of a metal baseball bat smacking into the back of her skull. A dense spray of blood erupted, coating the ground behind her. The last sound she made--after the brief involuntary whine upon contact--was the plop of her limp body crumpling into a pile of bones and meat.

Becky, her face made over in random patterns of dripping crimson and flecks of bone, stood there looking down at her victim. She held the bat in her right hand and rested it on her right shoulder, doing her best impression of a satisfied ax-wielding lumberjack who had just succeeded in chopping down an ancient tree. She smiled and said something that Amelia could no longer hear.

"That's what you get for talking to strangers."

Becky wasn't doing this for kicks, of course not! The guy on the phone, whatshisname? Anyways, he said it would all be set up for her. He said to wait on that street--guess he planned the whole bit--and bring whoever stopped by to this dirt bucket and take care of 'em. It was that own woman's fault anyway. Didn't she know how dangerous it was to stick her nose in other peoples' business? Couldn't she tell that something was wrong? Well, no matter what, Becky decided she wasn't going to finish the job this time. After all, the lady was pretty nice. Even if she was a sap, Becky couldn't do her like all the others. It would just be so… like so damn cruel or something. So Becky decided that someone--or something--else would have to take care of the mess. That way, she wouldn't be responsible for whatever else happened to Amelia. Becky had no trouble dragging the body into the middle of the dirt road. Finished, she dusted herself off as best she could and wiped her hands clean.

"Adults are so stupid."

Becky rummaged through Amelia's pockets looking for the car keys. She didn't bother to turn the body over and look at the face but she looked down at what used to be the back of Amelia's skull and smiled. That's that. Becky held the keys in the air out in front of her and jingled them as she walked to the car.

"Thanks."

She started Amelia's car and turned on the headlights. She tuned the radio to the local hip-hop station and cranked up the volume. To the illustrious soundtrack of crunked-out playahs slapping bitches and hos, Becky adjusted the

mirrors and buckled her seat belt. She couldn't wait for the sweet payoff she just earned. With a giggle she shifted the car to drive, dropped her foot on the gas and entered the newborn evening with a clear conscience. The screech of tires and the scent of burnt rubber floated in the air and lingered, bidding the dying woman a crass goodbye.

Amelia was alone. Beneath the tangled mess of blood, bone, and hair was her cracked eggshell of a head. Blood continued to seep out of the fractures in her skull. A sticky pool formed beneath her. The aroma of food lingered through the night air, attracting all sorts of predators to an easy meal. Within minutes ants had crawled all over her, relishing their newfound feast. Despite the absence of light, flies made their presence known, buzzing all around the body. In the distance a pack of wild dogs announced their impending arrival with shrieking howls.

Consciousness gradually returned to her. What happened? How long was she knocked out? A groan resembling the call of zombies escaped her lips. Her thoughts came back to her in the form of a torrential blur. Home. That's right. She was going home. The streets. They were clear. Empty for some reason. Then she saw the girl. That pretty young girl who wore nothing and had no idea what to do. That girl who needed help because her jeep turned into its own headstone. That's right. She was going to help. She was the Good Samaritan this time. She felt proud of herself. She drove the girl to her car. In the middle of nowhere. Black jacket. She looked at the engine but it wasn't there. Then she heard footsteps. Footsteps that turned into something deafening. Like metal teeth chewing shattered glass. And then…. there was the same silence that engulfed her.

She could not feel the swarming insects all over her body. If her ears worked she might hear the high-frequency flap of tiny wings, the slurping of microscopic mouths, the lapping tongues of stray dogs. The only sense that seemed to work was her sense of taste. She had already grown familiar to the taste of her own blood. Liquid iron seemed to spring up her throat from an angry heart and coated the inside of her mouth. Her tongue turned itself over and over again, a stranded fish flopping on a beach. There was no escape from that awful, sobering taste.

I'll never see them again, she thought. Drake. Julie. Emery. Stella. Where are you? Amelia choked on her own blood. The bastard child of a gurgle and cough escaped her mouth. She could not move. Not even her eyelids would open. This is it. This is the end. She couldn't help but look at her situation any differently. Even if Eternity hadn't swallowed her up yet she felt as if it had already passed her by.

Not a soul came down the road to interrupt the predators at table. Their main course laid there as her body decided to quiver on its own. The flesh on her limbs began to disappear. In twenty minutes her face was left unrecognizable.

Hopeless, she surrendered to her apparent fate. Back to dust I shall return she remembered…

If she still had eyes to look out into the distance directly in front of her, Amelia might have seen the form of a man walking her way. Perhaps if she could see the tall dark figure approaching her, she would wonder if it was God finally on His way to claim her. As the man got closer, she might notice his bright red eyes that did not reflect light--for there was no light--but glowed of their own accord. And she might see this stranger bearing his beautiful, perfectly white teeth as he stood over her.

"My, my, my… How lovely."

The man snarled. Everything snacking on the half-dead woman in the middle of the street stopped and fled immediately at the presence of a superior predator.

"Who are you, my darling?"

The man crouched next to Amelia. He looked at the back of her newly redesigned concave head.

"Tsk tsk tsk. Such a pity."

He grabbed her hair and lifted her head to see her face. Fleshy sockets greeted his eyes.

"And so beautiful."

The man looked around to gauge his surroundings.

"The most pleasant things in life are unexpected."

He lifted her up into his arms and together they vanished into the night.

"Let's see what I can do," the man said.

Amelia faded into unconsciousness again…

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"Ah, you have some fight left in you."

Amelia awoke to the sound of a masculine voice with the richness of butter. She had no idea what his words meant.

"Good."

She wanted to open her eyes; for some reason she could not. She felt like a head in a jar--why couldn't she feel her body? And who was this talking to her? All she knew was that here was someone who could help her. Someone who could find a doctor. Bring her to a hospital. Take her home to her family.

"Don't worry my dear. I'm here to help. I won't let you suffer anymore."

Amelia began to wonder what those words meant. No more suffering? God…is that you?

"I can't believe you're still alive. After all that blood loss…" the man trailed off.

His mouth wrinkled up.

"Such a horrible waste."

He was disappointed.

"Well, what can one do? What will be shall be."

At that moment, Amelia's sense of touch returned. She imagined the fires of hell wrapped around her as she writhed in agony; air assailed the open gashes left all over her body. Exposed nerve endings desperately tried to reconnect with their missing parts. "I wish I was dead," she thought. The man put his hands on what was left of her. She felt him move close. She could feel his cold breath on the side of her face. He pressed his nose flat against her cheek. He nearly inhaled her--he was breathing in so hard.

"Remember me well," the man whispered huskily. "My original name has been lost to the ages. But you shall know me as Paris. I am of an ancient race. Your kind would call me a vampire."

Amelia's mind swirled round and round. A vampire?

"I brought you here to my dwelling. You, who were left for dead, have a chance. I offer you a new lease on life. Become my servant and I shall grant you immortality," Paris said with a grin.

"I'm dying I'm dying I'm dying," Amelia kept thinking.

"You don't have much time to decide. I know you can hear me," Paris intoned in his most seductive and hypnotizing voice.

Who is this?

"I am your chance. Embrace me. Serve me. And you will live."

She thought of Drake. She needed him right now to hold her close and tell her everything would be alright. If there was anyway she could survive this mess and see her family again then that's what she needed to do.

"All I have to do is pierce that beautiful neck of yours…"

He opened his mouth wider than any human jaw would allow. The trail of saliva that ran from the top of his mouth to the bottom revealed his hunger for blood. His purple tongue extended itself, wriggling with a life of its own, and wiped his teeth. Paris leaned forward, an inch from her neck and sunk his icy teeth into her. Polar waters spread throughout Amelia's body. She could not move or react, entirely at the mercy of this midnight benefactor.

"Mmm," the vampire moaned in delight. "So sweet."

He raised his wrist to his mouth and with one deft movement sliced it open. A thick bluish-black liquid began to drip. A sour, rotting smell invaded Amelia's nose. Paris forced her mouth open.

"Let's finish this then," Paris declared. "Drink up my darling…"

An explosion above their heads interrupted Amelia's initiation into the world of the undead. Paris looked up at the high ceilings of his home. A second later a bright glowing ball crashed through and hurtled itself into the floor. A tidal

wave of light swallowed up the room as splintered wood rained down around them.

"Yield!" boomed a new voice.

Amelia wondered what was happening. This different voice, intertwined with care and authority, reverberated in her ears like shifting colors in a prism. Did it belong to God? Since she was a little girl at church on Sundays, Amelia had always imagined that God should sound so grand and powerful, putting preachers and pastors to shame. She began to feel warmth returning to her body. What could this be? Was it the voice from her dreams? No, not quite--but close.

"Step away."

The vampire laid Amelia back on the floor, stood up and took three steps back. Mouth hung open, the vampire's body shivered out of awe-inspired fear. A being in the shape of a human body stood guardian over his near-victim. All the light from a moment ago had since dissipated and concentrated into this body, glowing a luminescent white. The body stood tall with powerful broad shoulders and a pair of wings on its back that extended gloriously like an eagle in flight. It wore no clothes. It had no hair. It had no skin. A being composed entirely of light radiated something that the vampire feared. No features were discernible except for its face. And the face was angry. Paris felt his undead heart beating ever faster.

The glowing source of the voice kneeled next to Amelia and extended its hands over her. The strange being's face bore a look of concentration and determination. An otherworldly power spread, engulfing Amelia in a strange misty light until she disappeared from view. Amelia felt her entire body tingling. She cried out. What was happening to her body? Was she being torn apart? Was she finally going to die?

Cells multiplied. Blood coagulated. Bones fused together. Wounds closed. The light retreated back into the hands from where it came, revealing Amelia on the ground. Fully healed, whole once again, she felt reborn into a new body reminiscent of her former one but infused with a silent, mysterious strength. She opened her rebuilt eyes as if for the first time and gazed into the face of an angel looking down at her.

"Amelia," the angel said with what looked like a warm smile.

"How do you…what…who are you?"

Amelia had never seen anything so dazzling, so amazing, so heavenly. Was this God? Had He really come for her?

"An angel. My name is Uriel, servant of the one true God."

Amelia looked Uriel up and down. An angel? For the first time, she noticed the great, slender wings extending from his shoulder blades. "What the hell is going on," she thought. Hoping to escape with the angel preoccupied in conversation, Paris turned to escape.

"Stop!" Uriel commanded.

Paris had no choice but to obey. He stopped mid-step, leg raised, foot hovering an inch above the ground. His body frozen, Paris could only stare at them while sweat began to form on his forehead.

"A foolish mistake," he thought. "Didn't know she was one of them. Should have dispatched her quickly while I had the chance."

"Damn you both!" Paris screamed.

Uriel glared at the vampire--that shut him up--then crouched down next to Amelia. He placed his arms around her to lift her up.

"Just back off!"

Amelia threw his arms back and got up on her own. She clutched the sides of her head and tried to gather her thoughts. "What is going on? Why did this crazy mess have to happen to me," she thought. She looked back and forth from the angel to the vampire. Behind her confusion, her anger and frustration, Uriel saw a soul desperate to understand. His angelic mouth opened and his voice began to bring news of the reality Amelia now faced.

"Amelia--"

"How do you know my name? What's going on?"

"Amelia, you have been chosen."

"Chosen? What do you mean 'chosen'?"

"Please, let me explain."

"Someone attacked me I don't even know how long ago and now I'm here with you and the freak over there," she said, her voice ripe with desperation.

"Because of the goodness that exists in your heart God has chosen you--"

"Goodness in my heart? I've been chosen? Chosen to get my head bashed in with a baseball bat?"

Amelia's shoulders heaved back and forth as she tried to catch her breath.

"The world you know is not what you think it is," Uriel said calmly.

"Damn right!"

"Amelia, please."

"Stop--stop talking to me like that."

"Like what?" the angel said.

"Like everything is perfectly alright!"

"Everything will be alright, I promise you. I know this must be difficult."

"You don't know what this is like!"

She began to cry.

Uriel put his hands on her shoulders and looked her deep in the eyes.

"I'm so…so scared. Why is this happening to me? What…what did I do wrong?"

Uriel smiled.

"Nothing. You did nothing wrong."

"I want…I want my husband to hold me."

Uriel took her into his chest and held her. Enveloped in the velvet wings of an angel, Amelia closed her eyes and waited.

"Amelia, God has chosen you to be a Slayer in His holy army. Mankind stands in the middle of a great War between Good and Evil. The powers of Hell conspire to overtake their Creator in Heaven. This world is the battleground and they have corrupted it."

The words of the angel brought forth images in Amelia's head. She saw the war between Heaven and Hell playing out in her mind. She gasped, trying desperately to comprehend the visions.

"One such corruption stands before us now."

Uriel released Amelia from his grasp and directed her gaze toward Paris. Amelia looked at the man who took her to his home, the man who called himself a vampire and sunk his teeth into her neck. The trail of pale skin. The raven black hair. The sleek body dressed in some European-tailored suit. As she looked at him she could feel something new and inexplicable begin to grow inside of her. One finger after another curled, hands tightened into fists. Her teeth began to grind against each other. She glared at Paris, sending him a look that said "you've got nowhere to run now you blood-sucking bastard." She wanted to destroy the abomination standing before her.

"Yes. You understand," Uriel said. "You can feel the warmth inside you spreading, urging you to rid the world of creatures like him."

Amelia placed her hands on her stomach. That ache, that burning from the dreams was erupting inside her now. She opened her mouth warily and spoke.

"I never thought…I never knew they were real. Just a story. Where… where did they come from?"

"Long ago, six evil men had bartered their souls to a demon named Azmodeus in exchange for great power. They became the first vampires, bringing destruction with them wherever they went. They slaughtered many of the faithful and drank the blood of their victims."

Amelia's stomach turned. She itched to rid the world of Paris and his kind.

"After a feud between Azmodeus and Lucifer, all vampires were released from the service of Hell. Now they wander the world, gaining power for themselves and ignoring the battle for which they were created. But make no mistake. He is Hellspawn. He is an abomination in the eyes of God. And he must be destroyed."

"How?"

"Here," Uriel said as the air around his right hand began to spin and swirl. "Take this."

Uriel brought his hand up from his side to Amelia's eyes. A wooden stake lay in his hand.

"What's that?" Amelia asked incredulously. "Like in the movies? All I need is a piece of wood?"

"When the vampires appeared, God saw fit to curse them in order to lessen their advantage over the faithful. The Lord made it so common wood, in remembrance of the Cross of Jesus, would be enough to destroy them."

Amelia took the wooden stake and it felt so natural, like she was born for this. The muscles in her limbs burned with anxious energy. She felt strong, fierce and capable with the weapon in her hand.

"Go forth, Slayer, and serve your God."

Amelia stood there next to an angel from heaven with a sharpened wooden stake in her hand. She turned to her side and looked at a real, undead vampire who moments ago had bitten her neck in an offer of immortality. How did this happen? Why wasn't she freaking out? But no matter what, no matter how crazy this was, it just felt right. Amelia closed her eyes and felt reassurance.

"Thank you, Uriel."

Amelia opened her eyes and walked over to Paris as Uriel looked on.

"Please! Please have mercy on me," the vampire begged.

Nothing like mercy swelled up in the Slayer's heart.

"Mercy?"

Paris looked desperately towards Uriel who responded with a barely perceptible nod. The vampire felt the angel release its grip on him. He began to laugh.

"You're a fool."

Amelia hesitated for a second--how did he get free?--and the battle was on.

"Die!"

Paris snarled like a caged tiger and swiped at Amelia with his claws. Before she could even think her body seemed to react for her, leaping backwards into the air. Her hands guided her softly into the floor as her right leg extended. She landed a solid snap kick to the chin of the vampire before she completed the flip and landed back on her feet.

"Hurghk--"

How did she do that? Before she could find an answer the vampire was on the attack once again.

"You bitch! You're nothing to me," he screamed rushing towards her.

He feigned an attack at Amelia's neck. When she prepared to defend it, Paris slipped beneath her guard and tackled her to the ground. Using his momentum he brought every ounce of vampire mass to bear upon her and pinned her arms to the ground. The impact from the fall forced the wooden stake to pop

out of Amelia's hand. Like lovers in the night, they breathed in unison together, their faces pressed together.

"Ahhhhhhh…I can't wait to sink my teeth into your juicy neck again."

"I can't die," she thought. "I won't."

"Slow down big boy," she said with a smile. "You move too fast for me."

Transferring all of the energy contained in her body to her neck she landed a forceful head butt on Paris. When she brought her head back down she saw his hands clawing at the smattering of blood that covered his eyes. Before he could recover she landed a chop to the vampire's neck and rode the motion to upturn his body and mount him.

"This is how I like it."

"How did you…when did you get so strong?"

Paris began to shake with fear. Out of the corner of her left eye Amelia found the wooden stake laying a foot and a half away from her.

"It's over."

Moving faster than she could comprehend, Amelia leaned into the vampire's neck with her right forearm while simultaneously grasping the stake with her left hand. Without another word Amelia thrust the stake into the vampire's chest, her movement swift and sure. A soft squish accompanied the gurgling noise that Paris made in his throat.

"Die!"

She leapt off and watched Paris desperately try to remove the sharpened piece of wood sticking out of his chest. He hacked and coughed. He spit out blood. He tried to stand up once. He fell onto his side. His body began to convulse. His limbs flailed helplessly. His mouth opened wide. He let out a piercing shriek. Then he laid still.

"Very good," Uriel said while Amelia stared unflinchingly at her fallen enemy with disdain.

The vampire's skin turned scarlet and began to burn from the inside out. Within a couple of seconds, the ground at Amelia's feet had turned to ashes and dust. One less Hellspawn to plague the world: the newly commissioned Slayer had just completed her first mission as a soldier in the Army of God. Still, the war raged on. Uriel brought this to her attention.

"Amelia. You are ready."

She walked to the angel, ready to respond to whatever message from God he had left to tell her.

"You did very well. You are a Slayer. This is your sacred duty, to purge the world of evil. But there is another pressing concern, the reason for why I have come here tonight. I have been appointed with the task of ordering you to deal with a specific enemy."

"What is it?"

She had never felt this alive, this electric before.

"It's rare for an angel to be charged with handing out a specific mission to a Slayer. But God's will be done. There is a reason why you have been chosen for this."

A Slayer in God's army! Amelia could not wait to go home and share this news with her family. Her daughters would run and chirp loudly, asking if it was a real vampire; they'd hide in fear and quickly come running back to hug her tightly. Drake would be shocked--and proud. He would support her in whatever she had to do. Most importantly, she would be capable of protecting her family from any dangers the War between Heaven and Hell might bring.

"Please, tell me!" Amelia cried out excitedly. "I'm ready to serve, ready to give my life. I've never felt this way before, so complete, so alive. Tell me what to do next!"

If she was so inclined Amelia would have fallen prostrate on the floor and spoken in tongues. She wanted to praise God! A break from her static existence. A new purpose. Maybe she wouldn't have to work the same job anymore. Maybe she could spend more time with her family. Maybe she could train them. A family of Slayers! How awesome would that be?

"Slayer, what I have to tell you will test your faith like never before. I am a messenger. I can only speak the truth."

"I'm ready."

"Steel yourself."

Amelia couldn't wait.

"Your husband Drake is not who you think he is."

What was that? She must have heard wrong.

"He's been lying to you since the day you met."

A sledgehammer must have hit Amelia in the chest. She felt like collapsing.

"What?" she barely muttered out.

"Drake is not thirty-five years old. He is one hundred and forty-two."

Amelia blinked.

"He's a Magus, a wizard. He uses magic to alter his appearance and maintain the face you know now."

The face she fell in love with. The face she needed to see right now.

"He is extremely powerful," Uriel trailed off.

This is impossible Amelia kept saying to herself.

"…and dangerous," he continued. "Though there exist some wizards on the side of Heaven, most choose to ignore the battle. And there are those who side with Hell."

This must be some sort of test she told herself. Wait for it.

It's just a test.

"Your whole life together has been a charade orchestrated by him."

It's just a test.

"Your three daughters—he plans on sacrificing them tonight to gain a share of Hell's power."

It's just a test.

"You can't let that happen."

What could Amelia say?

"Destroy him before he unleashes another hellish nightmare into this world."

Uriel stood there unmoving. He waited for Amelia to answer. She stood there, arms crossed over her chest, holding herself tight.

"That…that's not true," she whispered. "It can't be true."

"I can't lie, even if I tried," Uriel responded.

Amelia looked down at the angel's feet. She brought her hands down to her side. This has to be a test. What if he's from Hell? What if he's trying to fool me? Temptations, lies, that's what devils bring. Her hands tightened and her knuckles turned white. Veins popped out from her temples and neck. Her body moved on its own: arms extended forward; fists opened into claws.

"You liar!" she screamed.

Her hands were at Uriel's throat. She glared, a modern medusa closing in. She breathed heavily on the angel's unmoving face.

"He is not evil! He can't be!" she screamed.

Uriel remained emotionless.

"He can't be…" she cried out.

Amelia loosened her grip and fell to the ground. Her head hung low, allowing hair to cover her tormented face as she began to sob uncontrollably. It's over; my life is over she thought. I can't do this. Why did it have to be this way? Can God be so cruel?

Uriel raised his head and looked up into the sky. He extended his arms, flapped his wings, and levitated off the ground just above the heartbroken woman. He smiled. Then a tiny ray of the purest light pierced through the darkness above and shined on Amelia. When she opened her eyes she was somewhere else, alone and surrounded by a warm, benevolent light. Though she saw no one there, she felt something embracing her. Her broken heart began to mend itself together. A Voice spoke to her.

"My child."

There was no denying it this time. It was the Voice from her dream. His Voice.

"Do not fear. I love you. I believe in you."

Amelia closed her eyes and began to cry again. But these tears surging down her face were tears of joy. She felt like she was about to burst, she felt so loved. Such incredible intensity of emotion and power and grace flowed through her body. When she opened her eyes again, she was kneeling at Uriel's feet. He was still smiling.

"God is good," Uriel said as he knelt down to wipe the tears from Amelia's face.

That was God she kept thinking. That was God talking to me. He believes…in me. Uriel lifted her back onto her feet.

"I…I don't know if I can do this."

Uriel offered her a reassuring smile.

"All things are possible through He that guides you."

She thought back to the nine wonderful years of laughs shared, fights started, children raised, tears cried, love made. All of it--and now nothing? How could she go home to murder her husband?

"This is only a trial."

A trial? This was worse than death.

"It's too much," Amelia said.

Uriel placed his hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eye.

"Think of your daughters."

Her daughters.

"Oh no!" she cried.

He was planning on sacrificing them. That's what Uriel told her.

"Please, take me there now! I've got to save them."

Uriel nodded and obeyed. He wrapped his wings around her. An instant later, Uriel unwrapped his wings and they were standing outside of her house.

"The rest is up to you," Uriel said. "Have faith."

Amelia turned toward her house and wondered what she would see behind the closed door. Before she could ask the angel to stay he vanished into the night.

"So here I am."

She walks to the front door, calming herself with deep breaths, playing the words over and over again in her head. He believes in me. I can do this. I have to. For Julie, Emery and Stella. She prepares herself: my husband is not behind this door. He is not my husband. Her hand shakes reaching for the door knob. Horrifying images pass through her head, her daughters lying on the floor gutted like worthless fish.

"No--he won't have them!"

She opens the door, steps in with eyes wide open, ready for anything.

"It…it can't be…"

Ready for anything except the house exactly as she left it, Drake sitting on the sofa with the phone in his hand, concern and worry etched into his face.

"Please, it's been three days. She's got to be out there. Find her," Drake says.

Then he looks up and his face melts into a mixture of surprise and joy.

"Amelia!"

Drake drops the phone, rushes forward and takes his wife into his arms. He begins to cry. Amelia stands there, wrapped in the arms she had been longing for all this time, staring off into space.

"I…I missed you so much," Drake manages to say.

Is this real?

"Baby…please, please say something to me. I need to hear your voice again."

Was everything Uriel told her a lie?

Drake pulls away and holds her face in his hands.

"I thought I'd never see you again," he says.

She stands still, not knowing what to say or do, held in the arms of the man who has had possession of her heart for so long, the same man who broke her heart, the same man who holds the pieces together with the promise of mending it again. The facts, the questions, the mission: all of it leaves her body. She lets go. She lets go and falls back in love with the man she is supposed to murder.

"Oh my God I was so scared..," she says before burying her face into his chest.

"Shhh, shhh. Baby, it's okay. Everything's going to be okay."

For a silent eternity entirely too short they hold each other…

"I heard…I saw such horrible, terrible things."

"Baby its okay. You don't have to tell me now. Just close your eyes and stay here with me. Everything's going to be alright. I promise."

"Where are the girls? Are they alright?"

"They're fine. It's late and they're in bed. Speaking of which, you need some rest."

He leads her to the sofa and tells her to lie down. He goes to the kitchen to get her a glass of water and fix something for her to eat. She closes her eyes and replays everything that has transpired. She remembers Uriel's words. No, everything he said is a lie. This, this love, this marriage, this is real. The vampires and angels and devils and wizards--where did all that come from? It doesn't matter anymore. She is here, in her own home, with the love of her life. She turns to her side and rests her head on her hands. A smile begins to form on her face. All of it must've been a bad dream. She hears Drake making a clamor in the kitchen and opens her eyes. On the floor a black sleeve with pink piping peaks out from under

the sofa.

"I've seen that before," she says. "Oh no--"

And then she remembers.

"Thanks! I'll just get a jacket from the back seat. I'm freezin'!"

The girl. The jeep. The jacket. The bat. The vampire. The angel. The mission.

Her daughters.

She turns around just in time to see a butcher knife streaking towards her neck. She moves and reacts as if this whole scene is choreographed, as if everything happens in slow motion. She grabs his knife hand and locks his arm. With a twist she tosses him up and over the sofa. He lands on his back and doesn't move for a second. Then he gets up without using his limbs; he floats slowly, his body tilting until his feet meet the floor. He smiles and brandishes the knife once again.

"Huggh," he wheezes. "So you know?" he asks in an ugly old voice.

Drake is trying to kill her. But he's not really Drake, not the man she knew. He is a Magus. He is more than one hundred years old and it's starting to show. His face ages rapidly. He must be losing power fast. That's why he needs to make the sacrifice. Why he's trying to kill her babies.

"Where are they?" she demands.

"You'll join them soon."

"You bastard!"

She rushes in and tries to sweep his legs. With a casual laugh he allows his lower limbs to phase for a brief second and her leg passes through.

"Even in my weakened state…I'll still kill you."

"There's something I never told you about me, honey," she says, her arms up and over her head in a defensive stance.

"Secrets, huh?"

"I'm a Slayer."

Before he can blink she is behind him. Before he can move her hands are on his head. Before he can say anything his face meets hers and she kisses him for the last time.

"Goodbye…"

His neck makes no cracking sounds. The body simply slumps to the floor, a feather finding its way down to the ground. She kneels next to him, places one hand on his back, the other over her eyes and showers his face with tears. This is her life now. She better get used to it.

Weary with grief, she stumbles into her daughters' room. She looks intently at all three of their chests rising and falling in unison. Dizzy with relief, she falls onto the floor and sleeps for the first time in a long time.

Morning. Sun pours in through the window. A woman sits alone on a bed big enough for three girls to sleep in, a paper in her hand. Her face is expressionless. The paper reads:

Thank you for bearing my children. --Drake



# All Things are Relative

By Vernon "Bo" McGuffee II

"But, Ms. Danning," piped a voice from the back of the classroom, "I think we can say that human sacrifice is evil. How can we not judge it as being evil?"

This happened in some form or another during this part of the course every year. Truth be told, Dr. Elisa Anne Danning actually begged the question in the way that she presented this particular history lecture.

"That's a good question, Aaron," Ms. Danning replied. "When I stand up here and talk about the need for students of history to 'suspend judgment,' I'm not saying that we should abandon any sense of moral responsibility. In fact, I agree with you and I believe that human sacrifice is an evil thing. But, I am saying that before we come to such conclusions, we must first temporarily set our sense of 'right' and 'wrong' aside. Unless we are willing and able to do that, we will not be able to open ourselves up to listening to 'why' people in different times or different cultures do what they do. It is only after we suspend our own judgment that we can come to understand the ways of others." She looked around the room to make sure everyone was paying attention, and then she walked out from behind the desk for effect.

"Take, for example, our lesson here tonight. In the past, historians have talked about how Columbus 'discovered' America. They had a pretty good sense of how the encounter with this 'new world' opened their horizons. They encountered people with strange customs who seemingly worshiped demons. They encountered vegetation that was unlike anything else they had ever seen. It was no wonder that they saw themselves as 'bringing God' to the savages. Historians have traditionally done a good job of seeing this encounter through the eyes of the Europeans."

"However," she began as she paced the aisles between the desks, "historians have recently come to question this Eurocentric approach and are arguing for a need to understand the encounter through the eyes of the natives as well. The influx of these strange people with strange customs, strange weapons, and strange religion was eventually perceived as a threat by the natives for a reason. But before we can appreciate those reasons, we have to first put what we have previously learned on hold. We have to stop thinking about 'Columbus discovering and civilizing the new world,' and instead begin with an attempt to appreciate and value the native culture that existed before he arrived. What one culture considers to be good and appropriate behavior, another culture might consider reprehensible. Case in point: Aztec human sacrifice. Whereas the Europeans were aghast at the practice, the Aztecs considered it to be a vital part of maintaining the community's welfare."

Walking back behind the desk, Ms. Danning continued. "Yes, this is an

extreme example. But it is our ability to suspend our own judgment that enables us to grow. At one point in time, slavery was considered to be an acceptable or vital part of American society. That was until enough people suspended their judgment and said, 'Wait a second. We need to look at this whole thing again.' All human morality is culturally conditioned in some way and is, therefore, culturally relative. The ability to take a step back from our own moral assumptions is vital not only to individual growth and development, but also to social development. Learn how to do it, and learn it well."

Being able to say that was the highlight of her evening. Ms. Danning was pleased.

* * *

Elisa pulled out her keys and unlocked her office door. As it swung open, she shifted the books under her arm and flipped the light switch. The light popped as the momentary illumination scattered back into the darkness.

"Damn it!" This was the third time this semester that her bulb had blown. She had come to believe that there must be something wrong with the wiring. Shuffling over to her desk, she carefully placed her books down in the clearest spot she could find. Pulling over a chair, she sat down and sighed in relief.

It was a beautiful night. Through the blinds she could see the moon which lit her office. It cast its silvery hue upon all that was around her. Tonight, it felt as though the moon was smiling at Elisa.

So many wonderful things had happened in her life recently. This was her first semester at a new university. The conditions here were heavenly compared to the last place she worked. Pay was better. Benefits were better. Faculty was better. Students were better. Everything was so much better that she didn't even mind teaching core courses at night.

She loved moments like this. As she rocked back and forth in her chair, she opened herself up to the love of the universe that she could feel being poured into her life. It was a contemplative moment. She allowed herself to be lost in the silence.

The sound of the doorknob turning wrenched her out of her contemplation. She gasped reflexively as the door opened and a backlit figure appeared in the doorway.

"Who's there!" she demanded, the fear evident in her voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dr. Danning. I didn't know you were in here." The janitor flipped the light switch repeatedly trying to turn the lights on.

"Jack. It's you." Elisa sighed with relief. "The switch won't work. The bulb's blown…again."

"Again?" he asked.

"Again," she replied.

"Well, I'm sorry to disturb you. I didn't know you were in here."

"It's okay. I was just leaving."

If Elisa weren't actually intending to leave when Jack appeared, his appearance encouraged her to do so. There was something about this man that greatly disturbed her. Grabbing her purse, she walked past the janitor into the hallway.

"Well, be careful, Ms. Danning. It's not always a good thing for a pretty woman like yourself to be out alone at night."

Elisa could feel her blood pressure instantly rise with that statement. She paused and looked at Jack. He seemed exceptionally scruffy and unkempt tonight. Through a forced smile she replied, "I'm sure I'll be okay. Thank you for your concern though." She struggled to maintain her composure, at least until she made it to the stairwell.

* * *

The night was even more beautiful outside. Crickets chirped as Elisa leaned against the back of the car while pumping gas. She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Recently, she had started the practice of "mindfulness." She read about it in a Buddhist magazine a few years back and had recently decided that she needed some sort of spiritual discipline in her life.

Again a deep breath with a slow exhale.

The slight wind caressed her as it passed. The moonlight mingled with the overhead lamps, causing a soft glow to cover everything.

Again, a deep breath…

Click!

The tank now filled, Elisa, attentive to as much of the moment as possible, slowly pulled out the nozzle and replaced it in its holder, and then went in to pay.

She was the second person in line. Normally, she would be annoyed at having to wait, but not tonight. Tonight she felt as though nothing in life could go wrong. The gentleman's presence was not an inconvenience. He was but another thing within her field of awareness. She indulged in a bit of eavesdropping.

"So the party went well I hear" said the customer as he replaced his ball cap.

"Yeah," replied the attendant, "pretty uneventful…luckily. Everybody was so high. Still feeling it, though."

"Well, good luck on getting that other job."

"Thanks, but I'm not gonna' hold my breath."

With that and a quick goodbye, the customer took his carton of Marlboros and left. Elisa stepped forward and slid a twenty across the counter. As she looked into the attendant's eyes, she saw the aftereffects of the previous night. But more than that, his eyes revealed intense despair.

As she started her car and left, thoughts about life and the universe flooded Elisa. For her, the attendant became this evening's symbol of what happens when

people make bad choices. She had recently come to believe that everything in this universe happened for a reason. The universe does not shit on people for no apparent reason at all. The universe shits on people because they have brought it upon themselves. Bad choices were all about abusing the universe. Abuse the universe; expect it to abuse you back.

For her, her standing on one side of that counter while the attendant stood on the other meant something. It spoke to a deeper reality. His curse became more apparent when so close to her blessing. As she pulled into her apartment building's parking lot, she offered a prayer of thanksgiving.

* * *

Elisa turned off the engine and stepped out. She stood by her car for a moment and took in a deep, joyful breath before closing the door. Her shoes clicked on the pavement as she walked through the lamplight.

Motion to her left gave her pause. The bushes rustled. She stopped.

*It could be the breeze,* she thought.

The bushes moved again.

She could feel her heart's rapid beating.

*Relax, Elisa,* she told herself, *you're not a child anymore who is afraid of things that go bump in the night.*

She stared at the bush for a minute. It did not seem large enough for a person to hide behind. Another minute passed and she had questioned her assessment. A smaller person might be able to hide behind it, but not a larger one…unless the ground behind the bush had been dug out.

*Oh, grow up,* she reprimanded herself. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out a canister of mace before continuing.

Her shoes sounded unnervingly loud on the concrete. They echoed louder than any surrounding noise.

And then, there was a flurry of motion.

Out from the bushes erupted a blurred mass. Streaking across her path, its shrieking howl causing Elisa to jump back. Losing her balance, she fell, her mace jarred from her hand. It landed several feet away, well beyond her reach. She began to scream, but contained herself when she saw the creature in the light.

A cat. A black cat.

Gasping preceded slight nervous laughter.

Elisa rose and dusted herself off with dignity. She took three confident steps toward her apartment building before she remembered her mace. She dashed to pick it up.

* * *

As the door closed behind her, Elisa was glad to be inside. Suddenly, the outside seemed far less safe than it did a half hour ago. The bushes were not

beautiful, and the moon was not her friend.

Elisa turned to look out the glass doors. "Silly girl," she said under her breath. Having faced her fear, she walked upstairs.

As she turned the corner she saw a neighbor down the hall wrestling with his keys. Elisa wasn't the most social person in her building, so she did not know her neighbors very well. However, this one looked strangely familiar. And handsome. Very handsome. The corner of her mouth turned up slightly as she thought about him. *To die for even,* she thought.

As she approached her own door, he turned his head and noticed her.

"Hello there," he called.

"Hello," she responded. "I hope you'll forgive me, but I've forgotten your name."

"Oh, it's Peter. I'm in your history class. I'm actually relatively new to this building."

*Damn. He's a student,* she thought.

He continued, "Would you like to come down for a drink. I think it's important to get to know neighbors."

"Well," Elisa hesitated. She didn't want to get too close to her students. She believed it made it difficult to maintain a sense of professionalism. But, whereas the mind said *no,* the body said *yes.* And so she replied, "I'd love to. Just let me take care of a few things, and I'll be down."

"Wonderful," Peter said. As Elisa slid her key into her door, she heard Peter drop his keys on the ground, again. *He's nervous.* She snickered as she flipped on the light and closed the door.

* * *

"…please leave your name and phone number and I'll get back to you." Beep.

"Hi, Auntie E," a small child's voice sounded on the answering machine, "I just wanted you to come to my birthday party. Bye."

Lisa was going to be five years old, and an adorable five at that. Elisa was the girl's "favorite aunt." Every time Elisa heard her voice, it reminded her of how much she wanted to have children. The biological clock was ticking.

But right now, life was busy. Busy, busy, busy. It would be difficult being a mother while getting her professional life on track. So, she figured she had better wait.

Besides, she had Lisa's voice to remind her of how much she was loved.

It's a terrible thing to go through life feeling alone. Relationships make life meaningful. Parents and siblings, friends and workmates, lovers and neighbors.

Elisa leaned up against the wall and closed her eyes. She could still see Peter's face in the darkness. His shy smile betrayed his awkwardness. The sound of the keys as he fumbled with them spoke to how nervous he was to be living next to

his teacher. And yet, he still had this animal magnetism about him that made Elisa tingle.

"So how bad is it, really, to cross those boundaries?" Elisa wondered aloud.

* * *

It took a moment for Peter to open the door. Elisa could hear things falling over or being dropped inside. An amused smile crossed her face.

The door opened as far as the chain would allow it. Peter peered through.

"Oh, hello Ms. Danning. Just a second."

Apparently, the chain on this door was more difficult than Elisa's by the sound of it. Finally, the door opened.

Upon entering, it became quickly apparent that this was a student's bachelor pad. Beer cans, books, and ashtrays were scattered across the room. Peter hurriedly grabbed the clothes off the recliner. "Please, sit here," he said, and then proceeded to look for a place to put the clothes. Finding none, he threw them into a corner.

Elisa, being the good guest, said, "Nice place you have here."

"Thanks," he replied.

Elisa took the chair while Peter sat on the edge of the couch.

A moment of awkward silence.

"That was a very interesting lecture tonight, Ms. Danning."

"Thank you. And my neighbors are welcome to call me Elisa."

"Sure…Elisa," Peter said. "So, do you really believe all that stuff about all things being relative?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, so do I, but it sometimes seems like so few people do. I imagine that the world would be a much easier place to live in if more did."

"I suspect you're right," Elisa replied. It felt good to know that what she said in class was really making a difference in the lives of her students. Obviously, Peter had taken it all in. She was glad she came down here.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"Yes, I would."

Peter went to the fridge and shuffled things around. Apparently, the fridge was just as difficult for him to find things in as the rest of the apartment. "So tell me about yourself," he called.

"Well, I grew up in rural Ohio. I have two sisters, of which I'm the oldest…"

As she continued her story, Peter returned with two cans of beer. Then he reached over, grabbed a stack of CD's, and began flipping through them. He showed her Vivaldi with a questioning look on his face. Elisa nodded in agreement and continued her story. While she spoke, Peter rose to put the CD in the player. He looked around the room for a moment. Finding the player with a bit of

difficulty, he put in the CD.

Elisa paused in her story, and then continued.

Peter's behavior was beginning to concern Elisa. It was one thing not to know what was in the fridge, but his not knowing where the large stereo system was in his own apartment began to spark feelings of fear.

Peter returned to the couch and continued to look through the CD pile. Some of them caused him to scowl in disdain before he flipped them onto the other end of the couch in disgust.

A disturbing thought crossed Elisa's mind. *It is as if he has never seen the stack CD's before. In fact, it's as if he's never been in this apartment before.*

"So, Peter, do you have any roommates?" she asked trying to probe a bit.

"Nope," he said, flipping another CD onto the couch, "just me."

"Oh I see." Now, very uncomfortable with the thought of staying, Elisa sought an opportunity to leave. She looked at her watch and then said, "Oh my, look at the time. I need to make a phone call before I go to bed. Thank you for the beer. I hope we can do this again some time, but I need to be going now."

Peter looked over at her. "I don't think so."

His voice sounded strangely hollow. Fear spread all through Elisa's body. She found herself gasping for air.

*Don't panic. Don't panic. Don't panic.*

She spoke as calmly as she could. "I…really…need…to go now." She began to stand.

"No," Peter's voice had turned into a near growl. "You will stay right there and not move." Elisa could feel her body going numb as she dropped back down. "You will not scream," he continued. Elisa felt her vocal cords tingle.

Peter rose, dropping the remaining CD's on the coffee table, cases breaking and discs rolling across the floor. They made a crunching sound underfoot as he walked around the table to stand directly before Elisa.

It took great effort for her to form words. "What…are you… doing to me?"

Peter stood over her.

*Are his eyes glowing?*

After a moment of gloating, he finally responded, "The same thing I do to all my prey, Elisa. Don't worry it will all be over soon." Through his smile, Elisa could see his incisors grow.

"No…" she pleaded, "don't…do this…it's wrong…"

Peter cocked his fanged head back. "Wrong?" he asked in a mockingly inquisitive tone. "Did you say 'wrong'? I can't believe that you just said that. Sure, what I'm about to do might be wrong for you and your 'human' kind. I'll give you that. After all, if you didn't make such value judgments you would destroy each other overnight and none of your kind would survive. Bur for me? I'm different.

I'm not human. I'm a vampire. That means my entire world is different, and this is precisely what we must do to survive. It's not an option, but vital to our way of being and our very existence. That, my dear Elisa, makes it 'right' for us. Remember, just because something seems 'wrong' for one people, it doesn't mean it is 'wrong' for all of them. Isn't that what you taught us…on this very night?"

Elisa could feel tears streaming down her cheeks. "No…please. There is…no purpose…in all of this."

Peter leaned close. Elisa could see the heat behind the eyes that had her so entranced. Their bestiality was laid bare.

"No, dear Elisa, this is nothing less than the consummation of your purpose in life. All of life's events have ultimately led you here, to sit before me now." Peter ran his tongue along her cheek as he leaned toward her ear to continue in a whisper. "Much like a cow on the plate of human, you will serve the greater cosmic scheme by becoming nourishment. On you, I shall feed and thus continue to exist until the time arises to feed again. It is the way of things. This is your personal role in what is called, by some, divine providence."

Peter stood and pulled out a handkerchief from his front pocket and folded it nicely. It was important to have such things nearby in case of accidental spray.

Elisa took a deep breath. She brought the entirety of her will and focused it on breaking his control and fleeing the room. *Focus,* she thought. She tightened every muscle in her body, aligned it with her will, and pushed as hard as she could in order to propel her from the chair.

Still, she could barely move. The peak of bodily response formed into spasmodic twitching.

The vampire smiled with amusement. Always it was the same things: the pleading and hoping to talk him out of it, the final push for freedom, and the overwhelming terror at the realization that there truly was no escape. It was always best to wait until that last part to feed, because the adrenaline rush flavored the blood deliciously.

Finally, she was "done." Pleased with the progress, he said in his original 17th-century English accent, "Now, if you would, please turn your head a little to the left; I like my meat rare." The vampire lifted the handkerchief and dabbed the anticipatory drool from his smiling mouth.

"Ah, thank you. That will do nicely."



# School Maze

By Chris Delloiacono

How could it have gone so wrong? After all, he'd only just arrived in New York City. Yet, they had discovered him almost immediately. It wasn't so much the discovery, but the power that they'd brought down upon him. Normally taking care of himself was no problem—he had been fighting in the War for centuries—still, this time, he knew that there was no chance to fight. There were times when you were utterly and totally outgunned. A quick and orderly retreat was the best course. If he could just make it to a nearby safe house, then he would be joined by others. It wouldn't exactly do well for his reputation, but sometimes the rep suffered if it meant staying alive.

David had little trouble bounding through the trees. While he appeared to be in his forties, with tossed brown hair, and a powerful build, something much greater lurked beneath the surface. Although he had been running at top speed for more than five minutes, he wasn't breathing hard in the least. He was concerned, but not deeply. There was still hope. David had not been to New York City's Central Park in many years, but he still remembered his way around. This was his area of interest for decades; nay, it was actually more than a century. Just past this next row of trees would be… A wall!

David screamed to nobody in particular, "Shit!" Well, he probably gained some ground in the preceding sixty seconds. A quick cut to the left shouldn't cost him much in the way of lead-time and it would bring him to the 56th Street entrance. It was only 50 yards at best. Surely they hadn't built a wall that blocked that entry, thought David.

Suddenly, a young boy, no older than eleven, appeared. David once again screamed out, "Shit!" David exhaled a great sigh of relief when he realized it was just a boy that had entered the clearing. He was rather haggard, unattractive, and weasel-faced, but a boy nonetheless. David was quite certain that the War was unknown to him.

The boy was not fazed by the sweaty, cursing man. The boy had close-cropped hair and was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. He looked David up and down, quickly, and quietly taking stock of the man.

David cut through the silence. "Look kiddo, you best get out of here. There's some crazy stuff going down." The boy ended his stoic appraisal and smiled broadly. David again broke the silence, "Can't you hear? Beat it if you want to live!"

Although David didn't view the boy as a threat, there was something unsettling about his piercing, cold stare. It was like the creepy kid was looking

right through him. Finally, the little boy spoke. "You don't even know that the hunt is over. It has been ever since you returned to this city."

David ripped off his leather jacket, throwing it to the side. He assumed a battle stance. "Obviously you are not on my side, so do your worst. I doubt I'll have much trouble taking you out."

The boy spoke again. "Oh, I won't hurt you."

A blinding red light suddenly engulfed the clearing. David's eyes burned from the intense energy. His arms began to glow as he threw them up ready for the larger conflict. The battle he hoped to never face. Perhaps this foe wasn't as tough as the others claimed. He had become quite adept at his work. There was always a chance. He had to maintain a positive outlook. He had a very important assignment. He would have to worry about that later, though. Survival was the most important thing at this moment.

The trees to David's left splintered as the monstrous form moved into the clearing. David was enamored by the powerful figure. Although he'd been fighting for ages, he'd never been this close to a creature that exuded such power. This didn't look so bad. In fact…

Who was he kidding? It was hopeless. Still, David wouldn't go out like a bitch. He clenched his fists and let out a war cry. It was time for…

David never completed his thought. He was ripped into dozens of pieces with one brief, almost cursory motion by his opponent.

The little boy's smile left his face. "That was anti-climactic." The boy looked at the monstrous form. "Is it time for the next phase? I'm starting to get just a wee bit impatient."

The boy's partner nodded almost imperceptibly.

The boy's smile returned.

* * *

Sylvan Turcotte awoke to the harsh drone of the alarm clock. That was not a good night of sleep by a long shot. In fact, it had been an absolutely hellish night. It took Sylvan only a moment to fully awaken. After all, he had only been asleep for fifteen minutes. For a moment Sylvan wished he was sleep-deprived because he was out partying all night, but that wasn't the case. He was certain that many kids had a near-sleepless night, and woke covered in sweat before they entered a new school. Sylvan also counted the fact that it was mid-year as another reason for his sorry shape. The night of sleeplessness could be explained away as a rather normal reaction to such a tumultuous upheaval in his life.

That would be an acceptable reaction had he been in the mood to kid himself. The bullshit-free explanation for his apprehension was a fear of dying. Oh, he didn't think he'd be hit by a bus or fall down a flight of stairs. His reasons stemmed from an experience that very few eleven-year-old boys had suffered—

Hell, he'd be surprised if many 82-year-olds could relate.

"Sylvan, get your butt in gear," yelled Sylvan's father, Phillip, from downstairs. "I'll be damned if I let those bastards keep my son from getting an education."

Sylvan thought his father's use of the word damned was pretty funny. Especially when you consider they had recently joined the War. He agreed with his father's choice of sides. Sometimes, you have to do the right thing in life. He was very happy they were doing the right thing. Still, Sylvan didn't think he would be such a target for the other side. He wasn't really a solider, yet he had an enormous bull's-eye on his chest. He had only become involved a couple of times in the real conflict. And he was only a boy. Why would they come after him in such force? Now that the jig was up, so to speak, he and his father had to move across the country and start again.

There was dad interjecting again. "If you're not down here in the next five seconds, you're going to have to deal with me, mister!"

The counselors—it's funny that they actually had a hierarchy setup that helped new recruits like Sylvan deal with the War—told him the best thing he could do was put the incident behind him. He had escaped with his life, and he shouldn't worry about becoming so deeply embroiled in the War at his age. Sylvan would become more adept at fighting as he spent more hours training. Plus, from all the indications he was given, they would win soon. Probably sooner than most people on either side realized. The tide was turning, and only one outcome was possible.

This school wouldn't be so bad. Wait, of course it would. Whether he was safe from the bloodthirsty opposition or not, it was still fricking school! Having the war between Heaven and Hell spill into his school and nearly getting killed was terrifying, but the thought of festering five days a week in a classroom again was even worse. Oh, the boredom! He would rather be training. There would be plenty of time to study up after the War was over. For now, he needed the kind of smarts that would keep him alive. They didn't teach those smarts in school.

"That's it," yelled his father.

Sylvan dashed out of bed and into the bathroom the moment he heard the sound of his dad's footsteps on the stairs. He definitely didn't want to get his father angry today. Considering how stressed Sylvan was, he figured that his dad must be even worse off.

Sylvan looked into the mirror and half-smiled. At least he still had all of his teeth, and his face wasn't scarred. He wasn't a vain kid, but he thought it would be a lot more difficult making friends in his new school if he had been disfigured in the attack. "Let's get this first day over with…and hope there's gonna be a second."

* * *

Sylvan sat next to his father looking out the window of their black Mercedes. He couldn't help thinking about all of the people going about their business as they drove by. Why were so many people ignorant of the War? Why were they not taking sides? Did they not realize what was at stake? If they would just open their eyes, they would see! One day they would all wake up and join in. Then the world would be an infinitely better place to live.

As they drew closer to school the sense of strength Sylvan had pulled together began to fade like a dehydrated runner during the last leg of a race. The final horrible moments spent in the previous school wouldn't ever slip from his memories. As much as he believed in the War, he was not ready to die. He wanted to be alive when victory was attained. Being remembered as a "good" little solider was not his aim. Relishing the new paradise that sprung from all of their hard work was what he wanted.

Sylvan broke the silence, "Dad, can't I just get home schooled or something?"

Sylvan's father sighed. "Sylvie, between providing for us and maintaining my place in the struggle, you know I just don't have the time." Phillip patted his son on the shoulder. "This school will truly be different. I promise you!"

"But they found our group the last time!" Sylvan was horrified when his voice cracked as he responded. The last thing he wanted was for his dad to think of him as a coward.

"That was the biggest mistake we made—putting so many of our children in the same school." Sylvan's dad smiled reassuringly. "The lot of you made for a rather big target. You will be the only child from our side in this school. And I have been promised there will be a very special protector on hand." Phillip's face became very serious. "We will not take any more half-measures with our children. You are the future. You will be safe."

Sylvan felt better. So there would be a protector! He felt like Luke Skywalker being watched over by Obi-Wan Kenobi. Sylvan smiled broadly. That was kind of cool. Plus he was being trained, almost like a Jedi. It may not be the ways of the Force, but it was close enough. That put his life into a neat little perspective. Nothing could get to him now.

The smile over the Star Wars-ization of his life didn't last very long. After having the previous three weeks off, he was going to school. School had always sucked, he thought. But after everything he'd seen, how could anything taught out of a book ever be exciting again? The knowledge from books seemed insignificant next to the power he was gaining during training. Ah well. He would have to muddle through. After school was when the real education began.

* * *

Sylvan didn't look back once he left the car. He could tell that his dad

would be disappointed if he wasn't strong. Even if Sylvan had some nagging doubts, he would put on a good show. The more "manly" he appeared, the more likely dad would be willing to let him learn more during the training exercises.

When Sylvan reached the school's set of green double-doors he was stopped by a tired looking, older man.

The older man barely seemed to notice him. "You must be the other new sprout. Head to the main office and get your room assignment."

The man didn't look back at Sylvan again. The sheer magnitude of boredom emanating from the "gatekeeper" did not give Sylvan much hope for this school being different from his old school. Walking down the main corridor only proved him right. Essentially, this place looked the same as his old school. The kids looked the same, dressed the same, and had the same zoned-out attitude towards life. It was obvious now why the world was not aware of the greater conflict taking place around them. None of the students cared about anything but what clothes to wear or who was dating who. Trivialities ruled the day. Was the whole world like this? Thankfully he had been awakened to his true potential at a young age. Hopefully, he would be one of those individuals that would help reawaken man. Ushering in a new era of greatness by ending the War, vanquishing their enemies, and reigniting the long-dormant spark of vigor the world lost so long ago. Wow, did he ever sound like a philosopher. He better not slip out with anything that deep around the other students. They'd think he was a total geek. His fear of being ostracized from the rest of the school was as great as his fear of the enemy.

Sylvan felt that his powers were growing much stronger each day. The training also seemed to be having a positive effect on his thought process. Sylvan really liked how deeply he was thinking. The noble side of his fight was becoming clearer. It was having a positive impact on how he saw life. Unfortunately, his reverie was broken when he reached the main office. Ah yes, trivialities were getting in the way again. Well, better to deal with it, keep his father happy, and move onward to the important aspects of life.

The main office was abuzz with frenetic activity. The over-taxed secretary was clearly frazzled, as she dealt with several substitute teachers, as well as two bickering students waiting to have their "case" heard by the principal. She barely gave Sylvan a look as he entered.

"Mr. Turcotte…welcome to William Howard Taft Elementary School. Your regular teacher is out sick…Mr. Decker is filling in for the next few weeks." She threw a quick gesture toward one of the substitutes standing in the office. She still wasn't looking up as she shuffled papers. "Why don't the two of you get acquainted and move on to class. We'll deal with the paperwork later. Thanks!"

As he walked down the hall with Mr. Decker, Sylvan couldn't help but think about the amazing prowess of the secretary. All of the things she was dealing

with at once and she barely had to raise an eye to direct him. Perhaps she was the powerful presence put in place by his father!

Mr. Decker wasn't the most impressive of men. He was just under six-feet tall, with short, wavy, brown hair. He was clean shaven. "Pretty boy" were the two words which came to Sylvan as the perfect description of the thirty-something teacher.

Mr. Decker smiled down at Sylvan. "So you're new today, too." A rather odd glint seemed to come across Decker's eyes. "Don't worry you'll be in good hands with me!"

Then it came to Sylvan: Decker was his protector, not the secretary. Of course, how could he have thought any differently! It made sense. The extended absence by the regular teacher and Decker's timely appearance to watch over him made it obvious. He would be beyond safe with his newest teacher in such close range. Perhaps Decker would mysteriously find himself as the teacher for the remainder of the term. If this guy was as good as his father said, well…then he wouldn't have to worry much at all. Those rotten bastards wouldn't get to him after all. He should have known that his father would fix things real good. This new school wasn't going to be so bad.

They reached the door to the class. Decker looked at his watch. "Well, Sylvan. We still have about ten minutes before class begins. Why don't we have a quick chat to get to know one another?"

"Certainly, protector." Sylvan winked at Decker.

A short, thin, balding teacher in his forties was walking by as Sylvan winked. He gave the pair of newcomers a surveying glance.

Decker quickly lashed out. "Son, I don't know what you think of substitute teachers, but I am not here to amuse you. I will have you know that I am a certified teacher, with nearly ten years of teaching experience. I will work you just like it is any other day. Is that understood?"

Sylvan looked up dumbfounded at the teacher.

A harsh glint came to Decker's eyes. He didn't look so much like a pretty boy now. "I am waiting for a response!"

Sylvan finally thought he got it. This wasn't the place to be overt. Decker was here to protect him, not to be his friend. They had to be careful not to pull others into their war. They couldn't possibly understand. He needed to play this cool. Decker would certainly communicate with him at some point. Let the man get his footing. He hadn't even gotten a chance to settle into his new role. Don't expect too much, too soon. Sylvan finally choked out a reply, "Yes, sir."

"I am actually going to need a few moments, son." Decker continued to glare down at him. "You should get a look around the school and come back when the bell rings." Decker grinned. "It's always good to know about the place you're

in. Especially if a life-or-death emergency were to arise. One never knows when split-second thinking could save one's life."

Sylvan got the picture. Decker was probably worried that the teacher who overheard his conversation was going to think some weird stuff was going on between the two. Weird stuff was going on for sure, but not anything like what could be going through that poor man's mind right now. He certainly didn't want to launch suspicion against his protector on the first day. That would be a damn fool thing to do, and leave him in a rather dangerous situation. Play it safe, he thought. "Sure, Mr. Decker. I definitely need to hit the 'throom. Might as well do that before class starts. I wouldn't want to miss anything important."

The other teacher seemed to lose interest at this point and continued down the hallway without a second glance.

Sylvan stood at the urinal a few minutes later. Trying to focus and take in his current surroundings and the first minutes of his new daily situation. Sylvan felt more comfortable, so he let his mind wander a bit further from what his father would call "the truly important." In fact, lessons, which occupied much of his time, weren't even chief in his thoughts right now. *Delta Assault* was his momentary respite from the War and school. He received the video game just a few weeks ago for his eleventh birthday. Sylvan was thankful that his dad allowed him to play videogames for a "reasonable period of time" each day. No strict time limits were imposed, since the games, in dad's estimation, helped to build lightning-fast reflexes. As long as the videogames did not come between his studies or his training, it was fine.

"Da fuck…" A sudden jab to the back pulled Sylvan from his videogame stupor. He looked back to see a short, chubby kid stepping up to the urinal next to him. The kid had a unibrow and close-set eyes. Sylvan thought those were the newcomer's better features. Sylvan wasn't really worried about what others looked like, but this kid was, well, to be as nice as possible, damn ugly.

The kid muttered, "Sorry, bud."

"I'll say you're sorry. Ya made me piss on myself. Not a good way to start the first day at a new school."

"Yeah, you're right. Don't fret about the embarrassment too much. Lot more important stuff to worry about in this crazy world we find ourselves in. By the way, the name's Cale."

"What is that supposed to mean."

"Ah, you know. The big picture." Cale zipped up his fly and started to walk away.

Sylvan thought long and hard about this boy before he responded. Could this little guy be one of **them**? You never really know anymore. From what father had said, **they** have been very successful recruiting the young. "No, I don't think, I

know what you mean. Want to spell it out for me?"

Cale smiled back at Sylvan. "Not right now. You think about it a bit. Contemplate what you could possibly want to worry about. Then magnify that image about twenty times. The answer just might come to you."

Sylvan finished his business at the urinal. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Now was the moment for a little scouting. Perhaps sporty here was a spy for the other side. Eyes and ears always ready. Ask questions. Be ready for anything. Never forget these things. Those were some of the major areas that his father stressed in his training. The most important thing was never to jump to conclusions. The world was not yet ready for the War to be made public. This kid might just be a silly, little bully marking his territory for a newcomer. Don't **do** anything stupid! But **being** stupid wasn't an option either. Press for more info.

"Look, Cale. I think you've got me confused with some other kid."

"Nope. You're the one I've been looking for." Cale glared at Sylvan like a pig eyeing his slop.

"Look. I don't even…"

That was when things got a little scary.

Cale's eyes glowed with a frightful yellow tone as he spoke. His voice took on a guttural disembodied sound. The doors to the bathroom stalls rattled and the water in the toilets literally evaporated on the spot from the power within those walls. "It will be sooner than you can imagine. This time, nothing can stop it!"

Cale turned and walked out of the bathroom before Sylvan could collect himself enough for another word.

Sylvan stared in the mirror. He was white as a sheet. Why had his father gotten him mixed up in all of this? Sure the war was important, but he was too young for this shit. He needed time to be a kid. Thankfully, he had Mr. Decker to protect him. Well the bathroom was out from this point forward. He had to always stay in public places. As long as he was by Mr. Decker nothing much worried him. Hell, he wouldn't have to bump into this runt very much anyway. What was he in second grade or something? Clearly he wouldn't see the pipsqueak that often. Maybe through the halls every now and again, but that was it. Yup, things were still okay.

* * *

Once he collected himself, Sylvan walked back toward his classroom. He was surprised to see that the hallways were still quite empty. When the hell did school start? Sylvan entered his new classroom to a rather terrifying sight. Not only was the room packed with students, but class was clearly in session. Worst of all, there was Cale standing up front with Mr. Decker. Had he really missed the bell?

"Ah. Nice of you to join us, Mr. Turcotte."

The embarrassed Sylvan whispered his reply. "Sorry I'm late."

"Well, I was just introducing another new classmate."

Cale responded, "Sylvan and I met, Mr. Decker. He seems like a very nice little boy. I'm sure we'll get on swell. The class will probably treat us both very well and let us both join in quickly with their little groups."

Mr. Decker followed Cale's speech with a short reply. "The three of us are clearly outsiders and very different from them, but I'm sure the class will welcome us all with open arms. Unfortunately, some of us won't be here long. We'll just have to make a difference while we are a part of this situation. Won't we, Mr. Turcotte?"

The quick wink that Mr. Decker sent Sylvan's way helped to ease his tensions. Yup, they were cool. This runt was playing right into their hands. He just didn't know it yet.

* * *

Time seemed to be crawling uphill as the afternoon moved along slowly through an interminable Social Studies lesson. Sure the Bay of Pigs was a rather interesting event when you looked at it on its own. The attempted coup de tat setup by the Kennedy administration to remove Fidel Castro from power in the early 1960s would be very entertaining, **if** he didn't have firsthand knowledge of an even greater failed coup. Earth affairs didn't impress him much anymore. Whether the final battle between Heaven and Hell occurred this week or in twenty-five years it took precedence over everything else. These books and all of the knowledge of the human race wouldn't mean very much when the true War was settled.

Finally, Mr. Decker was closing his Social Studies book. The laborious nature of the day seemed to be ending. Decker quickly pointed to the side-board where their homework for the night was listed. Sylvan made haste to jot down what he needed to do. Heaven vs. Hell had to wait for a little while when he got home. Dad would still ground him until the end of the conflict if he didn't maintain at least a B-average. The whole thing seemed to be an oxymoron, but complaining wouldn't help his situation. All complaints would get him were a sore ass and the loss of his video game privileges.

Sylvan finally noticed some additional movement in the classroom. He really needed to free his mind from the endless circles it made. He should have noticed that Cale was walking around the room before this. He needed to keep one eye on that boy at all times. What was he doing? What was he handing out?

Mr. Decker was downright jovial as he spoke. "Now that our first day is behind us, I wanted to let you know about a special last-minute field trip that I was able to arrange. Even better, we're going to be spending the night together at a mountain retreat! There will be fun and games for sure, but we will also learn to work together. It will be a time that none of you will forget. Please remember to

bring these permission slips back to school by Friday morning. Otherwise you'll be left behind and miss out on the event of a lifetime."

Cale was just up the aisle from Sylvan. His cold, focused stare never broke away from Sylvan. Sylvan thought that the stare from that bulldoggish face might actually be able to shatter a mirror. A shudder coursed down Sylvan's spine as Cale reached his seat.

Cale slammed the paper down on Sylvan's desk giving it a half-crumple as he did so. "How convenient."

Sylvan gave Cale a cool smirk. "I'm not afraid of you. You have no clue what's coming."

Cale spat back, "Your death?"

Sylvan didn't get a chance to respond as Mr. Decker's voice boomed. "Boys, I expect your undivided attention. Especially you, Cale. You won't hand papers out again if you are going to chatter away."

Cale bowed his head slightly. "Sorry, sir."

Mr. Decker's glowing-smile returned. "That's quite alright. This retreat is going to deal with all of the problems we've been facing." Mr. Decker looked into Sylvan's eyes. The smile actually turned to a smirk as they made eye-contact. "Yes indeed…all of our problems will be behind us after this wonderful excursion."

So, that was the answer, thought Sylvan. Mr. Decker was even better than he had hoped. Now that the enemy was exposed we were luring him to a remote place to rid the world of him once and for all. As the bell rang Sylvan quickly threw his things into his book bag. As he left he couldn't help but toss a half-hidden thumbs up and wink at Mr. Decker. Decker sat on his desk and crossed his legs. He half-smiled back, but it wasn't quite the reaction that Sylvan was expecting. No, on second thought, it was exactly the reaction he expected. Sylvan kept forgetting that he had to guard against letting their connection be known to others. Especially Cale! What good would the trap be if Cale knew it was coming? He could always feign sickness and not show up. The whole point was to lure Cale up there and be done with him. Then Sylvan could live the peaceful life that he and his father so deserved.

After collecting a coat from his locker Sylvan slammed the door shut and headed to the exit. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cale match his movements and slam his own locker closed. Sylvan peered up at one of the security mirrors hanging from the ceiling. Just as he feared, Cale was keeping in lockstep with him. Sylvan quickened his pace and darted in and out amongst the other students. He felt like a cow being led to the slaughterhouse. What if he didn't get to his father first? Mr. Decker wasn't around to protect him. He couldn't let Cale corner him! What to do? What could he do?

Suddenly the entire cheerleading squad poured out from a side door. They

had duffle bags over their shoulders. A tall, muscular female gym teacher followed behind the girls. Her manly voice and unfeminine physique somehow fit all of the ridiculous stereotypes he had seen on television.

Sylvan pulled out of his latest daydream when Cale was standing next to him. Before he could do anything else the boy's arm was around his shoulder. Shoot! His wandering mind had really cost him this time.

The malice in Cale's eyes was unmistakable. "Hiya, buddy. Why don't you and I take a little walk? It'll be over quick. I promise."

Sylvan didn't waste any time. The longer he stayed in Cale's clutches the less chance that he would make it out alive. He had to get to his father. Sylvan drove his elbow into Cale's solar plexus. The boy let out a gust of air. Sylvan darted for the gym. Unfortunately, Cale was hardly stunned by the blow. He actually caught a hold of Sylvan's coat, which was still clutched in his arm. Sylvan gave one tug then let go. His little ruse worked wonders. When Sylvan tugged, Cale pulled back in a tug of war that symbolized, at least to Sylvan, the centuries old conflict between Heaven and Hell. Sylvan showed why his side was always a step ahead. Sure they may not always be stronger, this was a case in point, but they were smarter. Sylvan released the coat as Cale pulled back. Sylvan's quick change in tactics took Cale completely by surprise. He barreled backward right into the gym teacher.

The teacher's voice rattled through Sylvan's ears. "Well. Don't we have a pushy little child?"

The manly voice may have been quite hard to listen to, but it was indeed music to his ears. With Cale held up, Sylvan could make his getaway. He bounded out of the main entrance, down the steps, and into the waiting car in less than thirty seconds. He plopped down next to his father and gave him a large smile. Today was a good day. As the car drove off he looked up at the main entrance of the school. There was Cale. Thirty seconds too late.

Sylvan couldn't help but pat himself on the back. He was indeed a tricky little devil. The distinct difference in brain capacity was why his side would win. Brutes and unthinking things that would do nothing but follow the chosen mandate of their superiors could never match the inherent brainpower that his side had going for them. Victory was indeed sweet.

As good as this moment tasted, Sylvan could not help but think ahead. How much sweeter would it be when he and Mr. Decker took care of Cale? That would be his first taste of aggressive action. In the year-and-a-half since he was indoctrinated into the War, he had always been on the defensive. Stay away from conflict. Don't press your luck. Patience. These were the things that his father had preached. Patience would soon be a thing of the past. Sylvan couldn't help but smile about his upcoming very real participation in the War. Maybe it wasn't wise

to relish the combat, but he couldn't help it. Right is right! He wanted to make a difference. Soon he would be able to make his first real difference.

Sylvan's mind wandered to Mr. Decker. He had seen the power his father exhibited firsthand. Yet, from what his dad said, his power-level paled in comparison to Decker. What would it be like? The faint smile that had started crossing Sylvan's mouth became a full-on grin.

Sylvan's dad looked over at Sylvan's sparkling white teeth and bright smile. "That smile's a big change from this morning, son."

Sylvan could barely contain his glee. "Sure is, dad. All I can say is: you were right!"

"I told you that nothing could touch you in that school."

Sylvan shrank slightly in his seat. "Sorry that I doubted you. I feel like a fool."

Sylvan's dad touched his son on the shoulder. "You're no fool. You aren't as experienced as I am. I can understand your doubts. This war may be new to both of us, but I've done my homework and made the right connections. There won't be any further half-measures on my part."

"I love you, dad."

Sylvan's dad rubbed his son's chin. "I love you too, sport. How about we forget about training and leftovers tonight! Why don't we have a guy's night out? We can grab a pizza and go to the movies."

Sylvan nearly jumped out of his seat. "Yes!" Sylvan thought to himself just how lucky he was. Yes indeed, he was one lucky kid.

* * *

Luck can certainly turn around rather quickly. Sylvan felt like he had missed something. As the red light bathed his body, Sylvan's mind wandered. Everything had gone downhill in a flash, without even a moment for him to acclimate to the situation. What happened to that string of fabulous luck he was riding?

It wouldn't have been so bad if it would just go quicker. The infernal glow slowly engulfing his body was so tedious. Wait. Was that his own voice shrieking with pain? Well he was being torn asunder by an amazing power, so it must be. Torn asunder or not, Sylvan still had time to think. Perhaps it was the wonderful powers he now exhibited that brought him this luxury.

They say a person's life flashes before their eyes as they die. For Sylvan it was just the last few hours. The flash would encompass most of the final moments of Sylvan's life. Sylvan couldn't help but think back to his father's words of wisdom: reflection was good for him. It didn't seem to be doing him much good now. His reflections were just a precursor to death.

Just a few hours ago, Sylvan's dad seemed to think that everything was in

very good order for the trip. Why hadn't he decided to make Sylvan stay home? Right, the presence of Mr. Decker would ensure an easy victory if necessary, so nothing could go wrong. Sylvan almost chuckled when he thought that his dad was right. One-hundred percent right, but, unfortunately for Sylvan, his father didn't realize that Decker, or this thing that was in Decker's place, was playing for the other team.

Nothing seemed out of place the entire day. Decker was even a bit playful with Cale and him throughout the day. The veiled threat Decker made to Cale during the kickball game made Sylvan certain that the end would come that night. Sylvan remembered the anxiety he had felt in that moment. He and Decker had to make Cale's murder look like an accident. That would actually be a whole lot of fun. A challenge, of course, but mostly fun. The anxiety he was feeling right now eclipsed the anxiety he had felt earlier. The first anxiety was the sense of anticipation for a great event in his all-too-short life. This current anxiety was over the encroachment of death. Something he didn't think he'd ever need to worry about. He had plenty of time in his young life to please the powers that be on his side. He had thought they would surely grant him with some form of eternal, or at least prolonged, life. Now it had become clear that eleven years was going to be it.

The note Mr. Decker palmed to him during the head count at lights out was the final bit. The words were still emblazoned in his mind. "Fifteen minutes after lights out. Meet me in the boiler room. We'll put an end to this tiresome farce." Ah, the smile that he shot at Cale at that moment. He doesn't ever remember being happier. The smile Cale shot back did unsettle him for a moment. Sylvan even thought that something of a double-cross could be afoot. Then he had put that thought behind him. That was, in hindsight, the stupidest thing he'd ever done!

Sylvan had made it to the boiler room with no problem. That was the last problem-free moment of his life. When he stepped in the room, he was not greeted by Decker, instead he saw Cale staring back at him. Hadn't the bastard been in his bed still? Considering Cale's presence here, that was obviously not the case. Clearly, Sylvan's revelry cost him again. This time his failure to keep tabs on Cale had happened at an inopportune moment.

Sylvan had to admit, Cale's speech was actually quite impressive. It was obvious that he had felt a tremendous level of passion about the war.

"This is the end, Sylvan. For you, first. Then we will go and take down your father. His vile, treachery destroyed my family and an entire group of students at the seminary where we lived. This type of business isn't our usual thing, but your family line must be ended before your evil spreads any further."

Sylvan didn't like to think of their side as evil. They were right, so atrocities had to be carried out occasionally. Still, had his father really attacked

such a place? Well, it was a war.

Cale's speech had continued. "Infernalists such as you are the worst the War has to offer. Greed is the only reason you commit atrocities. Why else would you turn against mankind and join with the Adversary?"

Sylvan felt some righteous indignation at that remark. It was time for him to make a speech. He spat back, "Why? There are a great many reasons! We are right. What we gain is only secondary." Sylvan didn't even believe himself at that moment. When he thought about it, he couldn't think of a good reason for what they were doing…other than the rewards. The rewards of power and riches were wonderful, though.

A cold look came over Cale's eyes. "Right. To slaughter indiscriminately? To kill the helpless? Your father butchered my three-year-old sister in her bed! There's no right in that."

Sylvan thought the boy might have a point. Still, he didn't see this as a real problem. Decker would be here any moment, and then all would be right. Sylvan even thought he might be able to take this boy. Sylvan's powers must be greater than this silly little Slayer. All he had seen out of the runt was a light-show in the bathroom. Hopefully he could finish the job before Decker arrived. That would be rather impressive.

That was when Decker had entered the room. A cold, blank stare made his features look as if they were chiseled from stone. Decker had spoken in an almost-melodious voice. "Do you still not realize what is happening, boy?"

The last words Sylvan had spoken flashed through his mind again, "We're about to kick some serious Slayer ass!" Sylvan's smile quickly transformed to agony as Decker's human body transformed. Not into the crimson demonic form he expected, but instead Decker morphed into a massive, ivory-skinned, winged angel.

"Sylvan Turcotte, I, Gaetan, condemn thee to death eternal for the crimes so far committed and those that you will not live to enact. I do this in the name of our Lord in Heaven, so as to bring this War one step closer to its final conclusion."

Sylvan couldn't help but think that the angel's voice was quite-beautiful. The power of the voice made Sylvan step back several feet, but the melodiousness washed over him and brought peace to his tensed muscles.

The angel's melody continued. "Your supposed protector was easily enough destroyed and replaced. You will be easier still."

Sylvan wondered if a death sentence had ever been rendered so sweetly.

The powerful voice raised an octave, the room began to shudder. "Let your foul father wallow for a few days. Wondering when the attack will come. Then he too will be removed from this Earth. First, though, let us attend to the matter at hand."

The final thought that ran through Sylvan's mind as Gaetan tore apart his body was if joining his father on the side of the Adversary in the battle against Heaven was the best decision he ever had made. He had been an altar boy when he was younger. He always enjoyed church. Perhaps there was still a chance to be saved. If he thought about it and spent the next moments renouncing his sins, maybe, just maybe, there was a chance.

Oddly enough, and quite unfortunately for him, his attention wandered during his final momentary renunciation. Instead of trying to cast away his evil and renounce Satan or something like that, he thought about being back in his luxurious room in the plush new Upper Westside penthouse they had moved into. Most of all, Sylvan wished he was playing *Delta Assault*. In his mind that would be the worst thing about death eternal. No more videogames.





# The Bastard

By C.T. Gerow

The music oozed and throbbed a sort of hardcore lounge mix, synchronized to the dark strobing lights. The ones in control, the Dominatrixs and Masters moved with a kind of languid cool that matched the atmosphere. The place smelt of sex, sweat, and blood. Subs and slaves crawled on the floor, dangled from chains, were locked in cages, or tied down to crosses. Tyler cruised through the sea of PVC, cold metal and sex with measured disinterest. He'd been here before, he didn't know how many times. At these bondage sex parties, small details changed from city to city, party to party, but the overall results were the same; women with too much make-up in PVC, bustier, and riding crops, middle aged men in cock rings, dog collars and ball gags. Women with men, women with women, men with men, people who were neither woman nor man, in every combination imaginable.

Tonight was an offshoot party of Torture Garden, strictly invite only, at The Garden Club. Tyler got an invite for two reasons; he was a regular with a good reputation and he was a good draw for the event. Experienced and somewhat known in the London BDSM world, he could have been their poster boy. Tonight he looked the part, black leather motorcycle boots and trousers (he had to remind himself that in England 'pants' meant underwear) and nothing else but his tattoos. He was a big guy, 6'4", 20 stone (or 280 pounds) of muscle, his head shaved bald and his skin naturally pale he looked like a Master. He bought a far too expensive bottle of beer and leaned back on the bar just as Barbara came up to him. Dyed black hair and still too much purple and black eye make-up. She only stood at 5'3", which was apparently the appeal. The outfit was new at least, purple PVC bustier, black silk G-string over garters and fishnets, with matching PVC stilettos that buckled up to just below the knee.

"Tyler darling!" she said pushing close to him. "We were worried you weren't coming."

"Purple's the colour of insanity, you know?" he said swigging his beer.

"Perfect. So, see anything you like?"

"Just got here, let me get past the cottage cheese cellulite and I'll tell you"

"I know what you mean, you should see the barrister I have caged up in the next room, all rolls and greying back hair." She said in a mildly disgusted voice.

"So why bother?" he asked, almost interested "Why not get yourself a fit toy boy…or girl? You might even have an orgasm."

"I've got my rabbit for that sweetie. Besides I'm almost thirty, I have to think about my future."

"Why do I get the impression that if I said the word you'd bend over for

me?" He asked looking to the crowd again. "You're *supposed* to be a Dom."

"My barrister might like that" she said stroking his bicep, then pushing off to leave "besides, I like to broaden my horizons"

He watched her saunter away and for a moment considered it, then remembered that he hated Barbara.

He kept scanning the crowd. Finding an attractive girl who was also a sub was difficult, as this party was invite only hardcores it would be more so. By his fourth beer and sixth walkthrough he was seriously thinking about giving it up, or at least taking on Barbara, when he spotted a woman at the stairs leading down to the club.

She was quite tall, 6' with short blonde hair and a thin tight body. He would have preferred bigger tits but otherwise she was perfect, only problem was her clothes didn't indicate whether she was Dom or Sub. In fact with the clothes she was wearing she shouldn't have been allowed in. Dark heels, stockings, short skirt (cotton not PVC or leather) a short cropped turtle neck sweater in green that left her tight belly exposed, topped with a fur vest, definitely not the right gear for this scene. Maybe it was just that which interested him. More likely it was those cold blue eyes that locked with his for just long enough to be more than a glance.

He didn't even notice the rest of the crowd with her.

They paced each other around the bar. She would glance his way then duck around the caged twins with matching ball gags. He would catch her eye then disappear behind the dominatrix whipping her "crucified" slave, and so it went until he finally took a seat on an unoccupied leather couch against a dark wall by the entrance.

"Let her come to me," he thought. "Otherwise, I'm walking."

After about five minutes she came over, beer in hand. There was smoothness to her slow walk that exuded pure animal sensuality.

"Corona, right?" she asked holding out the beer to him.

"English accent." he thought. "Probably Essex." with all that implied. He said nothing and just accepted the beer and patted the seat beside him.

"I'm pretty new to all this" as she sat next to him, crossing her long legs, her skirt riding up to expose her stocking tops. "I don't really know how to play the game"

"Easy enough" he said in his low baritone. "Just relax first off. No one here makes any kind of judgement"

This statement seemed silly. She was completely at ease, despite what she just said. He could play along. "What is it you're looking for?"

"I think I know but tell me what you're after." she smiled seductively.

"A sub."

"Someone who wants me to take control." He explained when she gave no

reaction. "Bondage, punishment, bloodletting…whatever I feel like, see?"

"I knew it." She growled, her demeanour changing startlingly as she leaned in close enough for him to smell her breath.

He was suddenly light-headed; it was the scent of blood on her breath.

"Who's your handler you bastard?"

"Wha…? No. I don't submit…?"

"Oh you will half blood." She snarled pushing him back hard and pinning him to the spot with one hand on his chest. "I'll bleed you slow and leave you starving, I'll beat you and torture you until you can't remember anything else."

Panic struck.

He had never felt so totally helpless; with just one hand pressed casually over his heart she controlled him more completely than anyone else in his life. He forced against her, he flailed out wildly smacking her hard in the head and upper body.

No effect.

"In the end." she continued calmly. "You'll beg to be my dog, or to die, and still I'll play. Ten years from now I *may* allow you one or the other."

Other faces, hungry and maniacal, loomed up behind her. His right arm pinned down by a phenomenal pressure; his elbow felt it might get bent back the wrong way. His heart pumped hard in his ears and with a strength born of desperation he thrashed for release.

Nothing. He couldn't get loose.

She leaned forward so their lips brushed as she spoke. "Let's taste my new bitch."

His left hand, still free, closed over a bottle on the table. Without a thought he swept it up and slammed it against the side of her face, showering them both in beer and shards of glass.

She cried out in anger and reared back.

The smell of blood, hers and his, drove him wild.

He grabbed her by the throat and heaved her over the coffee table using the momentum to get up off the sofa.

There were three others around him, two guys facing him and a girl who had her face pressed between another brunette's breasts. The brunette was trying desperately to pull away as blood sprayed like a fountain from her bare chest.

The woman who had attacked him was getting up shaking blood and glass from her face and hair. He jammed the end of the bottle he still held into the side of one guy's throat and shoulder slammed the other as he sprang for the door.

The club was a blur of violence as he rushed for the stairs, with only photoflashes of the carnage around him. A naked man pinned down by a woman who straddled his prone form, fucking him as she chewed open his throat. Another

man held the same victims' torn off arm over his gaping mouth and was drinking the flow of blood with relish.

Another man with his fist embedded to the wrist in a woman's face.

They were monsters, these newcomers, their faces contorted with violent glee. He skidded to a stop at the bottom of the stairs leading to the street. There, halfway up, was a young man was raping a blonde.

"Come on, luv." He laughed as she flopped about limply on his lap. "Shake it a bit, you want me to call back."

She looked like a rag-doll bent impossibly backwards so Tyler could see vacant eyes and her torn, shredded chest. They were both soaked in the girl's blood. Tyler only stopped long enough to swallow back the bile then sprang up the stairs. The rapist, enraptured with his carnal delights, didn't even notice Tyler until he was right in front of them. The young guy laughed, pumping away at his victim, his bright red Mohawk looking like a huge bloody blade in the gloom. Tyler, in a furious rage, roared as he leapt straight up and slammed a heavy boot in the fucker's face as he landed. His boots slid and skidded in the sticky blood that soaked the carpeted stairs. Tyler grabbed at the banister and stairs, desperately scrambling upwards as a gurgling hiss of mauled profanities bubbled from the rapist's ruined face.

He burst through the heavy steel fire doors out into the damp London night and barrelled straight into a kid in a Ramones hoodie and torn jeans. They tumbled to the cobbles of Covent Garden market in a heap and the kid's sharp teeth dug deep into his shoulder. He shoved out hard, heaving the kid off him and roaring in pain as the mad haze of his tortured mind enveloped him.

He ran on pure instinct with no conscious thought as to where he was going. He went straight through the square and down a tiny alley where he found a drainpipe and climbed. He scrambled across rooftops and up walls; he leapt over gaps and swung around obstacles. Finally, scraped, bruised and bloody, when his muscles felt like liquid and he breathed razorblades, he found a hiding place in the open spire above Tesco's. He looked out over Covent Garden working hard to control his breathing and watching for pursuit.

"You did well to escape," came a voice from a rooftop behind him. "But if they had wanted you, you haven't run far or fast enough"

Female voice. Strange accent.

His blood was still up but he was thinking clearly now.

"Who are they? Your friends back in the club?"

"You know what they are but you won't accept it. Say they are the enemy for now, and if you don't want them to catch you, you come with me."

"And you are?" He asked, finally turning and squaring up with the girl standing on the ledge behind him.

She was just short of 6', maybe more in the boots, leather outfit in dark burgundy, bandana over her lower face and boxers headgear to match. Her dark eyes shone out of the shadows, her dark hair tied back in a high tail.

She had a .45 levelled between his eyes and stood far enough away that he couldn't do much about it.

"They call me Jinx."

"There aren't a handful of people who've pointed a gun at me an' can talk about it little girl."

There was no reaction from her, just cool professionalism.

"Best shoot me now or put it away."

"Try to keep up." She said evenly, sliding the automatic into a shoulder rig inside her coat. "It's not far."

She turned and disappeared over the roof.

Who did this chick think she was?

Did she think he was some kind of whimpering simp?

It didn't matter in the end, something dark happened tonight and he didn't know what. He'd worked too hard to disappear. He wouldn't let anyone screw that up.

In the end it was simple survival, ignorance equals a gruesome death and while he'd accepted that this would be the way he'd go, he'd be damned if he'd go like an ignorant lamb.

He caught up quick and followed her close. She moved with supple grace, like a dancer, her long limbs flowing unerringly through the motions of movement. She hardly made a noise or left any sign of her passing. Tyler on the other hand chugged along, his boots thumping and crunching across the roofs. She slid down into a tiny alley between a coffee shop and a Mediterranean restaurant as the rain went from an annoying misting to proper drops.

"Clean that blood off." She said, watching St. Martins lane from the dark of the alley. "There are rubbish bags behind you and a drainpipe."

He turned and tore open one of the Grey Westminster Council bags spilling sloppy leftovers and other garbage out for inspection. He found some used napkins, slimy paper towels and wiped down his bloody face and torso. She came over as he stood wiping rainwater over the slime on his chest with his hands, and sniffed.

"Good enough, but you are still bleeding." She said squeezing the bite mark on his shoulder. "Drink any blood?"

"No."

She took a jar of white paste from her backpack and scooped some out with her fingers.

"We must be sure." She said smearing paste into the wound.

"Fuck! That shit stings."

"Garlic paste and holy water.

No serious inflammation.

"You alright?" She asked without sympathy. There was no point in responding.

She took off her headgear and bandana, putting them in her little backpack, then let her dark hair fall free. She was young and beautiful, dark eyes, full lips and high cheekbones.

"The theatre crowd is out." She said indicating the crowded street and the Albery Theatre beyond. "Put your arm around me. It's a short walk."

"Don't think I'll stand out a bit?"

"This is London." She said simply, putting a slim arm around his waist and guiding him into the flow of the crowd.

She felt frail under his heavy arm. Like a bird.

"I've seen some gruesome shit in my time." He said as she guided them up another alley beside the Charring Cross Hotel. "But what I saw tonight wasn't natural."

"No, it wasn't."

"So there really is a boogie man, eh?"

"Many."

She took him to a security door next to the stage door of the Coliseum Opera house and led him to the roof by a series of darkened steel stairs. The rain was letting up, London rain never really lasts, but it never seems to stop either. She held open an access door to the theatres domed spire on the roof. The room was dark, lit only by the bluish flutter of T.V and computer monitors humming in the centre of the room. The floor was a steel grid work that rumbled under Tyler's big boots. Heavy plastic sheeting screened off the other side of the room. Sitting at the banks of the computers and monitors was a heavyset guy with unkempt red hair munching loudly on crisps.

"So this is him, at last?" He asked, brushing his hands on his Oasis t-shirt and spraying crumbs as he spoke. "Call me Streak. I'm the guy who found you. Guess I saved your ass tonight." He smiled dopily extending a soft pudgy hand.

"Didn't see you out there." Tyler said, ignoring the hand, but studying the screens.

Text files, CCTV camera views from all over London that cycled every few seconds, Porn, Sci-fi, Strange graphics, sigils and more that he couldn't even guess at.

"This is the hub of our little group. From here I can do surveillance, research, communication …"

"I know an Ops when I see one." Tyler said, turning to Jinx. "So you've

got some shiny toys, a club house and nifty superhero names. So what, you go out every night to "fight evil"?"

"Yes." She said simply, disappearing behind the plastic curtains, a fluorescent light flickering on somewhere back there.

"Don't mind the Slayer." Streak said cheerfully. "She's a hard nut an' takes a while to warm up. Want something to eat? I've got a couple of microwave curries in the fridge?"

"Any Vodka?"

"Think there's some Stella in there." Streak said, turning his chair slowly to keep Tyler in front of him as the big man moved toward the fridges on the far side of the room. "So let me fill you in. You've figured out already that vamps exist, but that's just the start…"

"Don't care." Tyler said cracking open a can of beer. "Sun comes up, I'm out'a here. I don't fight the good fight. No profit in it."

"I said you'd say that. I Googled your whole background. Dishonourable discharge from the Canadian Airborne Rangers in '91. Picked up freelance black ops for the CIA, MI6, and The Israelis. Enforcer for a prostitution slave ring out of Poland. Gun running in Afghanistan, drugs out of Montreal. You're a real prince in'it? Should I go on?"

"Well you left out the whole Thailand thing, and Beijing, but I get the picture. Gonna try and bribe me pudding boy?"

"No, No, No." Streak said waving his hands frantically. "I just track info. I found a bunch of guys and girls for this gig. You're just the one Aidan and Martin settled on. No need to kill the messenger mate."

"Killed my share." Tyler said dully, crushing the empty can and grabbing another from the fridge.

A door opened on the other side of the room, spilling white light from the hallway and silhouetting the man standing there.

"Ah, I see Mr. Barrett is here," said the silhouette as he closed the door. "None the worse for wear I hope. Rough night was it?"

"Think I've still got some brain wedged in my treads, if that tells you anything?" Tyler answered, picking at the tread of one boot but otherwise ignoring the new stranger. "So why is it you freak shows think I'd want to hook up with your little "team", and more, why shouldn't I just roll you for all this nice gear?"

"You're upset, I understand." The stranger said in a friendly tone stepping into the glow of the monitors. "But my guess is, your losing control of the *situation*, rather than the situation itself, is what's disturbing you."

He was tallish and well groomed, wearing an expensive suit. Not one dark hair was out of place and his familiar smile was well practiced.

"You're that soccer player, aren't you? What's you're name?"

"Aidan Sobel." He said with a little bow, as he threw down Tyler's backpack. "And I think you'll find that most of the world calls it *football*."

"Yeah." Tyler said walking over. "You're dating some ditzy singer, or something?"

"I was." He admitted with a lecherous smile. "The sex was great but…"

"What?" Aidan asked looking off at nothing. "Well?"

Tyler looked to Streak for answers but he just shrugged and smiled meekly.

"I know it's besides the point but we're just getting to know each other…" Aidan continued his dialogue with the air.

Tyler knelt to inspect his bag. None of his weapons or cash, just clothes.

"Listen." The footballer said angrily. "This is a strange situation for him already and you're not making it any better, right? So just piss off and…"

"Fine have it you're way!"

"I should really explain." Aidan apologized. "You see my mother was killed last year by something called a Hellspawn…"

"And the loss of mommy dearest drove you nuts." Tyler finished for him "Seen it a hundreds times…but the Hellspawn thing's new."

"God no!" Aidan said sweeping a hand over his hair dramatically. "I was glad to get rid of the old bint, she was a constant embarrassment with those bloody crystals, herbs and what not, but I wasn't done with her was I?"

There was a wild light behind his eyes now, the frenzy of a trapped man the tabloids never caught in their photos.

"Oh No!" He screamed at the roof. "The old bitch is back, haunting me from the other side of the bloody grave."

He lurched forward and grabbed Tyler by the shoulders trying to shake him.

"Don't you see? She won't leave me alone. She's always there, watching me, whispering to me."

In one move Tyler stood and slammed Aidan with a crushing uppercut below the jaw. The footballer was launched off his feet to land heavily on the steel-grating floor. Streak scrambled out of his chair and around the edge of the desk to get some distance between himself and the big Canadian.

Tyler looked over at him slowly, "I don't like to be touched." He said evenly.

"Shit. That's cool mate." The over weight boy puffed.

The snap of a gun being cocked rang out in the silence.

"Desert Eagle." Tyler said, still looking at Streak. "Sounds like a .45. Not the same one you pointed at me earlier, but the principles the same. You'd best pull the trigger girl 'cause the third time one of us is gonna end up with a bullet."

He knew she had him dead bang but he couldn't deal with teetering on

the edge of this new underworld. If he was going to die best it happened now, in a world he could just about understand.

"You've said that." She answered coolly.

He turned slowly to look at her, prepared to die, or at least to fight. She stood holding back an opening in the plastic curtaining, which was backlit in flickering orange candlelight. She wore low cut blue jeans and a short cut vest top. Her desert eagle was levelled at his chest this time.

"We should speak. They cannot explain. We understand each other."

He didn't move, his expression never changed, but they *did* understand each other fully. She went behind the curtain, he watched her, then her silhouette for a while, then followed.

He'd expected a makeshift bedroom, maybe an area set aside for working out. He hadn't expected this.

The place was one part arsenal, one part training ground and one very small part living space. There was a double mattress on the gaff taped, plexiglas over grating, floor. Two racks of cluttered clothes. Ropes, weights and gymnastic equipment to work out with. But what really caught his eye was the arsenal that lined the room. It was all packed in flight cases. Brass knuckles, heavy gloves, katana, weighted chains, sniper rifles, Chinese AK47's, Beretta's, wooden spikes, RPG's, knives, bottles of clear liquids with crosses or biohazard symbols, it went on and on.

It was a killer's candy shop.

"You understand this." She said, as he ran his fingers over a rack of knives. "You live the violence."

Something in him flinched at that, but he said nothing.

"My blood makes me chosen to fight this war. I want something else but I can not have it. I accept this, with anger, but you are violent. For you it is not a choice. They *will* hunt you, no matter where you go. If you do not fight now you will be hunted for the rest of your life."

Tyler walked up close to her and looked into her deep hazel eyes. "I've paid a lot of people, hell I've killed a lot of people, to go underground, to be forgotten." He growled. "These freaks think *they're* monsters? They don't know the meaning."

"I've been hunting and killing tainted bastards like you since I was eleven years old in Brazil." She whispered harshly.

Her breath was sweet and hot. The gun barrel pressed to his temple was cold and insistent.

"Tell me now. Are you with us or do I kill you where you stand?"

"For now?" He smiled dangerously "I'm with you. But remember what I said 'bout pullin' a gun on me? This is the third, an' last, time."

They stood like that for a long time, Coldplay drifting through the plastic

from Streak's workstation where he watched their silhouettes breathlessly.

"You were going to get this one way or the other." She said taking a step back and ejecting the shell in the chamber. The bullet spun towards him, silver and bronze, end over end. He snatched it mid flight and glared at her.

"You still tryin' to intimidate me?" he asked tapping a Bowie knife against her bare stomach.

She spun in a blur and the knife flew.

He wrapped her in his arms, pulling her close.

"Just letting you know your place." She smiled before kissing him deep.

"Aw man." Streak moaned as he turned from the silhouette show back to his monitors, replacing his earphones. "Why is it always the bastards?"

Aidan moaned dully from where he still lay on the steel grating of the floor, but no one heard it.

Tyler woke up, in an empty bed, to the sickly sweat smell of garbage.

He rolled straight out of bed and scooped up the Bowie knife from the floor, coming up in a crouch facing the opening in the plastic.

A shambling, tattered, figure moved into the makeshift room.

"Good god dammed way to get killed." The big man growled as he stood. "Sneakin' up on a boy like that ain't real bright old man."

The stranger rushed up on him, almost as fast as the stench, and slapped him hard across the face. "That's for blasphemy." He scowled. "All the trouble you been?" The bum coughed past a rolled up cigarette screwed into his sagging lips. "Yer a lucky cunt to be drawin' breath."

"Now put yer dick away an' meet me down in the alley." He continued as he turned and hobbled away.

Tyler was in the alley twenty minuets later with a couple cans of beer in his coat and a bad attitude.

It was that kind of afternoon.

In the grey London light he could see the stranger more clearly. Ragged clothes so stained as to have no colour you could recognize. Scraggy, greying, hair and beard caked in fuck knows what and, blackened, bare feet with long chipped nails. But it was the smell that Tyler recognized.

"So what's all this happy horseshit old man?"

"Mind yer fuckin' lip." He spat. "Have some fucken' respect fer yer elders, ye cunt."

"God dammit! Why you people got to choose me to bother?"

The bum punched him in the ear. "That's for blasphemy." He spat.

Tyler laughed out loud and swigged beer. It was that or crush the old man's

skull.

"Yer a hard nut, fer sure, but you know fuck all of wha'cher about." He said as he led them out into St. Martins lane and down toward the church.

Tyler had no idea how this old bastard fit in, but he stuck as close as he could bear, to hear him over the black cabs and busses.

"Yer one'a *them*, or near enough. I'm thinkin' ye always known ye was different but'cha never known how different."

"I'm different, so what? It's always worked for me."

"Yer fuckin' Dhampir you dumb shit. A half vampire like those fucks last night."

"Right. And Dracula's my pop right?"The big man chuckled.

"How much you spend on sunglasses mate?

Feel funny whenever you see some poor cunt bleed?

Anyone ever say how fuckin' *young* you look for thirty five?"

Tyler stopped in his tracks, his head swimming.

The old man went to sit on the steps of St. Martins in the fields. Other homeless moved on and around the steps so they where close to the old man. One young girl, maybe sixteen, ran up and gave him a big hug.

"Thanks for getting' me in the shelter last night Martin."Tyler heard her say as if from a long way off. "Them guy's kind'a shook me up a bit."

"That's all right, Ali. Just make sure your scrawny ass is at that shelter by five every night."

"I promise." She said, hugging him again as Tyler walked up slow.

"Go on then. I got' a talk with this big bastard."

"Penny's finally dropped has it?" Martin asked as Tyler took a seat next to him on the old churches stairs and looked out at Trafalgar Square. "If those cunts can be real then maybe it's all true eh? Right kick in the bollocks, in'it?"

"So what now?"Tyler asked through gritted teeth as he popped all the white knuckles of his balled up fists.

"You take out Emily or she takes you out. She's the one you bottled. After that? Four choices really. You join us. You go over to their side. You try to ignore the whole thing, never really works by the way, or you roll over and die."

"Streak said you were lookin' for me way before last night. Why?"

"We lost a fella 'bout a month ago. We needed and experienced hard cunt like yourself to fill the gap. It was Suzan who focused on you."

"Aidans' 'Ghost mom'?"Tyler asked with a dull laugh.

"That's the one. Spirits tend to be stubborn types. She dammed near drove Aidan 'round the bend with her pestering."

"Saw it last night." He grunted and cracked open his second beer.

They where quiet for a long while, other than the odd rasping cough

from Martin, while Tyler tried to get it all straight in his head. The sun broke out low, below the clouds, to paint them in pinks and oranges and Trafalgar square in bruised purples. He found himself looking across the square to the flags of Canada house and wondered if he'd ever be able to go home. 'Course there was no "home" to go back to. He'd never had a father and his mom had probably drank, fucked or doped herself to death by now.

"The Marquis's in London to set up his 'Blood Ball'." Martin said, shattering Tyler's train of thought. "Does it every twenty-five years. Sort of a vampire St. Paddy's. Lot of people will die.

'Course you don't give a shit 'bout that. What matters to you is that Emily'll be one'a the leeches organizing it. All the big cunts'll sit down to sort out a treaty. We find out where that's going to happen we can stop the ball."

"And I can shank her ass. I see where you're going. Keep it up."

"You get her, and get through the shit, you'll be a free man. Aidan'll even give you some dosh. You can stay or leave as you like."

"How much cash?"

"I'm homeless, you twat. Couple quid's big to me. Just give Aidan a number. It's motivated self interest in'it?"

"Ok." He said crushing the empty beer can and standing. "I can work up a plan. Let's get a couple cans an' you can fill me in on what I need to know 'bout these fucks."

"Gave up the drink when I saw the Angel." Martin said shaking his head. "Jinx an' Streak can fill you in."

Tyler looked up at the church then back to the bum on the steps with a sarcastic smile. "Saint Martin?" he asked.

"Fuck off."

After two days he'd inventoried their gear, had the crash course on this dirty little war and its players, not to mention himself, and Streak had found out where the meet was going to happen.

Tactically his plan was a good one. He was experienced in small teams work and had a good idea of what this group was capable of. But he was still on edge.

As he lay in bed with Jinx curled up close, her head resting on his shoulder, he stared up into the darkness listing to keystrokes and muffled music from Streaks workstation.

"Think it'll work?" He whispered.

"You're having doubt?" She asked sleepily.

"No." He lied. "But you've been doing this for what, like eight years, what'd you think?"

"What I always think." She said raising herself to her elbow, her other hand sliding into his boxers.

"Live for today?" He smiled.

"For tomorrow night we may die."

The Salvador and Amanda on Port Street, near Lester square station was closed for a private function. The vamps were beginning to arrive and Tyler was curled up tight in an air-vent above the bar that had groaned and popped at his weight until he'd finally wedged himself into position. That had been almost two hours ago and every muscle now screamed to stretch and flex.

They'd all done their bit. Streak hadn't slept for three days getting them the intel they needed. Martin had done his blessings and rallied the troops. Aidan had shelled out for the extra gear and bribes. Jinx had worked with Tyler close to refine their tactics. They were as ready as they were going to get but that didn't help his nerves or his bunched muscles.

He swiped sweat from his eyes and cursed the heat of the PVC mask he'd bought in Soho, but fuck him if he was goin' to let any of the fuckers down there see his face.

"Streak" He whispered into his head mic. "Tell me you're fuckin' good to go?"

"My end's all good. Just don't fuck it down there."

"Martin's ready?"

"Oh, fuck ya. Gagin' to start, in'it he?"

"Aidan's had the street and surrounding buildings cleared?"

"Bought and fuckin' paid for already." He wined. "Just settle back and do what you do best ya big Bastard."

The mood in the bar below him changed, more tense and respectful. The Marquis had finally arrived.

Tyler could almost taste the kill that was coming.

"I'm so pleased you all accepted my invitation," said a thick European accent that Tyler couldn't quite place. It must have been the Marquis.

"Please, sit. But do we need all the bodyguards and hangers on? Many of you I don't know personally, and I'm sure the inevitable rivalries must be going on, but all this all seems a tad gosh." He continued in an amused voice.

"You said the city was going back to the old violence twenty-odd years ago Marquis." A girl said in a cocky, confident, tone. "It's even worse now. Which, mostly, is better for us but it makes everyone jumpy too. You just never know what these kids are going to get up to."

Tyler lowered a small mirror through the grate of the vent to see the players. The girl talking was a pretty punket type with a red and black Mohawk and

a sharp attitude.

"Kitty! Camden Kitty I'm so pleased to see you again."

He wore an expensive black suit and shirt with a cherry red tie. His dark hair tied back tight into a tail.

He embraced her and kissed her on both cheeks. "I knew you'd out last Nancy."

"You fucked us both and hedged your bets." She smiled carnally. "At least she was cute so I can't blame you too much. I'm glad you're back."

"It was a near thing my darling, I don't mind telling you, on several occasions. These Slayers and zealots seem to be breeding like vermin."

"Try running a market like Covent Garden." Said a dark vamp dressed in a dark suit and open collared white dress shirt. His dark hair was cut short and his build and features where heavy. "The bloodbags who run the stalls are the real vermin. If it weren't for the money and blood I'd have slaughtered the lot by now."

"Savash. You blood skimming, Turkish, *son of a bitch*. I can't believe you're still in London."The Marquis laughed, shaking the big vamp's hand.

"And Evangeline." He moved on to an Amazon red head dressed for an exclusive London nightclub. "I suppose you're still the Queen of the West end?"

"Piccadilly darling." She said with a dazzling smile as she allowed him to kiss her hand. "Everything else has become so dirty and common."

Angry hisses followed that last statement and tore through Tyler's' head like hot razors.

"And it's Jade now darling."

"Mrs. Jade can not read the future Marquis." Said an Asian dressed Hong Kong sharp. "London has always been multi-national, it is part of the city's charm, but Londoners like her find change difficult."

"S'truth enough mate." Agreed a tattooed Aussie from a nearby table.

It went on like this, the Marquis making introductions and greeting old acquaintances. Tyler sweated it out and tried to work his muscles. They needed to be relaxed. He counted it at an hour and a half before the henchmen were sent off to the dance floor area of the club and the principal players were sat down to the real business of the Blood Ball.

"The only way this has ever worked is when we are all free to wander the city as we like."The Marquis said calmly to a group of mostly stoic faces. Savash was nodding his approval. Camden Kitty seemed bored, colouring her nails with a big black marker.

"I know there are rivalries, bordering on open warfare, but these are secondary to the Ball."

His voice was hard now. It carried power.

"You lock up your trouble makers and curtail your hotheads. This is a party. We all get along or it's bloodwar. And no one wants that."

They were all silent.

Tyler counted to thirty.

"Now Streak."

"I think that…" was the last thing said before the sprinklers went off and the screaming started.

Tyler bashed out the vent but the sudden movement had the whole, weak, section coming free from the ceiling.

He bounced hard off the bar and ended up face down on the floor.

He swore a blue streak as he pulled the Uzi and started spraying all the feet and legs he could see as he scrambled up and pulled his stake.

Every one of the fuckers was flailing at the water pouring down on them. Most, who hadn't been shot, seemed not to even notice him yet. Martin's blessings on the water tanks had worked.

Thank fuck none of them had wanted to wash their hands.

If there were younger vamps here the holy water might be enough to finish them off.

He drove his stake into the chest of a nearby bloodsucker.

Small arms fire from over by the dance floor. Jinx had gone to work on the underlings.

Stick to the plan.

He strafed the floor by the exits and the entrance to the kitchen. That whole side of the bar erupted in a wall of flame. Those sprinklers had been hooked to jerry-rigged petrol tanks. No exit now for at least another minute.

Welcome to the playground. Tyler's kill zone.

"Streak. Get Martin on it now." He yelled into the headset.

Something clamped on his shoulder like the Jaws of Life almost snapping his collarbone.

He jammed his stake over his head and felt the hand spasm loose as he made contact. He twisted and grabbed the fuckers belt buckle, heaving him up and over into the flames. He caught a glance of some chink in Prada, with a big fucken' hole in the top of his head, tumble into the flames then spun back to the room. The Uzi kicking all the way.

The gun clinked dry as the Amazon leapt at him from ten feet away.

He sidestepped, surprisingly he managed to avoid the brunt of her attack. The Queen's nails tore through the PVC of the mask into his cheek. The cheek tore more as he turned with her as she went past. He bit down and pulped fingertips while his free hand slammed her head into the corner of the hard bar top.

"Bitch." He growled, spitting blood and fingertips as he staked her through

the back.

He rolled backward, pulling the P-99 from his shoulder rig, and came up in a crouch when his shoulders slammed into the immoveable legs of a bald vamp in a hoodie.

The vamp roared in pain and rage.

Tyler jammed his pistol into its crotch. "Get fucked." He laughed dryly.

The vamp's fists came slamming into Tyler's' chest as he pulled the trigger.

He fell forward and rolled right as the vamp fell back, clutching his jeans where his cock and balls used to be.

Tyler rolled until he hit a table leg, desperate to force air into his lungs.

Through the stars sparking in his eyes he saw a fine pair of Italian shoes rush to him. A hand clutched at his shirtfront and suddenly he was looking at the exposed pipe work of the ceiling not a foot from his face.

"Drop the weapons bitch or I snap the half-breeds spine." The Marquis snarled from below him.

Tyler finally managed to gasp in air and turned his head to see the room.

Maybe ten left, mostly big players or heavies. They were all twitching and convulsing from the water. Jinx was pointing a .38 at the fucker holding him and a sawed-off double barrel at the only two that where mostly unaffected by the holy water. Kitty and Savash stood under a huge umbrella she held printed with the map of the London tube network. His snarling gangster vibe and her punket look under that tourist piece of crap was too much.

Tyler started to laugh.

It started as a giggle and would have become a full-fledged belly laugh if his spine weren't being bent like a hunting bow.

"What's so funny half blood?" The Marquis snarled as he tightened his grip, drawing a gasp from Tyler between laboured laughs.

He'd dropped his gun and stake. He couldn't speak so he just pointed at the pair under the umbrella.

A Chinese woman screamed something from under a nearby table.

"The water." Howled a vamp in an alcove with a Polish accent. "Turn off the fucking water!"

Tyler worked a slender object from his back pocket and tried to loosen up, to gauge his moment. Water streamed into his eyes but he'd have to work by feel anyway.

Two vamps, both women both euro trash, leapt at Jinx from their hiding place in a covered booth screaming in Italian or Spanish.

Behind the double barrel flash he saw Kitten standing alone under her umbrella. She was looking right at him as she winked and kissed her middle finger in farewell.

His right hand arced down and drove the pencil into the Marquis' spine.

He hit the floor hard when the Marquis dropped him but managed to keep some breath and scramble away.

With his back to an overturned table Tyler winced at the pain as he reached around and pulled out the big gun at the small of his back. He cocked the Desert Eagle as Jinx's .38 popped off somewhere in the background.

A chick rushed him. The gun bucked violently and the .50 calibre hollow point tore off the top of her head.

He squeezed off another round and blew off a guy's leg at the thigh.

"Too many." He thought as he rushed into the area framed by a backlit stained glass wall and leapt up onto the curved bench under it. He turned to face the room as he licked the blood from his lips.

He saw Jinx backlit with the dying flames by the entrance and fore lit in high relief from the muzzle flair of her AK-47.

Then he realized. The water was slowing.

"Hey." Said a voice from very nearby.

Despite the gargled raspyness he recognized the voice from the other night.

Emily.

"Not often a girl gets a second chance."

Shit. She was right above him.

He tried to dive away but she dropped on him, hard, and they bounced off a heavy oak table to the floor. They both kicked and scrambled, coming up in low crouches.

He heard his gun clatter off the raised area and out of reach.

Her hair dripped limp. Her face and exposed skin was blistered, cracked, burned, seeping blood and puss.

"Wow. You're pretty." He said in a rumbling laugh that whistled through his torn cheek.

"You've managed to drop your weapons all over the bar. Such an arsenal and you've nothing left when you finally find me." She rasped. "What will you do now half-breed?"

"Tear off the top of your head and piss on what's left?"

She moved like no one should.

She moved him like no one could.

There was the crush of impact on his chest. The tear of glass in his back.

She'd slammed him seven odd feet back and probably the same up into the stained glass wall.

There had been no sense of movement until he fell down through the glass and florescent lights to tumble off the heavy table to the wood tiled floor.

He was rolled over and lifted by his gun rig. Then he was airborne again

He bounced off another table and scattered more chairs. He lay face down on the floor gasping in equal parts water, blood and air.

He desperately tried to push himself up from the floor as he watched her high-heeled boots click towards him. Any strength he'd ever had was drained. He couldn't move.

He felt a tug at the back of his belt.

"This will help." She said. "But then I've got your girl and the doors to deal with. Best take two."

There was another tug then she kicked him across the club and into the bar.

His vision swam. He couldn't bear to even twitch but he fought to stay conscience.

He had to focus on the little things. Wet floor. The blood in his lungs and mouth. Gunfire and the sound of tearing skin. Burning wood and flesh.

Something she said.

"Your girl."

Fuck. She'd taken two grenades.

A shot rang out.

A grenade went off.

He was up and hugging the bar like a drunk.

He saw Jinx staking the Marquis. Saw the top of Emily's arm twitching on the floor. He heard another grenade go off. He stumbled towards Jinx.

"She got out!" The Brazilian hollered over the pops of her Glock as she shot down fleeing vamps. "Get the bitch!"

He forced his way up the stairs clinging to the twisted rail and working to drag air into his lungs. He stepped over the remains of Martins cross as he stumbled through the, grenade-shattered, glass doors.

In the little street he breathed in fresh air and tasted the blood on his breath, wondering vaguely what all these people would make of him. He stumbled forward and shoulder slammed a no parking sign. The post came free but he never felt the impact or the pavement.

He opened his eyes to find himself surrounded by homeless. The stench of them was thick. He gagged and spat out burring bile.

"He lives." Said a toothless bum with thick dreads.

"He lives." He said with more volume to the crowd but with the same, gruff, astonishment.

The bum moved away to be replaced by Martin standing over him. He extended his hand, wrapped in dirty bandages, to Tyler. The streetlight behind him

gave the old man an orange halo in the hazy London drizzle. Tyler took the offered hand and was surprised by Martin's strength as he was pulled to his feet.

It still hurt to breathe, broken ribs no doubt.

All around him in the street, the walkways and alleys, even on the roofs and ledges were Martin's people. They were armed with crosses, stakes, torches and a hundred scavenged or makeshift weapons. This was the West End's unseen population. Martin's homeless army of God. Just down the short street he could hear the sounds of a Lester square Saturday night; sirens, drunken girls laughing far too loud, taxi horns and pop re-mixes blaring out of over rated clubs. But here in Port Street it was quiet.

"We cornered the cunt for you." Martin coughed, as he rolled a cigarette and nodded across the street to where a dense crowd stood with their backs to them.

"Can I have one?" Tyler asked looking at the rollup.

Martin handed it to him with a shrug.

He spotted the girl he'd seen with Martin the other day. She was holding a torch.

"Ali, right?" he asked.

She simply nodded in response. There was clear fear in her eyes and briefly he wondered if it was him or the vamps she was afraid of.

"Got a light?" he asked looking at the torch.

He turned as he inhaled and his foot caught on the sign he'd knocked down.

The crowd parted as he walked up, none took their eyes from the trapped vampire. The street and pavement were wet, Holy water he guessed. Emily clutched at the stump of her left arm and hissed as he approached. Sparks leapt from the sign he dragged behind him. There was fear in her eyes and a sick tension all around him.

Tyler swung the sign up in a wide arc, which almost clipped her under the chin, to rest it on his shoulder. She looked around desperately.

No escape.

Tyler laughed loud and hard around the rollup.

He brought down the sign in a two handed grip like a battle-axe. It cut deep into her uninjured shoulder and embedded in her splintered collarbone.

He pulled back hard and kicked her in the chest to dislodge her.

He used the sign like a spear and severed her leg.

He cut, stabbed and beat her with the signpost.

He kicked her and punched her. He tore pieces free.

She was a bloody pile of pulped body parts long before the beating ended. When he could finally do no more he turned slowly to look at Martin, leaning

heavily on the twisted, bloody, post. His laugh still rasped through his strained breathing.

He'd been laughing the whole time.

None of the crowd even glanced his way, Martins expression was one of resigned revulsion, but he didn't look away.

"You about done with her?"

Tyler shook bone chips and gristle lazily from his swollen fist. "Just about." He said, the laughter finally dying down as he turned back to the pile of twitching flesh, un-zipped, and pissed on the remains.

"Where's your head bitch?" he chuckled roughly.

"Now I'm done." He said to Martin when he'd finished.

Martin rushed past him and began praying over the remains as he touched a torch to them. The big man threw back his head and laughed.

That laugh died on his lips.

On the roof of the still burning club he saw Savash and the Camden Kitty looking down on them. They were lit in the high contrast of shadows and flickering firelight. The Turk stood at the edge of the roof with clenched fists and death in his dark eyes. She looked down with a slow smile as she kicked her legs back and forth over the edge. She held out a teddy bear, which was almost as big as her and dressed as a beefeater, out over the street and dropped it.

Tyler watched the trashy toy fall in slow motion past the red brick façade.

"Fuck."

The bear exploded five feet from the pavement.



# Mother

By Travis Legge

Brianna slammed a closed fist into her punching bag. Working out had become one of her common pastimes. Being an immortal insomniac, Brianna had devised several ways to help pass the endless hours along. She was able to spend days at a time in meditation, should she desire to. She had collectively spent centuries in libraries and universities engaged in academia and study. A stint of more than four hundred years as a member of the Order of Ouroboros had earned her the title of Archmage. Still, among these myriad and disparate interests, she got the most joy out of honing her body.

Perhaps it was because she knew that while knowledge, societies, governments and even magical schools are temporary, dated structures, her body was truly immortal. She would never age. She would never die naturally. Though she could catch diseases as readily as any human, she could never die from an illness. Terminal illness meant eternal suffering for her kind. It was unsurprising then that she had devoted so much time to studying healing magics.

Brianna's immortality was mostly universal. Disease and age were of little concern to her. Still, she could perish in combat, or due to a terrible accident. This knowledge, combined with the fear of what may happen to her soul should she actually die, had driven Brianna to shape her body into a perfect machine. She had become faster, stronger, and tougher than nearly anything that walked the earth. Deep in her heart she knew that it still was not enough. Though she would never admit it to anyone, she still feared death as much as any of her kind. In training, she felt as if she was looking the fear in its eyes and forcing it to submit to her will. She would not bend knee to the cowardice that was rampant among the elves. She would master their terrible curse, and eventually overcome it.

The rhythm of her fists and feet on the heavy bag increased as she felt fatigue begin to set in. While elves were sleepless they could still become quite tired. In Brianna's mind this was simply a sign to push herself harder. Sweat poured from her skin and her waist length blond ponytail whipped furiously in time with her strikes. Pushing harder and further, Brianna continued her workout.

"Ahem," said a voice from behind her.

Brianna spun with blinding speed and fell into a defensive stance. The sweat glistening on her bare skin and her excessive height gave her the air of a warrior goddess. She was not used to being snuck op on. To tell the truth there were only a handful of beings on the planet that were capable of the feat. Brianna had no desire to see any of them, least of all the man that stood before her.

"What are you doing here?" Brianna asked, her stance not relaxing in the

slightest.

Smirking, the man replied.

"Hardly the way to greet an old friend, is it, love?"

"I don't recall us being friends, William."

William shrugged. Though his temperament was aloof and laid back, and his gesture was intended to indicate some measure of apathy, even the simple movement of his shoulders carried the grace of a predator. William was not just any man. He had been cursed to walk the earth forever, though no elven blood flowed in his veins. William was one of the damned immortals. Forsaken by Hell and despised by Heaven. William was a vampire.

For a few minutes the two stared at each other, neither one moving. Finally William sighed and rolled his eyes, the smirk dropping from his face as he spoke.

"It's Caleb."

Brianna closed her eyes and slowly lowered her guard. Taking a deep breath to try and center herself, she looked up at William, her despair thinly veiled by a scowl.

"What's happened?"

William paused a moment, as if seeking the proper words. Finally he smirked again and looked Brianna up and down.

"Why don't you get dressed? I'll put on some tea and we'll have a sit down."

Brianna opened her mouth to speak, and then looked down at her sweaty naked body. For longer than she was comfortable admitting, a brief memory of love, tenderness, and abandon shared by two cursed immortals danced through her mind. She turned quickly from William and walked toward her shower. Over her shoulder she spoke.

"Fine, William. There's Earl Grey in the cupboard," she said. Her voice faded. "I'll be out in a moment."

William turned on his heel and went into the kitchen.

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The kettle whistled as Brianna walked into the kitchen. She had showered and all seven foot four of her was still wet. Wearing a white bathrobe, and with a white towel wrapped around her hair, she looked bizarrely domestic. Only her immense height belied her true heritage. Even the pointed tips of her ears were hidden. She walked to the table and sat down, looking at William as he poured the tea.

William was dressed in a white t-shirt and blue jeans. Despite his best effort to look mundane and normal, he still carried a bestial, predatory air about him. It was impossible to pick out what exactly gave the impression and Brianna had noticed a similar trend among the oldest of vampires. It was as if they had

forgotten how humans stood and moved. Sure. A majority of people were not nearly perceptive enough to pick out a vampire such as William by sight. William's brown hair and eyes along with his unremarkable British facial features gave him an edge when blending into a crowd. Still, he stuck out to Brianna as a killer. No matter what her other feelings for him may be he was still a being who stole the life from others to satisfy his own needs. Brianna could never be comfortable with that.

William turned and set two teacups out on the table. Pouring a cup for each of them, he then sat across from Brianna and poured a bit of honey into his tea. Looking over the steaming cup in silence, William's smirk grew steadily less comfortable. Finally he looked down into his cup and spoke softly.

"Our boy's in trouble."

"When isn't he," Brianna asked as she blew onto her tea to cool it. William looked up at her, his eyes pleading. Brianna felt a pang of guilt and turned away from William's gaze.

"I'm sorry," she said. "What's going on?"

"It's pretty bad," William began, setting down his tea. "I have been trying to keep tabs on him the past twenty years or so. It seems that he wound up in Eastern Europe a while back. The money you gave him last time must have run out. Apparently he got involved with some sort of cult. He fabricated some hokey religious bullshit and started taking the members for every dime he could get."

"And they caught him. Okay…" Brianna began, a bit confused. "So far this hardly sounds like something that he can't handle. I mean I'm disappointed that he's swindling people, but how dangerous can they be?"

William shook his head. "Cult's not the problem," he began. "Not really anyways. You see, this cult has been around for a good long while, dating back to the Dark Ages. It seems that they worship a 'god' by the name of Veles."

"Slavic god of prophecy," Brianna chimed in.

"Right," replied William, now fidgeting with the teacup in his hands. "To make a long story short, Caleb convinced the cult that he was some sort of prophet, blessed with insight gifted by Veles. He arranged a few staged events to confirm his supposed clairvoyance and win the cult's loyalty. For the past year or two he's been swindling and bamboozling the cultists out of hovel and home. I mean, it's not like these are rich people, Brianna. He's stealing from the poor."

"I'm still not understanding where things went sour," Brianna said, sipping her tea. "Did they find out he was a phony?"

"It's complicated," William said. He took a deep breath and looked Brianna in the eyes with his cold, predatory stare. "From what I can gather, there were a few scholars of note in the cult. It seems that after a few centuries worth of collective research, the priests of the Cult of Veles managed to discover a ritual that allows them to summon their god."

Brianna's eyes widened and she set down her tea. After a moment of staring at nothing in particular and trying to collect her thoughts, she looked to William once more. This time fear and realization had crept into her eyes. Her voice was barely above a whisper as she clarified her suspicions with William.

"Veles is a Mastim isn't he?"

William closed his eyes, not wanting to see Brianna's reaction as he nodded. "It seems that about five hundred years ago, the Cult of Veles had a bit of a tiff with the Guardians. Veles was given the celestial eviction notice, and it was believed that the cult was destroyed."

"Apparently not," Brianna said, bitter sarcasm coloring her voice. "So I assume that when Veles returned, he set his followers straight about Caleb."

"Not right away," William began, producing a package of Dunhills from his pants pocket. "It seems that Veles respected Caleb's ingenuity and made him a job offer."

"Please tell me he didn't…" Brianna's usually calm demeanor melted away as fear for her son's soul oozed out through her words.

William put his hand on Brianna's. She looked at him with teary eyes as he spoke.

"Our boy's not daft. He did the right thing."

Brianna took a few breaths to calm herself. Once her initial panic ebbed, she slowly pulled her hand away from William's. The comfort of his touch frightened her nearly as much as their son's predicament. She swallowed, closed her eyes and regained her composure.

"I take it that's not all."

"I wish it was," William said. He looked down for a moment, pausing to keep his own composure. "Veles wasn't exactly thrilled with Caleb's refusal. He had Caleb ambushed by the cultists. They've got him, Brianna."

Brianna hung her head as tears streamed down her cheeks. She allowed herself a moment to cry. She knew that if Caleb had fallen into the hands of a demon, there was little hope. Still, she had survived on very little hope for over three millennia. Wiping her face with her robe sleeve, she looked back to William.

"What's the plan?"

"We go get our son," William said as he produced a cell phone. "I can charter us a plane-"

"Don't bother," Brianna interrupted as she stood up. "We'll take a shortcut."

***

Brianna and William stood in her basement. Brianna was now dressed in her leather trenchcoat, white t-shirt and black leather pants. Her hair was tied back, as it always was when she prepared for a fight. In her hand was an ornate

wooden rod. The Rod of L'Un. An ancient artifact passed down to her from her master. The Rod was rumored to be the most potent magical artifact in existence. Brianna wasn't even entirely certain of the Rod's full range of power. One power that she was pointedly aware of was the ability to open spatial portals. The Rod allowed the user to make gateways to far off places. This was Brianna's "shortcut."

William had not changed his clothes, though he had put his black leather jacket on. Knives and bullets usually didn't bother him much, but the coat did add an extra layer of protection. Neither of the immortals carried a weapon. They didn't need to.

"Teleportation," William said nervously as he looked at Brianna. It was obvious that he wasn't entirely comfortable with the concept.

Brianna nodded and looked at William with almost genuine concern. "You okay with that? Will it make you feel better if I hold your hand?"

William scowled and shook his head. "Someone told you that you were funny once, didn't they?"

"I thought it was pretty funny," Brianna said as she raised the Rod straight out in front of her.

Drawing a circle in the air and intoning a brief incantation in a long forgotten tongue, Brianna began to open a portal to Romania. William had not known the exact whereabouts of their son, and Brianna had been irritatingly unable to divine his location through her numerous spells. This demon that held Caleb must have been quite potent indeed. All that they knew was that Caleb had last been seen in the city of Brasov, so Brasov was where they were going.

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Brianna dragged William by the hand as they stepped into a secluded courtyard in old town Brasov. Despite the shift in time, no sunlight found its way into their entryway. The long red tiled roof above obscured what little sunlight made its way beyond the ponderous peaks of the Carpathian Mountains. William looked up at Brianna with one of his smart-assed grins.

"I guess you're going to have to go first," he said. "Maybe next time we should plan ahead for the time change."

"Just be glad we came out somewhere with a roof," Brianna said as she headed toward the nearest street. She was irritated by William's glib attitude, but she always found something to be irritated about when dealing with William. It helped her resist his charms. "Meet me at the Black Church an hour past sunset."

William found the darkest corner of the courtyard and sat down. Still smiling, he waved as Brianna walked onto the street.

Brianna turned into town, heading for the Red Light Café. Apparently Caleb had frequented the bar, so Brianna figured she would start her investigation there. It was a short walk to Strada Lunga from the courtyard and Brianna was in

a bit of a hurry. The townsfolk on the street cast confused and frightened looks at the large elf as she walked down the street. The normal folk were noticing her, just as she had hoped. Without a doubt word would soon snake its way to the shadowy occult figures in the area that a large woman with pointed ears was out in broad daylight. With any luck, Brianna's quarry would find her before she needed to waste much time looking for them.

The elven beauty stepped into the Red Light Café. The small club was dimly lit and sparsely appointed. The interior design created an unnatural number of nooks and corners, giving each table the feel of being the quietest and darkest area in the bar. It seemed the perfect place for a romantic rendezvous. It also seemed the perfect place to discuss darker pursuits. Brianna stepped into the main seating area and began to look around. Presently, a desirable young woman stepped from behind the bar.

"Buna ziua, doamna," the young woman said as she approached. Brianna scowled. Her Romanian was rusty. Rusty and about three hundred years out of date.

The woman grinned and extended an arm to guide Brianna to a table. Brianna looked down at her hostess and allowed her irritation to fall away. By the time she spoke, her face was a mask of warmth and pleasantry.

"Scuzati-ma," Brianna said, softly, attempting to feign embarrassment. "Nu inteleg. Vorbiti englezesc?"

The hostess smiled warmly and began speaking in heavily accented and broken English. "Please forgive," she said. "My English is poor. Please sit." The hostess led Brianna to one of the open tables. "You would like drink," she asked as she pulled out a chair for Brianna.

"Wine," Brianna said as she settled into her chair. "Red."

The hostess walked away to fetch Brianna's drink. Brianna scanned the room with her eyes, looking for anything abnormal. The few people in the café seemed to be lovers meeting to share late afternoon flirtations. She would have to try her luck with the hostess. A quick incantation gave Brianna the ability to speak and understand all languages. It was a useful, if simple spell. Her ears rang for a moment as the Burn worked its way through her system. After a few minutes, the young woman returned with a glass of red wine. She set the glass before Brianna with a smile.

"Do you need anything else," the hostess asked.

"The wine is fine," Brianna replied. Though she spoke English, perfect Romanian escaped her mouth. "I would like to speak with you if you have a moment."

"Yes," the hostess said, falling right back into her native tongue, which Brianna magically understood. While the waitress was more comfortable with

Romanian, she was a bit taken aback by her customer's sudden fluency. A bit of nervousness shone through as she responded. "You have a question?"

"I am looking for someone: A man with dark skin and ears like mine."

The hostess scowled in thought for a moment. Brianna knew that this was simply for show. No human would have laid eyes on Caleb and forgotten. Aside from his obviously inhuman ears and skin tone, Caleb was immensely attractive. His face was sculpted and flawless. Certainly not the type of face a young woman was likely to forget. Having no interest in being stalled, nor in bartering for information, Brianna produced a large wad of bills and began counting them.

"You look like you're having a hard time remembering," Brianna said as she laid three bills on the table. "Would three hundred Euro help?"

The hostess smiled. "Please understand many of our customers appreciate our discretion."

Brianna laid two more bills out.

"And I appreciate your honesty."

The hostess collected the bills from the table and leaned in to whisper in Brianna's ear.

"Your man was in here with Sasha Ojacarcu. Sasha is a fixture in the club scene. Many people know her. If you ask around the bars, perhaps starting at Opium, you should find her with little trouble."

Brianna smiled and handed the hostess another hundred Euro note. "Thank you," she said sipping her wine. "You have been most helpful."

The hostess bowed and walked away from the table. Having no time to waste, Brianna abandoned her wine glass and stepped out into the Romanian dusk.

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Shortly after the sun fell behind the Carpathian peaks, Brianna made her way down the Strada Muresenilor. From the Red Light Café to the Black Church was only about a kilometer, and soon she was approaching the front gate of the church.

Leaning on the gate, William lit a cigarette. Next to him was a wooden plaque, the number "1477" carved into the wood in Gothic lettering. The flame from his lighter briefly illuminated the wood and the light danced across the centuries old etching. William put his lighter away and called to Brianna as she approached.

"Any luck," he asked as he exhaled a lungful of gray smoke.

"I got a name," Brianna said as she stepped to the gate. "It's not much of a start, but its something. Apparently our son has been making time with a girl named Sasha Ojacarcu. She's a clubkid, hangs out at some place called Opium. I guess we start there."

"This Sasha girl have any sort of a rep?" William asked, his cigarette

bouncing between his lips as he spoke.

Brianna shook her head. "None that I've ever heard of. Of course I haven't been out this way for a long time."

William looked over his shoulder at the wooden plaque. He smirked briefly and ran his fingers over the numbers before looking back to Brianna. His eyes seemed to glimmer. The shine was a signal of deceptively human emotion. For a second, Brianna almost forgot what William was and a barrage of long buried emotions clawed their way toward the surface of her mind.

"Do you remember the fire?" William spoke gently, seductively as he asked.

"Of course I remember."

Brianna averted her eyes, unable to look him in the face. She began trembling as William stepped closer. He tossed his cigarette away and arched his neck to look her in the eyes. She felt her heart pound as she saw the tenderness and sincerity floating in his piercing eyes. Her lips quivered as she searched for words.

"I still love you," William said. "I love you now just as much as I did that night. All of Brasov burning around us didn't matter. With you in my arms the whole world could have burned and it wouldn't have mattered."

William's words dug deeply into Brianna's heart. She had spent several decades trying to convince herself that she didn't love William. She had repeatedly reminded herself what he was, what he had to do to exist. She had even tried to blame him for the curse that she passed on to Caleb. Their son was drow. Neither vampire nor elf, cursed to the fringes of both societies. Caleb had been such a troubled youth because of that isolation. Brianna had never wanted her son to have to suffer for what he was, though he did. She certainly didn't want to doom another child to the same fate. What mother would?

Brianna snapped out of her reverie, feeling breath on her lips. She knew that William didn't breathe, but as close as they were, her own breath blew back on her, giving the illusion that he did. As their lips brushed for the briefest of moments, Brianna slowly pulled back.

"I…"

"Don't say it Brie."

"Our son," Brianna said, barely keeping her tears in check. "We need to find Caleb."

Brianna turned on her heel and stepped onto the Court J. Honterus, headed toward Opium. Silently, William followed.

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Brianna and William scanned the bar as they stepped inside. The layout was unique, as most seating areas were not so much tables as beds. Lining the walls were mattresses the size of queen-sized beds. The mattresses had backs and arms on them similar to a restaurant booth. Each seating unit was covered in red velvet

and an optional table folded out from the side, suspended over the mattress. In the center of the room there was sparse conventional seating, with a candelabra burning on each of the seven tables. At the far end of the room stood a bar. The bar itself was hand-carved with exceptional workmanship.

Brianna beelined to the bar, ignoring the cozy and comfortable couples who shared quiet romantic drinks or Ganga pipes. William followed, sizing up every person in the bar with a simple sweep of his eyes. He immediately knew that none of the patrons of this establishment even remotely resembled a threat. One of the many gifts of vampirism.

As a matter of expedience, Brianna recast her language spell. Her temples pounded for a moment as the magical energy passed through her, but by the time she reached the bartender the pain had subsided.

"I'm looking for Sasha Ojacarcu," she said as she leaned on the bar. Her nerves were still frazzled from the conversation with William and she came off a bit more hostile than she meant to.

The bartender raised an eyebrow as he responded, "I don't want any trouble."

William stepped forward to intervene. His demeanor was much cooler as he spoke.

"You'll have to forgive my friend," he began. Apparently his Romanian was not rusty in the least. "She's cranky. Jet lag. We're looking for Sasha. She's a friend of our son, Caleb."

"Caleb is your son?" The bartender was obviously suspicious. "You don't look like Caleb at all."

William smirked. "Look, I just want to talk to the girl, ok? I'll even talk to her right here."

As William argued with the bartender, Brianna sensed movement near the back door. Looking around the corner she saw a red-haired woman dart from one of the back rooms toward the rear exit. Brianna leapt the bar and gave chase.

The bartender shouted as Brianna went over. William followed Brianna, tossing a hundred Euro on the bar as he passed.

"Sorry for the trouble," he shouted as he rounded the corner to the back exit.

Brianna let the young human run outside. She knew that it wouldn't be hard to follow her, and she preferred to avoid an audience if possible. Once outside, Brianna effortlessly snatched the girl by the back of her neck and spun her around.

"Sasha?" Brianna questioned her in a calm, conversational tone despite the fact that she held the girl a full two feet off of the ground.

"Just leave me alone," Sasha shouted. "You'll never catch Caleb. He's too smart for you!"

William burst out of the rear exit. Seeing Brianna's grip on the panicking girl he ran over.

"This is why Caleb never brings his friends over," William said as he came up behind Brianna. "Put the girl down."

Brianna dropped the young human to the ground. The girl, who couldn't have been a day over twenty, looked up at Brianna and William with fear in her eyes. Her skimpy skirt and halter top were disheveled from the fracas and her hair was wildly out of place. William squatted in front of the girl.

"I take it you're Sasha," He said in calm measured tones.

The girl nodded.

"Hello Sasha," William said, offering his hand. "I'm Caleb's father. William. This is his Mother, Brianna. We're looking for him."

Sasha looked suspiciously at William for a moment before taking his hand. He helped the girl to her feet and gave her a moment to straighten her clothes before he spoke again.

"Do you know where our son is, Sasha?"

"No," she muttered as she shook her head. "He said the Cult was coming for him and he was going to lay low. He wanted me to meet him in America in two weeks. He left money for my ticket and visa."

William hung his head. He didn't want to drag this poor girl into the shadows any deeper than Caleb already had. He'd have to remember to chastise the boy about wrecking the lives of innocent girls once they were all safely back in the States.

"Do you know where the cult meets?" William noticed her eyes go wide as he asked.

"I think they might know," Brianna said, pointing to the nearby rooftops.

Brianna, Sasha, and William looked up to see thirty well armed men and women standing on the surrounding roofs. William smirked.

"Leave one awake enough to question," he said as he swept Sasha up with one arm. "You stay right here, and try not to flail around too much. I'll keep you safe."

Brianna and William dropped into fighting stances as the cultists dropped from the rooftops. They were outnumbered fifteen to one and their attackers had swords, knives and pitchforks. William held Sasha tight and balled his free hand into a fist.

"Let's do this," He said, swinging at the nearest cultist.

Brianna rolled her eyes as she engaged five of the assailants. Though she would never admit it, she did find it somewhat cute that William had such a gung-ho mentality. He had always loved a good brawl. Brianna was never violent unless it was necessary, and she gained no actual pleasure from hurting people. Still, she was

hardly a saint and had no qualms about doing what she had to in order to survive.

Bones shattered and discarded weapons bounced off of walls. In a matter of seconds Brianna, William, and Sasha stood amid twenty nine wounded and unconscious cultists. Brianna had slightly begun to sweat, though William showed no sign of fatigue. Sasha looked over the scene with wide eyed shock.

The thirtieth attacker was at Brianna's feet. Though still awake, both of his arms and legs had been broken. The bones poked through his flesh and he writhed on his back in pain. William shook his head as he looked at the helpless cultist.

"How the hell are we supposed to question him now?"

"Do you always have to criticize me," Brianna replied with a scowl.

"Well he looks like he's in shock," William said. "We won't be able to get any information if he's in shock."

Sasha looked at the two immortals bickering like an old married couple and took the opportunity to stand there dumbfounded.

"Fine," Brianna sighed. "I'll heal his wounds if it will keep you from nagging."

"I wasn't nagging," William said under his breath as Brianna knelt to heal their hostage. A few moments later, the man's bones had set back into place and he was no longer in mind numbing agony. Once he had healed Brianna lifted him off the ground and seized his wrist.

"Hello, you piece of shit," she began. "I am Brianna. Archmaster of the Order of Ouroboros, First among Elves, and the very angry mother of the boy your master has kidnapped. I can break and heal every bone in your body in succession from largest to smallest, I can repeat the process indefinitely, and I can quite likely keep you awake and aware the entire time."

With a twist, Brianna shattered the cultist's wrist.

"Where's my son?"

***

Brianna, William and Sasha stood at the south wall of Prejmer fortress. Despite William's loud and lengthy objections, Brianna allowed Sasha to come along. Once Sasha snapped out of her shock and stopped vomiting, she had professed her love for Caleb and her desire to help in any way she could. Brianna was willing to give her that chance. William suspected that Brianna felt guilty about nearly killing the girl and was trying to make up for it, though he couldn't quite fathom her reasoning.

"This is it," Sasha said in English as they looked up at the looming fortress. "Prejmer fortress. It was one of the many fortresses used for national defense in the middle ages. It's not the largest, but it has a complex series of dungeons and underground tunnels behind the outer wall. The entrance that the cultist mentioned should be right behind this wall."

William scowled as he looked at the massive cross that stabbed into the night sky atop the pinnacle of the central church steeple. Though not a practicing Christian, William was sickened by the thought of demons using holy ground as a staging point for their cult activities. Unfortunately the occurrence was all too common.

"We'll scale the wall and head down into the caves," Brianna said. "I want you in the rear, Sasha. William and I will protect you."

"What if something comes up behind us," Sasha asked.

"Scream," Brianna said as she began climbing the wall.

William chuckled and turned his back to Sasha, leaning down low enough for her to climb onto him.

"You gotta love her," William said as they began their climb.

Once over the exterior wall, the trio spotted the guard shack that their unfortunate informant had described. Though she was most certain that a trap lay behind this entrance Brianna moved forward with resolve.

Brianna led the party into the guard shack. Just as they had been told there was a stone staircase that descended into the earth from inside the shack. The stairs were devoid of torches, though it was a simple matter for Brianna to summon magical light. Illuminated by a floating sphere of energy, the group walked deeper and deeper into the earth. To Sasha it seemed like they had walked forever when the end of the stairs finally came into view.

The stairway opened directly into a large clearing. The walls of the clearing were painted with various demonic symbols. Twisted icons of creatures long forgotten to this world hung from stalactites at seemingly random intervals. Torches hung on the walls here every thirty feet and a large group had assembled in the clearing. At the front of the group was an old man. His garb indicated that he was some manner of priest.

"Hold," The old man shouted as Brianna, William, and Sasha stepped into the clearing.

"I am Tio Bercu, High Priest of the Cult of Veles! I demand you abort this sad attempt at attacking our lord and master and surrender immediately."

William looked over at Brianna with his trademark smirk. He then bowed his head to the High Priest and spoke softly.

"We accept your gracious offer and surrender."

The High Priest was taken aback. He cocked his head to the side.

"Really?"

"Hell no," William said as he stepped slowly toward the crowd. "But since you were kind enough to offer, I'll offer you the same. Surrender now and I won't cripple you."

"Seize them," Bercu shouted.

The assembled cultists rushed toward the would-be interlopers. Large sacrificial daggers were drawn as the cultists closed in. When the crowd was about five meters from William, Brianna held out her hand, summoning the Rod of L'Un. The mighty artifact appeared in her hand and she raised it to the sky.

"You may wish to stand back," Brianna said to Sasha as her eyes began to glow.

As the mob reached William, Brianna shot a powerful beam of energy from the Rod of L'Un. Each cultist that came into contact with the beam was suddenly turned into a newt. William took the dagger from the hand of the first cultist to reach him and began cutting limbs off of the advancing mob. With Brianna cursing the cultists in the back and William maiming the cultists in the front it wasn't long until the chamber was littered with crippled cultists and very confused but entirely harmless amphibians.

Tio Bercu, High Priest of the Cult of Veles watched as his small army was decimated by the invaders. Upon realizing that he would likely share the same fate, he audibly vacated his bowels. Falling to his knees, Bercu began to beg.

"Show mercy," He screamed. "I will guide you to your son! Please! I will do anything!"

Brianna walked past William and stepped on the High Priest's head, forcing his face to the earth. She took the time to grind his cheek with her heel before she spoke.

"Where is my son?"

"The dungeon," Bercu shouted. "He's chained to a wall about a hundred and fifty meters down the south hall. He is unharmed!"

"Thanks," Brianna said as she kicked Bercu in the face. His jaw shattered and his nose broke, but he would live. Brianna began down the hall.

William and Sasha ran to catch up. Once he was beside Brianna, William tuned to face her with concern in his voice.

"Don't you think that was a bit much," He asked.

"Bercu was a shit-stained infernalist. I only spared him because if I kill him he'll quite likely return as a Hellspawn."

"Not Bercu," William said. "Bercu kind of deserved that, but the cultists? You turned them into baby lizards."

"Newts," Brianna corrected.

"Fine, you turned them into newts. A little harsh don't you think?"

"Would you rather I killed them," Brianna asked.

"Point taken."

***

Brianna, Sasha, and William walked into the dungeon. The room was small and sparse, about five meters to a side, with only manacles hanging from the

walls and a guard's desk next to the door. As the trio entered, the guard rose to his feet, leveling a crossbow. With lightning speed, Brianna grabbed the guard's arm, breaking it as she turned the crossbow to point at the guard's shoulder. Releasing the bolt, she pinned him to the wall.

"Caleb," Brianna said as she spotted her son. He was chained to the far wall and looked malnourished and beaten. Brianna rushed to his side and began removing the chains.

"Mother," Caleb said as Brianna helped him down. "Mother, you shouldn't have come. They took my blood."

Tears welled in Brianna's eyes as she spoke. "That doesn't matter now. We're going to get you out of here."

Sasha ran over to help Brianna with Caleb. William stood in the doorway, watching for more guards.

"You don't understand," Caleb said. His voice quivered with weakness. "They used my blood in the ritual."

William flew across the room, his flailing body slamming his companions into the wall. His chest was smoldering and his ribs had collapsed. The force of the blow knocked Sasha unconscious. Caleb hit his head on the wall and began bleeding. Brianna climbed out from under her incapacitated companions and rose to her feet, the Rod of L'Un glowing in her hand.

In the doorway stood Veles of the Mastim. He looked like a normal human. Well dressed in a tailored suit and polite in manner, there was no outward sign of his true nature. Brianna wasn't even certain how she recognized him for what he was. Perhaps he simply wanted her to know.

"Well done, Magus," Veles said with an unsettling grin. "You managed to fight your way here with all of the clumsiness and bravado I have come to expect from your sort. Of course, you damaged my network of earthly resources, which annoys me all to hell, but it was amusing to watch."

"Maybe you should be a bit pickier about your followers," Brianna said. "Yokels with daggers are hardly what I would call a threat."

"Too true," Veles said as he adjusted his tie. "What can you do though, you know? I was stuck in the pit, until your boy made his gracious donation. It's hard to do proper recruiting from the depths of Hell."

"I imagine it is." As Brianna spoke she banished the Rod, sending it back to her home. Veles raised an eyebrow at his opponent as her weapon disappeared.

"That stick of yours may have been your only chance," Veles said as he took a step closer.

"True," Brianna replied. "I don't think I'll need it though. You're going to let me walk out of here with my family and the girl. We aren't going to fight today."

"Why on earth would I do that?" As Veles spoke his skin hardened. Fangs and claws burst forth and burnt bat wings extended from his back.

Unimpressed, Brianna met his eyes.

"Because you're too smart to waste a good opportunity," Brianna said. "We walk out of here unharmed and you're still on earth, free to go about your business. You make your fight now, you'll probably kill us, but I guarantee we'll kill you. No one wins."

Veles rubbed his chin with a jagged claw. Brianna could see the bloodlust in his eyes. After brief consideration, Veles retook his human guise. Straightening his suit, he smiled.

"Done deal," He said as he extended his hand to the door. "Take your loved ones and go."

Brianna turned and roused William. With great effort the vampire rose to his feet and lifted Sasha over his shoulder. Brianna helped her son to his feet. Caleb was immobile but aware of his surroundings.

"I can't walk," Caleb said. "Too much pain."

"It's okay," Brianna replied. "I've got you."

"Mother," Caleb spoke in tired, hushed tones. "You can't just walk away. You can't let that thing walk the earth."

"You're my son and I love you, Caleb. I'll keep you safe. The world's just going to have to figure out another way to take care of Veles."

Bruised and battered but alive, Brianna, Caleb, Sasha, and William made their exit.

## Anthony Andora

Anthony Andora graduated with honors from UCLA with a B.A. in English last June. This starry-eyed and strapping young man has read comics for more than half his life but can boast of having read more non-comic books than a fanboy can shake his toy lightsaber at. Dreaming of a future in creative writing--before the inevitable slap of reality directs him towards a more practical existence--Anthony considers writing for comic books his calling.



# Chris Delloiacono

Chris Delloiacono was born in Rahway, NJ in 1973. He has lived in Clark, NJ his entire life. Chris is one of those people that always find themselves back in school. Currently, he holds degrees in Telecommunications, Management Science, and has twin teaching certifications in Elementary Education and Social Studies. Chris made his way to the world of teaching via a long route of unhappiness at various professions. Chris has worked as a janitor, retail manager, director of marketing for a major market research firm, and served as a courier with Federal Express. He's proof positive that if you look hard enough you will eventually find your calling in life.

Chris has been a staff writer and editor for the website www.ComicsNexus.com (formerly 411Mania Comics) for nearly three years. In his time with the website, he has written nearly three-hundred reviews, interviewed more than a dozen comic creators, and worked on two regular



columns. Chris's reviews have been quoted in a variety of publications (including Wizard Magazine) and various company press releases.

Chris has no other professional writing credits at this time. He does have three comic book projects in the works and, with any luck, they will see publication in 2006. Chris can attest to the very strange medium that comics are at the moment. There may never have been as many quality books available to the public, yet there are fewer readers than ever buying in the shops. In fact, it seems like more people are writing comics than buying them these days.

Chris's dream is to balance professional writing with a career in teaching.

## C.T. Gerow

I was born in Ottawa, Canada, in May 1970. A lot's happened since then, most recently this story, which I'm hoping you like.

I've written for Comics, TV, Film, Games and Ads over the years



with varying minor success. I've also been a Carney, a Roadie, and a Bartender to name some of the more interesting jobs.

I've been lucky enough to travel a lot of the world, through much of Canada and the States, Europe and even as far away as Thailand…and I intend to see more.

I now live in London England with my girlfriend, Erin, who is far too beautiful and talented to be hanging out with a chump like me.

I want to dedicate this to all my friends and family who have supported me over the years but there's a few who deserve special recognition.

My parents, who never dissuaded me from a creative life despite knowing, firsthand, the pitfalls I'd face. They taught me that some people just have to pursue their dream and live an unconventional life.

To Tim who's been a friend, mentor, and partner in crime.

To Kim who never quite understood but always backed me up and cheered me on.

And to Erin who helps me see the value of it all.

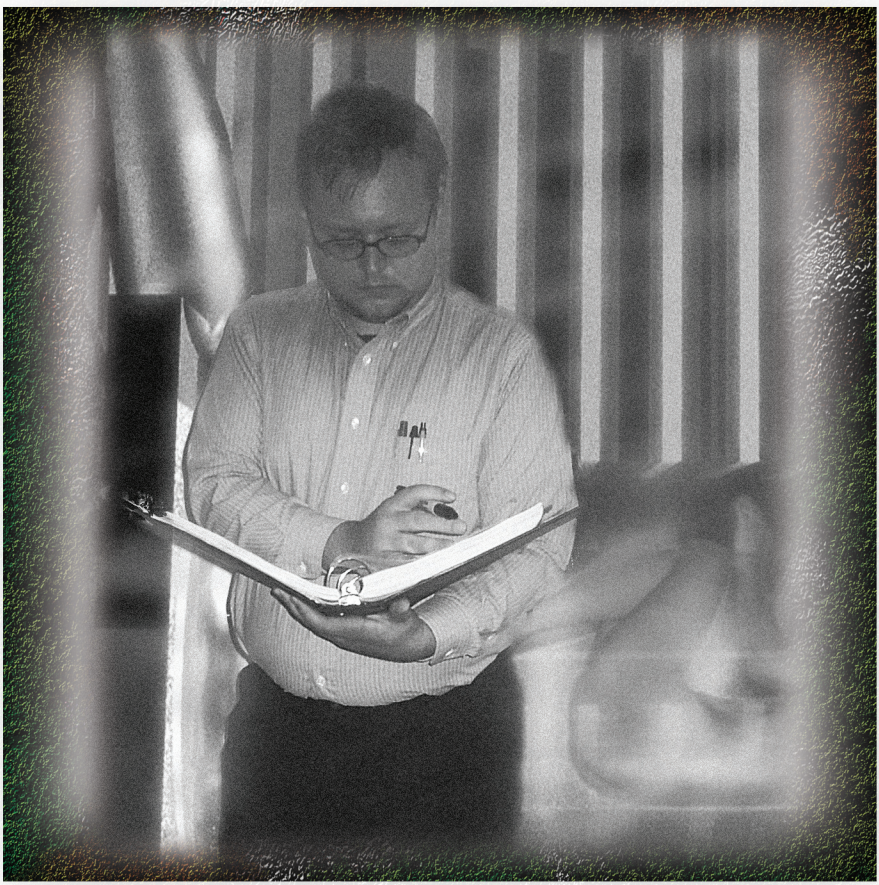
I hope you enjoy the story and I hope you'll soon find me for more.

## Travis Legge

Travis Legge is a writer, father, and game developer. He lives in Loves Park, IL with his beautiful and supportive fiancée Jayme and two of his three offspring (though the third comes over a lot). Travis has wanted to be a writer since reading the "Daredevil/Punisher: Child's Play" storyline by Frank Miller at age 8 (or was it 9? lousy memory…). Travis's published works include several **Contagion** sourcebooks, The sometimes monthly webcomic Paco the Illegal Alien, The Sorrow (benefiting the National Association to Protect Children www.protect.org) and his monthly web column What Do I Know? which can be read at www.unleashedpublications.com During the final stages of preparation for this anthology, he lost his father, who, in his opinion, was the greatest human being ever to walk the earth (okay, except for Jesus, but Dad was a close second).

I love you Dad, this one is for you.

If you wish to contact Travis Legge, his email address is trey.legge@aegisstudios.net



# Kenneth Mack

Kenneth Mack was born in Brooklyn, NY on September 16th 1972. He started collecting comics when his mother bought him his first comic book in 1979. Fascinated by superheroes and science fiction, he became intrigued by the storytelling elements. Growing up, Kenneth would collect comics by artists and writers such as John Byrne, Chris Claremont, Marv Wolfman & George Perez to name a few. He was also a fan of movies; action/adventure, sci-fi. Movies like Star Wars, Alien, and Blade Runner to name a few. Anything that had a strong story arc, he was interested. In his early teenage years, he started writing poetry and short stories. It was then that he discovered Anime (Japanese Animation) where complex story arcs were developed into high levels of action and sometimes suspense. His favorite Anime/Manga artists and filmmakers are Yoshiaki Kawajiri (Cyber City Oedo 808, Vampire Hunter D); Masamune Shirow (Appleseed, Ghost In the



Shell); Katsuhiro Otomo (Akira, Steamboy); Gainex (Neon Genesis Evangelion); Shinichiro Watanabe (Cowboy Bebop). At seventeen he attended Hunter College where he majored in Psychology. His life was changed when his mother passed on in 1993 causing him to care for his younger sister; his dream was put on hold for a few years.

He went on to work on Wall Street in the IT industry for companies such as Dresdner Bank and Goldman Sachs & Co. It wasn't until after 9/11 that Kenneth's career began to decline due to the extenuating circumstances. He went on to try writing again but was missing a "spark" so to speak. It was two years ago that he met aspiring artist John Ruiz who was trying on his own to get into the comic book industry. The two had a lot in common and immediately started collaborating together on small projects to break into the industry. Their upcoming projects, Ebony Samurai: a graphic novel/cartoon with influences from Kill Bill to The Princess Blade and various other Japanese Samurai movies. Teddee Bear: a gritty, adult story about a large man who decides to make a difference in himself and the city he lives in and in doing so becomes a hero and a savior. Big Wolf Studios Anthology: Collection of the artist and writers collaborations together from early stages of Ebony Samurai to comic strips. The release is slated for Mid September and November of this year.

Kenneth now resides in upstate NY in North Country with his sister Michelle and nephew Tyler.

## MaGnUs

MaGnUs came to scourge this dimension on February 16, 1980, emerging in New York City, USA, and was legally registered as Martín Alberto Pérez Carrara. His years in the USA have left him with English as one of his mother tongues, the other one being Spanish, which he has spoken on daily basis since moving to Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1985. He defines himself as a nerd and a freak, and even if he doesn't wear thick glasses and he's not a virgin, he's still deeply nerdy. Due to work reasons his freakish appearance must remain subdued most of the time, but he's still, inside, as much of a freak as if his hair was blue and his tattoo not covered by clothing.

From a very young age he showed an interest in many subjects: dinosaurs and animals in general, space, robots, medieval knights, superheroes, and anything that allowed him to use his hyperactive imagination. Beyond his scribbled drawings and the crafts proper of his preschool and early school years, already at the age of 3 or 4 he was making up stories, forcing his mother to draw or cut and paste images of He-Man and friends, and to write down the stories he dictated to her. The good lady probably did an editor's job to make sure the little brat's stories made any sense.

However, his real career as an artistic tormentor of humanity started when he was 9 or 10 years old, writing a fantasy story in his summer vacation. His writing continued, intermittently (out of guilt, perhaps?), until he was 19, age at which it became more frequent, probably because he'd lost compassion for humanity.

The genre of his stories varies between crime, science fiction and fantasy, usually with a good dose of humor, and there's almost always at least one death in his stories (not always, but…). Besides short stories, he also writes articles, role playing materials, comic scripts, radio plays, and whatever fancies his slightly insane mind. He also does some graphic design (posters, logos, film props and scenery), and co-produces/co-hosts a radio show about comics, sci-fi and the like, Perdidos en el Eter (Lost in Ether). All these creative activities have been gathered under the figurative roof of Studio Robota, the arts and design collective he founded together with Endriago, his partner in crime.



He's also an active part of Uruguay's local fan scene, being one of the creators of Montevideo Comics, the comic/scifi/rpg/etc convention held yearly since 2002 (only one of it's kind in the country), and one of the founders of Caballeros de Montevideo (Knights of Montevideo), which holds role playing events in which charity donations are gathered.

For the time being, none of these undertakings report any financial income to MaGnUs, or at least not even remotely enough to live from them. He earns money to pay bills as a public employee, more specifically as policeman in the administrative branch of the national police department. Armed with a keyboard and a mouse, and shielded by a desk, he fights petty delinquency and organized crime, one bureaucratic file at a time.

All these creative tasks are reflections of his own hobbies, as well as others he doesn't attempt to practice out whatever wisps of mercy for the human race he still has, such as music. He's happily (no, no sarcasm there) married to his wife Cindy, and has a son, Gabriel Alberto (almost one year old), who already chooses Spider-Man over Mickey Mouse, and laughs at his father's Darth Vader impersonations. MaGnUs, incidentally, drools like a madman with pride over his child. Lastly, and to quote Michael Stackpole, MaGnUs is completely, and utterly bored of writing about himself in the third person…
Ifyou want to complain about the psychological damage his writing caused you, just drop a line at magnus@montevideo.com.uy.

## Royal McGraw

Royal McGraw grew up in Athens, Georgia. His first taste of fame came at an early age when he was selected to appear as a background dancer for the REM video "Shiny Happy People" and paid the princely sum of 150 dollars for his efforts. If you look closely, you can see Royal standing just to the right of Michael Stipe wearing a red YMCA Tee Shirt and Coke bottle glasses.

Since growing up, Royal has at one time or another worked as a legal assistant, host, retail sales associate, casting assistant, television extra, graphic designer, character assassin, film compositor, and gentleman of leisure. He has one testicle, no pets, a garage overflowing with books, and degrees in Cinema-Television Production and Filmic Writing from the University of Southern California.

Now settled permanently in Los Angeles, Royal pursues a career in film and television writing and, in his spare time, composes works for comic books and the printed page. The novella presented in this anthology is one of his first experiments in the short story format and he hopes he will get the opportunity to write more prose in the future.

If you would like to meet Royal in person, you might check out A Sounds
Eclectic Evening presented by local Los Angeles radio station KCRW as he is there every year standing by the open bar and getting pleasantly drunk in the company of beautiful people.



## Vernon A. McGuffee II

Vernon "Bo" McGuffee was born in 1969 in mid-Illinois. The sci-fi/fantasy genre has always been a pull for him, especially after being exposed to the *Lord of the Rings* book series and the movie *Star Wars.* His interest in the horror genre developed much later with the introduction of the movie version of *Interview with a Vampire.*

An aspiring writer/artist on the side, his primary passion is religion and

spirituality. He received his M.A. in History from Eastern Illinois University in 1994 and M.Div. from the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in 2003. He currently serves a United Church of Christ congregation as an Interim Associate Pastor. Driven by an interest in everything "postmodern," his focus is in church development and redevelopment.



## Luke Pierce

Luke Pierce was born in April 1981 in Portsmouth, England to his father, Peter, a retired submariner in the British Royal Navy and his mother, Georgina, a care nurse. His younger brother, Peter Junior, followed in 1983 and is currently serving in the British Army as a member of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. (REME)

Soon after Peter was born, the family moved to Gibraltar and is where Luke began his education and formative years. As a result, he was well ahead of



his peers when returning to the UK in 1986, also being able to speak some Spanish at the time and having long since been forgotten. As a result, Luke never really developed a regional accent, yet has managed to keep a slight British twang to his voice. He likes to believe that it's like James Bond; but that's his own opinion.

His interest in writing first surfaced at the age of 14 when he managed to completely ignore an English assignment to re-write the final scene of Romeo and Juliet and instead turned in an entire play based upon the original in the same time-frame given to the students. From that point, he was ignited by the desire to learn more about the art and has written several comic scripts since 2001; a couple of which produced such a dramatic upsurge in quality after some pointers, it astounded the submissions editor. He also writes Western Manga and also attempts to illustrate it as well. His first illustrated work should be appearing in the forthcoming issue of *Futurequake: Mangaquake*.

Outside of writing and working as a full-time salesperson for a shoe company, Luke also is a qualified soccer referee and is regularly turning out on weekends to officiate on matches and has also gained a promotion in the last year which allows him to officiate at a higher grade of soccer. He also professes to love learning languages; currently trying to self-learn Japanese and Dutch and is able to talk tourist-level German.

*Touched* is the first short story to be published and is almost certainly his first attempt at writing a darker tone adventure. He will also freely admit that writing horror and building a tense story is an art mastered by only a few talented people. If you want to say hello, please feel free to email him.

Lukepie@yahoo.com

## Christopher J Pisano & Brian Kosciensk

Brian and Chris reside in south, central Pennsylvania where Brian is often chased by angry villagers wielding torches and pitchforks due to his uncanny resemblance to Sasquatch while Chris can often be found in newspapers and magazines under the headline "Cro-Magnon Man Found." Their obsession with writing is pretty thorough; their compositions range from stories to novels to articles to poetry. They even went so far as to start their own comic book publishing company called Fortress Publishing. Their main mission in life is to simply do what the screaming voices behind their eyeballs tell them to do.



## ssg

ssg has been writing off and on for longer than he sometimes cares to remember. He resides in the United States of America, and has lived in many locations within it. Writing being only one of many of his obsessive artistic distractions, he refers to himself as creatively compulsive, and is currently doing other stuff.

Some of his other work of various kinds can be seen elsewhere, if you look hard enough.



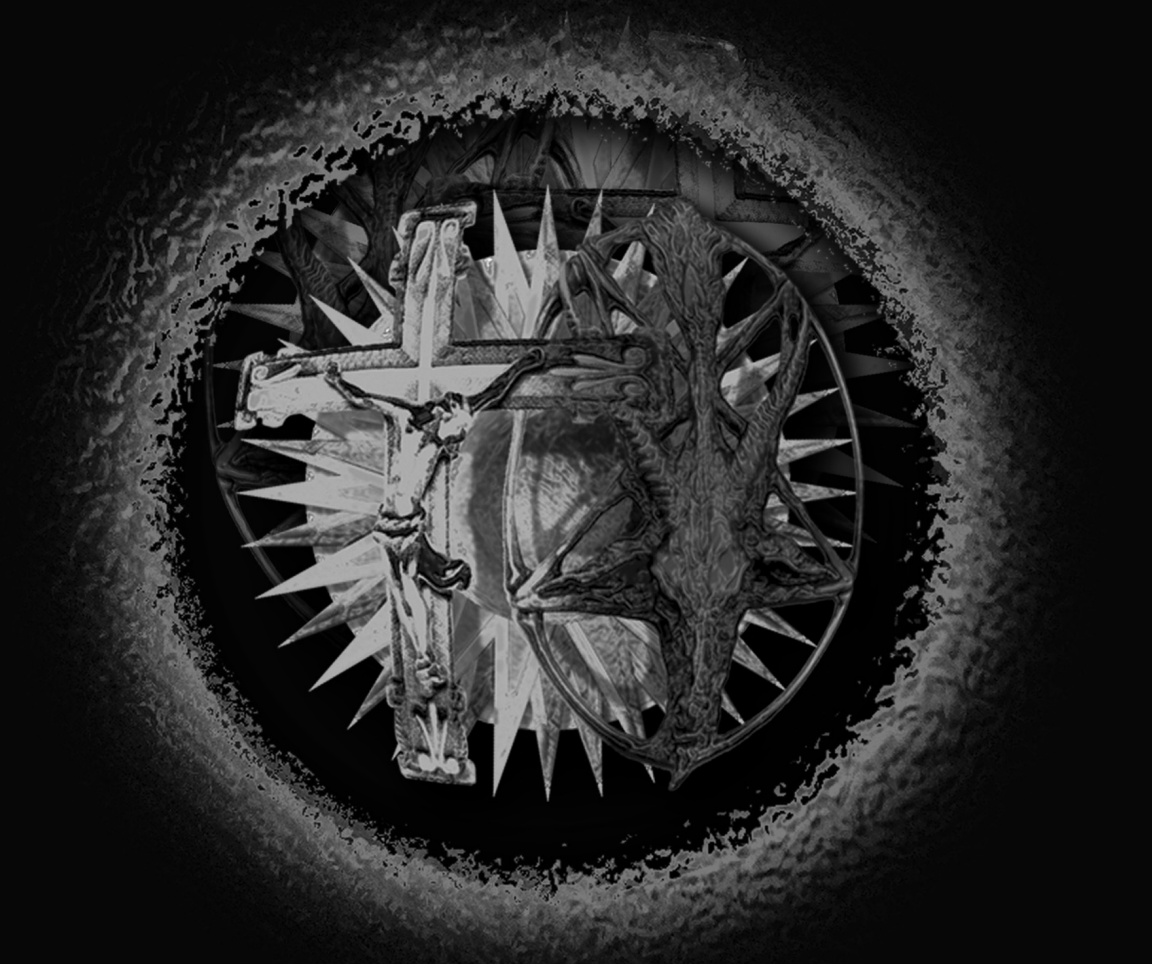
## Cathleen Stark

I was born and raised in San Francisco CA but now live with my husband in Rockford IL. I graduated from Rockford College with a BA in English in 1999.

I have been published in The Eclectic Screwdriver, and more recently in various Contagion Setting books. I also enjoy photography and ceramics.



# Revised Edition



# Coming in 2006