

Blood Red Pearls

Book Two of the Reconquista Saga



A Vampire: The Masquerade™ Fiction
Written by Tobie Abad

Blood Red Pearls

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Table of Illustrations

Magdalena Faraon

page 05

Rose

page 16

Ysmael Prieto

page 38

Kindred/Cainite Territories

page 107

All illustrations by Tobie Abad

Software used:

MS Office - Word

Adobe Illustrator

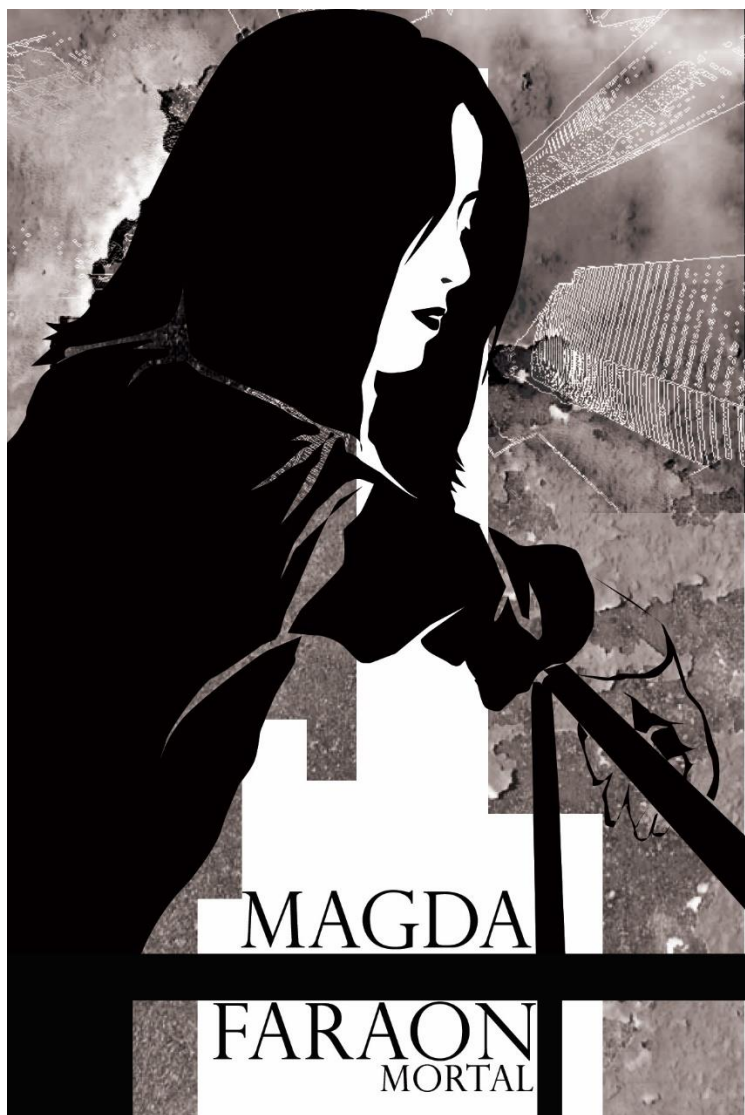
Adobe Photoshop

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Fear	06
Chapter Two: Opportunity	09
Chapter Three: Vicious	17
Chapter Four: Hunger Pangs	25
Chapter Five: The Maharlika	31
Chapter Six: Company	39
Chapter Seven: Sleeper	59
Chapter Eight: Echoes	75
Chapter Nine: Hiss	90

Other Contents

Lexicon	104
About the Novel	105
About the Author	106





“Can you imagine the feeling of being an oppressed colonial being addressed respectfully by a colonizer in the mother country?”

Ambeth R. Ocampo, *Rizal Without the Overcoat*

She had never seen a dead body before. While most have had the experience of losing a loved one – the passing of a grandparent, or the loss of a relative – Magdalena Faraon was not so lucky. Yes, lucky. While it might sound strange or even contradictory to call losing a loved one a lucky event in one’s life, the fact of the matter was this: being a close neighbor to death allowed one to gain some measure of composure and familiarity with it. Having experienced neither, Magda had no idea how to react.

The body hung upside down from the ceiling. Thick
Blood Red Pearls

heavy chains were wrapped around his legs and suspended him from the rafters. His throat was slashed open and a violent spray of blood surged out in time to his dying heartbeat, splattering all over the walls. A figure lay naked underneath the hanging man. Her body was dark, like midnight, and the blood made her body glisten and shine. She ran her soiled hands against her skin, rubbing the blood deep into every fold. It made Magda think of how she would moisturize her skin after a bath.

Figures moved from the shadows. Magda saw them emerge from behind her, walking past her without a sound. They were men and they were naked. Their bodies betrayed the excitement and lust they felt. Magda took a step back into a wall she did not know was behind her. She pressed against it as she saw the men reach the bloodied woman and, like feral cats, begin licking her clean with their tongues. The woman moaned in pleasure as sparks of sensual bliss shot through her system. Magda was certain now this had to be a dream of some sort.

It had to be.

“*Sige lang, sige lang...*” the bloodied woman hissed as she guided the men to every nook and hidden fold of her body, “Lick it all, my darlings. Lick all the blood up.” One of the men got a bit more aggressive and pulled the woman off the ground as he shoved his face between her thighs. The bloodied woman clamped her legs around his head, gasping as she arched her back from the spasms of pleasure that coursed up and down her spine. She rode him, with one hand clutching his hair while the other

reached up for the body suspended on the rafters. She grabbed the corpse's head and tugged at it, unclogging the severed throat to allow another hot shower of blood to pour on them.

“*Dios ko,*” Magda gasped, “Wake me up. Please wake me up from this dream.”

The bloodied woman suddenly turned towards Magda and smiled. Magda screamed as she saw the woman's ivory fangs glistening against the red-black blood.

But she couldn't wake up.



“One only dies once, and if one does not die well, a good opportunity is lost and will not present itself again.”

Jose Rizal

The shock of pain and hunger woke Lazaro Gaspar from his slumber. Sometime ago last night, his injuries had brought him to the ground. While he had some knowledge of the supernatural endurance of the Ventrue which the Tremere have codified and labeled as Fortitude, the ghouls that roughened him up did have the blessings of vitae that granted them preternatural strength. There were many broken bones that were to cost him precious blood to rebuild.

The betrayal he had seemingly befallen from Binks' act of treachery was still sore in his mind. He thought his friend was

bringing him to the Prince of Parañaque, only to discover he instead had delivered him to the Archbishop of the said city. Then again, Binks did say that was “Exactly,” what he was doing. What that meant however, was unclear.

Looking around, Lazaro realized the chamber he was in was no longer the same one where he had been beaten up before the Archbishop. He was now in some kind of back room filled with cardboard boxes that had been unfolded and scattered all over the floor. The walls were covered with egg crates, which made him quick realize these and the boards on the floor were attempts to soundproof the room.

“Guess you stumbled into her show,” a rough voice spoke from the dark. Lazaro scanned the area but could not make out a face. He sensed there was someone there. But he seemed to be able to conceal his presence from the Ventrue.

“Opportunity,” Lazaro muttered as he started to understand. Binks did intentionally do this.

“Opportunity?” the voice asked.

“How long as the Sabbat been in charge here,” Lazaro pulled his knees up to his chest, hugging one arm around them. What he didn’t admit was he moved to a defensive posture. If the speaker attempted to attack, he could at least lean back and kick hard forwards, to buy himself time. “I take it that’s why you are here too.”

“Aba, why would I be important?” the voice quizzed.

“Because you are the Prince of the City of Parañaque,”

Lazaro tensed, ready to move in case he was wrong. Thankfully, his gamble paid off. Coming into view, the second figure allowed the darkness to cease concealing him. The man stood a good six foot three, with a barrel chest and a squarish head. His skin was dark and blemished with a generous presence of warts around the neck. Thick brows framed his piercing eyes. He wore a demin jacket over a brown long-sleeved shirt. The holster of a gun peered out from under the jacket's side.

Lazaro had met many Kindred in the past, but those encounters were mostly in North America. A few chance encounters were in Europe, during a rare instance when he was given the chance to attend a Conclave. But here in Manila, it was harder to tell what clan the man was.

"I am not," the man replied, "Or rather, I am no longer the Prince of Parañaque. But I have served her in the past. In some ways it was I who guided her to the point that she was recognized as a city."

"1998," Lazaro offered.

"You've done your homework," the man nodded, "But not quite enough--"

"Nogales," Lazaro paused, waiting for a reaction. The man slowly began to smile. Lazaro realized he was right. "Your name is Casimiro Nogales. You were the Malkavian based here in Parañaque since the early '70s. Even back then, you already believed the area would one day be developed enough to gain the status of a city. The Ventrue know of you, my Prince, and--"

“I am not the Prince,” It was Nogales’ turn this time to interrupt the other. He helped Lazaro up to his feet and guided him to a monobloc chair. The brittle hard plastic strained slightly against Lazaro’s frame. Lazaro began channeling just enough of his vitae to repair the shattered bones. He knew he had to carefully manage the amount of blood he was spending.

“Because the Archbishop is in charge?” Lazaro asked.

“No, because the another rightfully gained the title of Prince from me. I had stepped down a few years back. I had needed time to handle other affairs.”

“And the other?”

“Sienna Mara,” Nogales replied.

“The Archbishop.”

“Yes. And No,” Nogales admitted.

“Why am I not surprised,” Lazaro rolled his eyes as he replied, “Let me guess. She has two identities?”

“Seven,” Nogales corrected him. Ignoring Lazaro’s scowl, he continued, “You likely have meet three of them. Her loyal companions: the Monkey, the tall Turtle, and the Bird, are her common projections. But she has others. And *Ate Shena*-“

“The Archbishop,” Lazaro confirmed.

“Yes, she is the current dominant one. Sienna Mara is the real identity behind them all. She and I go way back,” Nogales explained. “She too used to live here at Parañaque with me.”

“Listen,” Lazaro groaned as he felt the last rib pop back into place. “I am happy to reconnect with you, but I don’t think

this is the best place to have our conversation.”

“I’m afraid this will have to do,” Shena’s voice replied and Lazaro instinctively hobbled to Nogales’ side as if to shield him. Nogales caught the Bellator from falling.

“She’s with us,” he explained.

“What?” Lazaro spat out, “But you just said she’s-“

“Sienna,” Shena calmly replied, “Sienna Mara, if you prefer... Shena and the others will not be active for a few minutes. It isn’t long but it should be enough.”

“This is bullshit,” Lazaro shook his head, “This is just a ploy to get me to talk or something. Nogales?”

“She isn’t lying. It took a combined effort, to be honest. Her Auspex. My Domination. We worked in concert to create a post-hypnotic suggestion which, when triggered, had all the other personalities focus on having a *siesta*,” Nogales tried to reassure Lazaro.

Lazaro stared at Shena. She looked exactly the same as the Archbishop, down to the un-made face, missing eyebrows, and the black velvet sack. He looked more carefully and quickly began to see the tiny details most would overlook. Sienna favored her other foot to carry her weight, despite the velvet sack. She also had her face in a smirk, as if she couldn’t help but be amused at the predicament they were in. Auspex was the psychic ability that some Kindred had. It allowed them the ability to perceive auras, to read minds, and in some cases, if the Tremere documentation is to be believed, the ability to leave the body and

act like a spirit. Dominate, on the other hand, was the ability of the Kindred to sway the weak-willed. The Jedi Mind trick that the children of Caine were able to do. Lazaro could see how the two powers, if such a thing could really be done, would contribute to some kind of subconscious key word. Perhaps it was something elders could do.

“You stand before the Prince of Parañaque,” Nogales beamed, “Contested as it may be. May this lead to us recovering the city for the *Oripun*! For the Camarilla!”

*

Bonifacio Global City Philippines

Binks sat in his car, worried over the events of the previous night. He wondered if Lazaro would ever forgive him for bringing him to the Archbishop. Somehow, he knew the Ventrue could expect some form of “lextalionis” and probably demand a chance to beat him up in return. Binks as much as possible was an independent and claimed to favor neither the *Maharlika*s nor the *Oripun*. But one thing he could not deny was that it was the *Oripun*, or rather, the Camarilla, that had given him a second chance. And with the Sabbath slowly gaining a stronger foothold in the country, Binks was not ready for a country where unexplained murders would be waved away as everyday normal extra-judicial killings.

When Nogales was aware that one of Sienna Mara's personalities had begun to embrace the Sabbat rhetoric, the then Prince new preparations had to be made to deal with the impending fallout. Nogales and Sienna worked on a unique form of Conditioning that would remain embedded in Sienna's psyche. Binks was given the keyword to help trigger Sienna's resurfacing whenever a Camarilla visitor would come by.

"Opportunity," Binks grumbled, "I fucking hope the opportunity worked." It was the first time for him to use it. The many years that passed without any Camarilla visitors plainly reflected how unimportant most of the Camarilla viewed the Philippines.

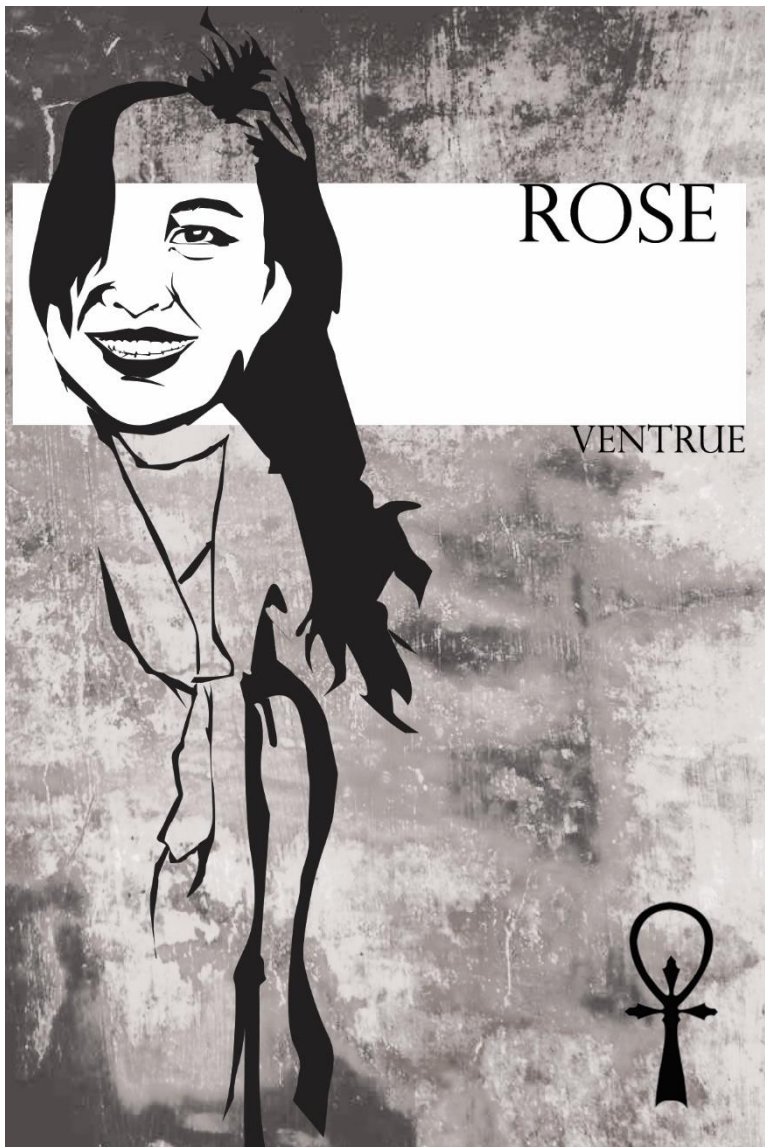
A couple stumbled out of the bar, and like in the many other nights before, it was another couple that had a bit more than they should have that night. Binks wasn't feeling to hungry and so he reached out and switched off his lights. The couple looked around, hoping to find a cab they could take.

Binks left them to wait for the next few hours.

A chirp.

Binks sat up and stared at the message. He closed his eyes and felt the surge of relief quickly flow over him. The message was from Lazaro. He was alive. The message said:

"Time to talk."





“When no one understands, that’s usually a good sign that you’re wrong.”

Victoria Schwab, *Vicious*

Dor stared at his reflection in the mirror. He pressed both hands against his face and remembered how that same face was once the face adored by thousands. He stared at his high cheekbones and his broken nose and remembered how he hated their permanence years back when his embrace was first granted. There was perfection expected from the nose. Its arch and its angle were instrumental in a person’s attractiveness. One single degree off and the features of a person can completely change.

The night before his embrace, Dor found himself in a fight over funding with his patron. The man had withdrawn their

support and accused Dor, then still known by another name, of having created a work that made a mockery of them. Terrified and frightened, the artist ran away and would eventually find himself standing before his Sire. The gift of immortality would be offered. And Dor would realize how much opportunity lay in the future.

“One thousand nine hundred thirty videos,” Dor snarled at his own reflection then turned to walk towards the laptop set on a side table. “And over a million subscribers. Has the world gone sick while I was focused on the intricacies of color and composition? Have we sunk into another depression? Why on this god forsaken planet has a glorified snuff porn star garnered far more followers than a living icon of modern art?”

Tuesday quietly waited by the door. He knew better than to actually answer any of Dor’s questions. When Dor had these outbursts, the best course of action was to merely nod when you were regarded and remain nonexistent until then.

“Did Salvador Dali ever feel this unappreciated? Was Jackson Pollock ever ignored in this manner? Picasso, Matisse, Monet, Duchamp... we Masters deserve to be given our pedestal. How dare this pedestrian performance artist find a grander audience than me!” Dor flung the laptop across the room. The device shattered against the tiled wall, spilling its metal and plastic fragments across the floor. The glass shards danced against the porcelain tiles.

“You,” Dor growled at Tuesday, who quickly gave a

small bow and walked towards Dor to show he had heard him. Someday, someone will perhaps commend him for his fearless display of service. That was not, however, happening today. “I want you to call the rest. I know what day it is. But I do not care. Call the remaining six. I need my retainers.”

“Yes, Dor,” Tuesday bowed and hurried for the door.

“You all disgust me,” Dor screeched and stomped out of the room. His feet pounded over the debris of the laptop, but none of them broke his skin. He slammed the door behind him and nakedly walked down the carpeted living room. Around him, various portraits stared back. They were not Dor’s usual creations of monotone mastery. They were vividly colored oil paintings of faces he once knew. Friends. Family. His sire. A personal museum of those whom Dor once cared for and have long missed.

“All of you. How could you have all failed to show me I was... I need to... I should be the one with that huge a following! Not that horrible pathetic wench!”

Dor slammed a second door behind him as he left the living room and reached a dining hall. The windows, open to let the cool night air in, rattled as he walked across the room. His presence was a palpable cloud of energy in the room. Not that far away, the retainers hurried into the room. All seven of them identically dressed in their suits. They lined up nearby and waited for Dor to notice them.

Instead, they all noticed the music that burst into the

room. It was Night on Bald Mountain, a classical piece by Mussorgsky-Korsakov version. On the screen of the nearby tablet, the image of Elle Woods emerged. The initials, “M.R.” were visible.

“The fucking bitch,’ Dor snatched the tablet from its silver platter and swiped it on. “Speak.”

The blonde visage of the Praetor Rose come into view. She did not look pleased. The sight of her sitting in the car explained why the signal had its choppy moments. Dor, however, found himself wondering where she was going.

“I’m outside your door,” Rose’s answer stunned Dor. He took a step back and slowly shook his head in disbelief. Surely the Ventrue was- “And I’m not lying. My car is waiting outside across from the entrance. I do not like being made to wait.”

The retainers ducked for cover as Dor screamed and flung the tablet across the room. The device shattered into a spectacular shower of broken pieces as it struck the wall. Dor’s world turned red as the Beast within roared in delight at the emotional wave that surged within the Toreador.

The last time Dor lost control of himself this way was when he first witnessed a full technicolored movie that featured the sun. It was some science fiction movie remake of an older work and it showcased a group of people who were drawn to the burning orb’s majesty. Dor could barely recall the story right now. What he could not, however, was how intense the feelings of anger and flight battled within him. In the past, it was flight

that won and he broke away from the theater with the aid of his vitae fueling his body, allowing him to flee from the place in an eyeblink. Today, it seemed anger would win the night.

But Dor was not one to allow circumstances to determine his fate. Even during the years of being ancillae, he fought against the conventions. He struggled against the expectations of the elders and harpies and showed them a young one such as himself can do far more than they thought. He boosted the popularity of the Clan's hunting ground and made it easier for the Toreador to feed in the area, he established a means of communication with a mortal cult that soon embraced them as their hidden masters, and even apprenticed under the most talented of their kind. Today's struggle against the beast was not to be any different. Dor will not let it win.

"Tuesday," he gasped, then tried again harder to enunciate the word. The servant nodded and walked forward; worried but eager to serve.

"I am here, Dor," Tuesday replied.

"Help me get ready," Dor sighed.

*

"Josie... Josie.. Josie," Rose sounded despondent as she stared at her cellular phone. On the screen, the dark playback of Josie on her show, *Susmarjosie*, was on pause. While dark and grainy, there was no denying it was pretty much a snuff film. The

man chained to the rafters had been murdered during the livestream and the thousands of viewers were none the wiser.

A knock against the window alerted Rose to Dor's presence. She looked up and saw the coat and tie of one of his retainers blocking the view. With a push, the window slid open and Tuesday peered from under the umbrella he held above him.

"Dor awaits the invitation," Tuesday declared.

"Oh, for fucks sake," Rose growled and kicked the car door open. She hopped backwards to give Dor room to step inside. Tuesday stepped aside, revealing Wednesday and Thursday holding matching umbrellas to shield Dor from the light rain. Dor was in a matching suit, only his was pure white and silver trimmed. Rose noticed the make-up on his face and immediately go the reference.

"Ziggy Stardust? Really?"

"Fuck off, Blueblood."

Rose's hand reached upwards so fast, it clamped around Dor's throat despite Dor's supernatural agility and perception. Perhaps he was too distracted by the Beast. Or perhaps he never really learned those Disciplines. What was certain was in that same moment, Rose shoved Dor into the car and pressed him against the back of the driver's seat. "I don't have time for your theatrics, Mark. And I am only here because you called me when this all began."

"She's... your... sister..." Dor growled. Tuesday and Wednesday tried to reach into the car to help him, but Rose

shoved the door closed before they could react.

“Yes, my sister. Josie was my sister when we were still alive. That was a relationship that long ended when we were Embraced.”

“What are you not telling me,” Rose growled. Dor felt her hand tighten around his throat. He tried to straighten up, but Rose kept the pressure against his neck, holding him off balance. Dor felt the Beast laughing. He could hear Tuesday and the others struggling to open the door. He could hear Rose breathing heavily.

And he realized she was afraid.

“Let me go,” Dor gasped, “allow me to sit... and we can talk properly.”

Rose pressed against Dor’s throat with enough strength that it would have choked a human. A fellow vampire, however, that did not need to breathe, would find it merely a painful inconvenience.

“We still need.. to breathe.. to talk.. so if you.. want answers..” Dor resisted the urge to merely use his intimidating presence to force Rose to cower back. He knew the young Praetor was lashing out because she didn’t know any better. It was that moment Dor realized what this was about. “It’s Lucinde.. isn’t it?”

“So, you **do** know!” Rose howled. Dor felt something snap in his neck. Painfully. That was enough. Like a low frequency rumble that grew into an explosive boom, Dor

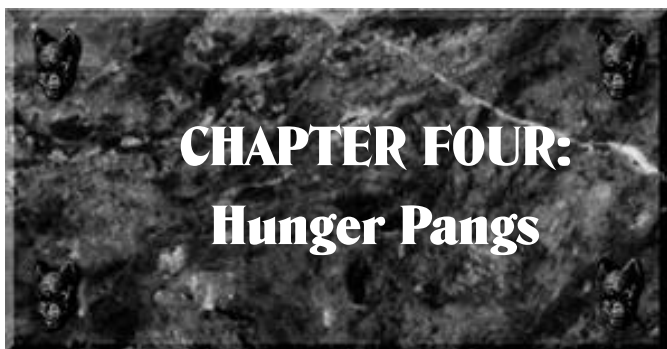
unleashed his full Majesty upon Rose. Even the driver who sat at the front of the seat could not resist the intensity of his presence. The driver stumbled out of the chair in tears. He backpedaled against the concrete so quickly that he scraped his hands bloody. Rose was struck down and reduced to act like a child. She shoved herself backwards against the cushions with her hands raised defensively over her face. She cowered in fear as her rage was obliterated by the force of his personality. She could barely utter a sound out of fear of displeasing him more.

“That’s better,” Dor calmly composed himself. Running both hands down his chest to pad his clothes down, he adjusted to sit down beside the cowering Praetor and motioned for her to open the door. She complied.

Tuesday and the rest could sense Dor had everything under control. They simply held the umbrella over the door, ready to serve their purpose as needed.

“So, tell me what has happened,” Dor flexed his neck a bit to find that offending point of pain. “Because darling, I really have no idea what you are bitching about.”

Rose wept and began to explain.



“My favorite animal is steak.”

Fran Lebowitz

Binks held Lazaro tight as they embraced, his feelings danced between shame and relief as he saw the Ventrue was still alive. Lazaro patted Binks’ arm to signal him to ease up on the hugs. He wasn’t fully recovered, after all. The two were at a small branch of Jollibee along Sucat road, close to the entrance of the South Super Highway. Not too far away, Nogales patiently waited at one table. A small plastic bag of yumburgers, French fries, and plastic cups of soda sat atop it. Nogales insisted ordering was necessary to keep the staff from nagging them about taking up table space.

“Shit man, I am so sorry,” Binks finally got the chance to apologize directly. The Malkavian wasn’t sure if Lazaro would even give him a chance to explain. As it turned out, he didn’t need to.

“Cas explained to me everything about-” he hesitated and looked around to see if anyone was eavesdropping. No one seemed to care they were talking aloud. “... about *Ate*. And how the *Maharlikas* have maneuvered things to their favor.”

“You know then what they need,” Binks asked.

“They were hoping the Camarilla would step in. Do something about the situation here in Manila that the *Oripun* had to deal with. But then again, here in the Philippines, populations are much smaller. Which means a smaller population of the Kindred as well,” Lazaro admitted.

“*Mas konti talaga Maginoo dito*,” Binks sighed. “Parañaque only has around six.”

“Six on record,” Nogales clarified, “The *Oripun* try to limit the Fifth Tradition. The same cannot be said about the *Maharlikas*.”

“As they tend to be anywhere else in the world too. The Sabbat are like roaches, overpopulating cities with their filth,” said Lazaro.

“Get word back to the Camarilla that if they do not send assistance soon, the entirety of the Philippines will eventually fall into *Maharlika* hands,” Nogales sighed, “And if that happens, then you can be assured that getting it back is likely going to be an

impossible task. We have held on our own against their push since the Spanish Occupation. Any assistance would be appreciated.”

Lazaro wasn't fully paying attention. The hunger was growing within him. Since his arrival, he had spent precious vitae to heal from the injuries he sustained from Shena and her men. He had yet to hunt and he knew his vitae reserves were getting low. Worse, as a Ventrue, he had a rarified taste that limited what he could ingest. Despite being in a country where the poverty level was high enough to hide any victims of feeding that may arise, searching for the kind of blood he needed was like looking for blood red pearls.

His eyes had focused on a group of young adults who were laughing at one side as they shared stories. His eyes gazed at the woman's bare throat as she craned an ear towards the group to hear their jokes. Or the hefty man's wrist. He felt his fangs were pressing against his tongue. He was getting hungry.

“Surely you weren't just expecting me to be a messenger,” Lazaro almost absent-mindedly replied. He noticed a man sitting alone by another table. He coughed a few times before taking another bite on his burger.

“Of course not,” Nogales admitted, “We need your help to turn the tide in Parañaque. Besides Shena, most of the other *Maginoo* present are young. Barely three years young. But what they do have are numbers. Binks here refuses to take part. However, I feel you and I can help her regain Parañaque from the

Maharlika.”

“You mean war?” Lazaro asked.

There was a pregnant pause that filled the room. Save for the people in the background ordering food and enjoying their dinner, a notable silence surrounded the three Kindred. Binks realized what Nogales was up to and the shock of it was enough to get him on his feet. He shook his head as he regarded Nogales but the former Prince merely nodded in agreement.

“You have got to be kidding,” Binks said.

“I was never kidding,” Nogales said.

Lazaro could tell there was an earlier conversation that he was not part of. He chose to stay silent and tried to piece what he could from the two.

“Ticonderoga,” Nogales muttered.

“Fuck, that’s the Broken Arrow,” Binks realized.

“Yes, it is,” Nogales, “1965, the fifth of December.”

Lazaro stared at the two and wondered what they were talking about. He gazed at the other people nearby and noticed the people in line at the counter had not even glanced their way. The people behind the counter seemed too preoccupied to notice them arguing. Lazaro glanced at the table next to theirs where the coughing man finished his burger. He raised a hand and waved it at the man, a small gesture to see if he’d say hello back. The man gave no reply.

“Nogales,” Lazaro whispered.

“Who?” Binks worriedly asked.

“Madrigal,” Nogales replied.

“Okay, stop you two. I am obviously not aware of the other half of this conversation. And something tells me you have been making sure no one else knew,” Lazaro faced Nogales and waited for his reply.

“Ah, you have noticed,” Nogales grinned.

“Okay, now I’m the one who doesn’t know what you two are talking about,” Binks grinned.

“Mister Nogales here is a Malkavian. I’ve heard talk that they have the ability to conceal even more than just themselves. That they can hide others in their vicinity,” Lazaro smile, “He’s just made it safe for us to talk openly about things.”

Binks laughed. He looked at the people around them and watched as they all unconsciously ignored the three. At one point, one guy from the counter was walking straight for them, but at the last second turned and opted to sit at another table.

“If we will be talking about the Ticonderoga and the Broken Arrow Incident, it was best we had some privacy,” Nogales said.

Lazaro’s smile faded. He realized what they were referring to. Binks saw his expression and clapped his hands together before pointing at the Ventrue. “You got it?”

The Ventrue remembered an old 1996 movie that starred John Travolta and Christian Slater. It was a John Woo crime thriller which had terrorists attempting to steal weapons from two air force pilots. It wasn’t a good movie by any

standard, but Lazaro enjoyed it simply because he always enjoyed cheap thrills like these. They served as a quaint counterweight to the serious tasks he ends up engaging in working with the Archons.

“It’s a nuke,” Lazaro gasped. “This is the fucking Philippines, and you’re telling me there’s something here to do with a nuclear weapon.”

Nogales laughed.

Binks shrugged, “I still think it is bullshit.”



“Adolf Hitler was the son of Jose Rizal, via Klara Poelzl. If you ever have the opportunity to visit the library at Malacanang, note as you enter, the huge portrait of Jose Rizal. Then turn 180 degrees to see a smaller portrait of Adolf Hitler staring across the room at his father.”

Online conspiracy story

Laurel Aguinaldo always considered himself a master of manipulation. The Lasombra Archbishop loved to play games and use games as a means of proving his intellectual and tactical superiority. In a city with over 50 Cainites, Laurel relied on his bishops to help him keep track of each one. He liked running the

city to playing a game of chess... no, not chess... playing Games of the Generals, a Filipino board game where one tried to capture the flag. In the game, opponent's pieces have identities that are hidden from the player, forcing the player to deduce who they are in the game. Every game had a Spy piece, who was the most powerful piece and could kill any other piece except for the Private, the weakest piece in the game.

The Spy.

That was always the question, wasn't it?

Who was the Spy among them?

Laurel stood at the roof deck of the PBCom Tower, once the tallest building in the entire country, until it was dwarfed by two other towers: Trump Tower and the current highest peak, Grand Hyatt Manila in Taguig. The building, which was at the corner of Ayala Avenue and Rufino was at the heart of the Makati Central Business District. It had a façade of stone and metal which was accentuated by the use of lights. Inside the building were various international call centers and other informational technology companies.

Try as Laurel might, he could not see the Grand Hyatt Manila's peak. Part of him wished he could, to have some sort of "gazing across the borders of a warring country" feel, given Taguig was still under the Machiavellian control of the *Oripun*. Perhaps if the Lasombra, too, had the supernatural perceptions the Toreador and Malkavians easily mastered, he could gaze across the national road between the two cities and see the face of

his rival, Prince Madrigal Rufino, smiling back.

The double doors leading to the roof slid open as Bahgat Sighn, Kai of the Sword, emerged from the lower floor. The Archbishop's bodyguards quickly moved to inspect the visitor for any weapons. Bahgat played along, smirking at the realization the ghouls were less likely to find anything unless he willed it. The Ravnos Clan had a distinct ability to shape images in the minds of their foes. Bahgat could, with the slightest of effort, cause the bodyguards to replace the image and sensation of the knives they feel during the pat down as nothing but cloth.

"Playing with the boys again," Laurel laughed.

Bahgat snickered and waited for the bodyguards to motion him forward. As they did, he walked straight up to the Archbishop and bowed before him. Laurel reached out and allowed Bahgat to kiss his ring. "Better small joys than messy indulgences, Archbishop."

"Indeed," Laurel turned to favor Bahgat. With one arm leaning on the edge for support, he slid his other hand into his side pocket. The Ravnos stayed a good four feet away from the Lasombra, aware of the Keeper's attention to such details. He had once called for the dark shadows to suffocate a shovelhead who didn't know his place. Despite not needing to breathe, having intangible shadows anchor one throat first to the ground was not a delightful experience.

"What have you to report?"

"The *Oripun* of Taguig remain difficult to locate. The

bastards continue to evade my spies,” Bahgat admitted, “I suspect either the magics of their Warlock, Graham, or the spies of Crispin, Nosferatu Primogen.”

“And of Guillermo’s criminal gangs?”

“Our influence in the supposed ongoing drug war is in the works. While the rest of the populace sees a president hitting hard on the drug trade on the streets, they don’t see the effect it has on forcing the Brujah’s minions to go into hiding,” Bahgat laughed.

He noticed, however, Laurel did not. The Lasombra was not even looking at him. The Lasombra was gazing into the night sky, his thoughts racing in his head. As much as Bahgat and many of the *Maharlika* questioned Laurel’s ascent to power, none questioned his tactical mind. Laurel knew the *Oripun* were staying one step ahead of his minions. He realized, however, the spy was not within his council.

“Basilio,” Laurel muttered.

“The Archbishop of Pasay?”

“The very one,” Laurel leaned back to face the cityscape. He waited for Bahgat to join him. The Ravnos leaned as well and flicked a cigarette out from his breast pocket. A second flick of the cigarette in place suddenly ignited it. The orange glow of its embers and the smell of its smoke would have convinced anyone that he was smoking. In truth, it was just another illusion. A force of habit of the Ravnos. The trail of smoke danced like linked chains as it floated into the night sky.

“He has been silent,” Laurel observed. The blasted Nosferatu usually loved reminding me of how I had lost part of Makati to the *Oripun*. This year, however, he’s been curiously quiet. Almost too quiet.”

“Maybe he’s just preoccupied,” Bahgat wondered aloud, “Maybe, the drug war affected his minions too? Messed up his plans?”

“The *skwater* uses roaches and rats as spies,” Laurel shrugged, “Do you really think that would affect his plans? I need you to go check on him. Know if we can still rely on Pasay when the Crusade for Taguig finally happens.” Crusade was the term members of the *Maharlika* liked to call their attempts to take over an *Oripun* city. They usually were bloody and violent affairs which the mortal media would end up reporting as gang war-related violence. Most of the actual fighting was between vampiric minions. Vampire deaths, if any, were usually covered up with fire and explosives. Rioting usually followed in its wake.

“I shall go check on the sewer rat. I shall return as soon as possible,” Bahgat gave a small nod and left.

Even among the Cainintes, conspiracy stories abound. One of the most popular was the supposed coming of Gehenna which marks the rising of the Ancients. As Children of the First Murderer, Caine was said to have created a city for their kind. The Creator called forth the great Deluge. The waters rose and thousands of vampires were destroyed as they were spent away. But among the survivors, the legends go, are the Antediluvians –

Caine's Third Generation – who founded the Clans in their loneliness and sunk back into a torpid sleep. If the legends have any truth in them, these Ancients are to rise up one night to summon their childer.

And feed.

Another one claimed a red star had appeared in the sky and is only visible in the North America and Europe. There were a few based in Manila who claimed to have seen such a star in the sky but it was more likely these were just attempts to sound like they were “in the know.”

Finally, some had whispered that there was something going wrong with the blood. That for some elders, the powers within their vitae had begun to deteriorate. Stories of domination that does not hold. Or of preternatural strength that disappears. Laurel even heard from among his Clan that there were some whose powers over the shadows turned against them. He knew many claimed they were all connected. And that they were signs the end was near.

Laurel was not one to believe such fears. Having survived the Japanese occupation and the Spanish colonization, he had a glimpse of how easy it was to experience something and describe it in world-shattering ways. But given the frequency of these claims from people all around the world, was there more to this than merely a shared delusion?

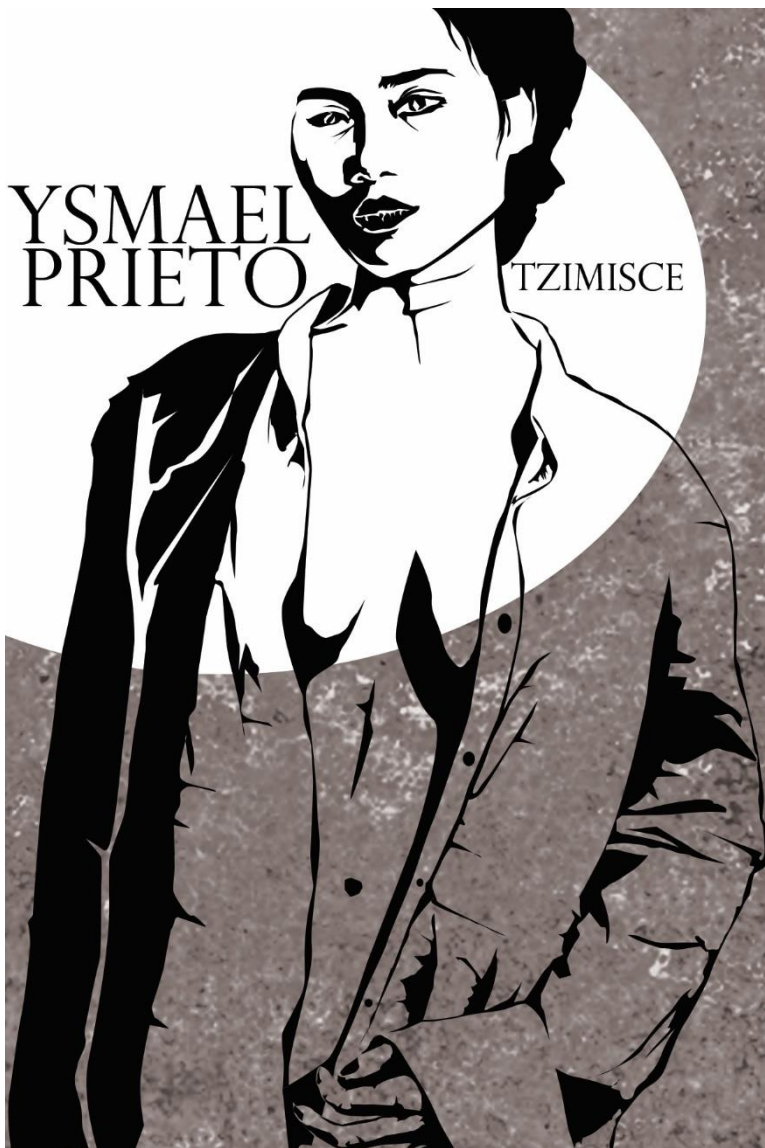
He dug out of his pocket the letter he received earlier in the evening. The red envelope was sealed with wax, a rarity in

the modern era. There was no return address on its cover nor any name identifying its sender. He slid out the single sheet of parchment inside and read once more the message that was written in a fine calligraphy:

The Justicar Lucinde is in Manila.

A Justicar was no laughing matter. They were typically the most powerful or influential of the Clan. And normally had a cadre of five or so Archons at their beck and call, each one trained to be the perfect walking weapons and instruments of investigation. Laurel crumpled the letter in his hand and began ripping it into pieces. He threw them over the edge, allowing them to scatter into the winds.

There was no need to terrify the *Maharlika*, for now. At least not until there is further proof that the Justicar truly is in this god-forsaken city. At least, that was what Laurel thought was best. He would very soon learn how wrong he was.



YSMAEL
PRIETO

TZIMISCE



“Soul connections are not often found and are worth every bit of fight left in you to keep.”

Shannon Alder

Uncaring cold hands groped at Magda, tugging at her in a bid to pry her from her hiding place. She had lost track of how long she had been screaming. Her throat was coarse, and she could taste a hint of blood with each swallow. Magda ran from the bloodied bodies and tried to clamber up the closest wall to reach the swivel window on its top. But the hands found her feet before she could pull away and there was far too many of them for her to fend off. Magda had one hand on the window’s edge. Her fingers nearly broke nails as they clamped against the edge, seeking leverage. The hands pulled harder.

She fell.

Expected the painful impact of the cold floor, Magda instead found herself falling into an unexpected embrace. The second woman had caught her with her own arms. Magda tried to lift herself up and stare at her savior's face. She was barely a woman. Blonde hair, despite the darker roots. Lithe body. Baby faced.

"I got you," the woman whispered, and Magda pressed against her, finding safety in their embrace. Hot against cold, Magda felt feverish as she pressed against her pale skin. Her own body heat seemed to sink into the strangers.

The ravenous band of naked bodies pulled back. They chattered and jeered but dared not approach. They could sense the newcomer was different. Familiar. But different.

"This is a nightmare," Magda gasped, "Please tell me this is a nightmare. And I'm waking up."

Lucinde held Magda close. She wasn't too certain how to answer just yet. But she understood there was more unfolding here than she had anticipated. More so considering this all started early the previous evening.

*

Bonifacio Global City
The Previous Night

Lucinde watched as the woman drove away in her car.

She knew Kemintiri was hiding in his humid and complicated country and standing out as a foreigner was not going to work in her favor. But just as she was going to leave, her ears caught the fluttering of tiny wings.

A cockroach clumsily fluttered away from where she stood and was about to land on the wall at the opposite end of the street. But Lucinde trusted her instincts and used an old Thaumaturgical trick to test her theory. With a soft incantation of Latin words, she snapped her fingers and caused the cockroach to implode as its guts erupted outwards into a tiny disgusting torrent that sought her lips. Perhaps it was not the most dignified way of practicing the Theft of Vitae, one of the more recent levels of power she had learned in her years working almost independently from the Camarilla, but as fate would have it, her suspicions were confirmed. The vile thing's goop had traces of vitae within it. As a ghoul, it was definitely a servant of a Nosferatu – if not any other Clan who had mastery over the lower beings. There were too many eyes and spies in this country to risk being out too long. She knew she had to find a Haven.

Lucinde called upon another Discipline gained through her many years, one called Obfuscate which gave her the ability to hide herself and kept to the shadows. She walked calmly down the road and considered her options.

The Justicar had spent many nights in the past exploring the dangerous and dark streets all by her lonesome. Whether it was the unlit trails of the medieval age or the gas lit roads of the

Victorian era, Lucinde knew her child-like appearance drew attention from the unsavory kind. That sometimes worked in her favor, given the Kindred need to feed.

Another roach emerged from the shadows.

This time, the scavenger kept its distance. Lucinde could see its feelers animatedly moving in the air. Its brown black body was thinner than the kind she was used to back in North America. But they looked just as disgusting. Lucinde did not recoil, however. She had waded through dead bodies in her hunts for the Anathema in the past. A few curious roaches were far from the most disgusting or disturbing things she had seen.

The roach, however, kept its sentinel watch over her. It was deliberately standing at the edge of the wall, keeping itself visible yet unmoving.

It was a message.

Lucinde had worked with Tatiana Stepanova in the past. Stepanova was an Alastor despite hailing from the Ravnos bloodline. Her kind were known as tricksters and nomads during the medieval era given most of them could trace their mortal lineages to the Roma. Sadly, such racist impressions remained strong despite their more diverse heritage now in the modern nights. Stepanova resented her Embrace, seeing her thirst for blood as a clear confirmation of her fall from humanity. It would take nearly three decades for her to break from her then sire, Vasily Vasilevich, who embraced the young woman simply to take advantage of her skills in larceny. While most of her unlife

was spent running with the Anarchs, it was only after the destruction of Petrodon did she reach out to Lucinde to warn the Justicar of the Anarch's plans. To her surprise, the Ventrue Justicar not only trusted her information but offered to have her serve under her wing.

In the many months that followed, Stepanova learned to embrace her newfound role and would send animal messengers to Lucinde for communication. While the Ventrue had no talent for commanding the lesser beasts, Lucinde was a quick learner in seeing the animals as a silent signal for her to contact her Alastor.

This roach, in some ways, reminded her of that.

She had no doubt this was unrelated to Stepanova. She had full certainty the powers of Animalism were involved, however. Lucinde approached the roach and, resisting the urge to roll her eyes at the thought of how foolish she probably looked, she said, "Lead. I shall follow. You know who I am."

*

Washington D.C.

The Night Before

"What do you mean," Dor asked as Tuesday handed the weeping Rose a handkerchief to clean herself up. The Toreador hated having to reveal his power. He hated having to let more know he was far older than he has presented himself. He had

taken great pains to “erase” himself from history, among which was the permanent wound he had on his nape – a round puncture hole which he covered with a latex surface. Rose’s hard grip had caused it to pop open. He would have to deal with it later. For now, his attentions were on the unmentioned question. “What about Lucinde?”

Rose pulled herself together. She couldn’t understand her emotions. They felt all over the place. She tried to center herself, remembering the lessons she once was given when she first gained a place among the Archons. Somehow, she couldn’t stop the blood works that kept flowing on her cheeks. She wasn’t even this weepy as a mortal.

“The Justicar,” she said in a calmer voice, “Has gone missing.”

This was not new news. At least, not to Dor. Dor heard about Lucinde vanishing in the past. The Justicar, then known more for the prestige of being the very first Alastor, slipped into torpor reputedly to weaken and break the blood bond she had with the Anathema, Kemintiri. The Setite had replaced her lover Michaelis and she only discovered her treachery too late. The bond was used to silence her for nearly fifteen years.

By the time Lucinde resurfaced, it was 1994 and the Inner Circle gathered to receive a letter she had found – proof of the same Setite’s next scheme to forge an alliance among all the Kindred Most Wanted. Dor remembered standing in the shadows of that proceedings. Perhaps in another life, had Dor

been Ventrue, he would have relished playing the political game. Or perhaps he would have been ridiculed for being far more Toreador at heart. But the fact was, he had connections that most Kindred could only dream of, given his role in the events in 1444. And those connections had him there in the Conclave to hear them promote Lucinde to full Justicar status.

“She has disappeared before,” Dor grumbled, “Along with her Archons, devoting their eternal nights to hunting the Anathema and nothing else. What makes this disappearance different-“

“Alone,” Rose gasped, “She left without taking any of her Archons. She left without informing any of us.”

“Hmm,” Dor would never admit it aloud but that was something that gave him a moment of pause. Lucinde was a fine leader. And an amazing investigator. She knew her way around the political arena as well as she knew how to fight. Vanishing to hunt the Red List was not only extremely dangerous but also impressively stupid. It would have to be something quite personal to make her...

Dor stumbled. Tuesday rushed to his side to help steady his master. To his surprise, Dor muttered a thanks as an instinctive response.

“What did you know,” Rose clutched her arms around herself. She struggled to find the warmth of security in her own arms. Instead, they were cold and devoid of any comfort. “You asked me to inform her of my sister’s actions. There was

something else that you weren't telling me. There was something, wasn't there?"

A Toreador *anti-tribu* who was flaunting her vampiric gifts openly on streamed entertainment? A snuff film disguised as a well-crafted indie splatter sex-ploitation film? Dor was admittedly concerned of the Masquerade second and more spiteful of the young one's success with utilizing new media first. What was he too not seeing that Lucinde saw?

"Tuesday. I need the recordings. Every episode she had aired," Dor commanded. The retainer quickly hurried back into the building to prep the requested material. Dor had suspicions, but he knew better than to say anything out loud. Walking up to the Toreador Praetor, Dor reached a hand out to help her to her feet. "Come. We must continue this inside. I may have answers for you. But they are not the kind the city deserves to hear."

*

Pasay City

The Previous Night

Lucinde followed the cockroach across the city, walking down the winding McKinley road until it intersected over EDSA and transformed into Ayala Avenue. There she continued walking, following the road down the shadow of skyscrapers and business buildings. It wasn't anything close to the claustrophobic towers of New York City, and yet it felt just as dangerous. Both

cities were, after all, contested domains for the Camarilla.

Upon reaching a massive building clearly labeled as the RCBC Plaza, the roach then lead Lucinde west, into Gil Puyat Avenue. More commonly called Buendia Avenue, the Justicar found herself soon crossing train tracks out of the financial district into a seedier district. Here, the streets evidently were narrower and there were less-working lights providing illumination to the dark winding roads. Squatters could be seen in the alleyways, surviving in their own self-contained ecosystem as they sold precooked meals to commuters and passersby.

The guide stopped in front of a red lit Japanese restaurant whose front entrance faced the very street. A security guard eyed Lucinde curiously, having noticed the foreign woman having arrived on foot.

“Ma’am, are you lost?” the guard asked, sincerely concerned. He did not take any effort to hide his lingering glance at her figure, however.

“I’m where I need to be,” Lucinde replied as she put her foot down on the roach. It died without a sound. The security guard opened the door and Lucinde was surprised by three tired wait staff who greeted her in Japanese, “*Irasshaimase!*”

“失礼します,” Lucinde replied,
“担当者是谁ですか”

The wait staff stared at each other. Clearly, they were only trained to speak certain phrases to use as greetings. Lucinde scanned the restaurant and noticed the small glass room separated

from the rest. It was labelled a smoking area. Inside, a nondescript person stood, cigarette in hand. Lucinde realized there were no other occupied tables. Not any served meals. The figure was definitely the one controlling the roaches. Perhaps this restaurant served as a Hunting Ground. Or maybe it was a local Rack. Lucinde had no time to be disoriented or curious. She had to make the most of the first night in Manila.

As she walked to the glass room, the wait staff immediately turned away and disengaged with paying her any attention. Lucinde noted this and realized there was more here at play than she expected. She slid the glass door open and went inside. The chamber was around fifteen feet by fifteen, which meant there was adequate yet cramped room for a little over two people. The air was the stale sticky stench of old cigarettes. The rest of the furniture seemed clean.

The figure was thin and not quite tall. Gray skin mottled with blackish red stains, almost like those from liver spots dotted his skin. His clothes were loose silken pants, perhaps Thai in origin topped with a simple v-neck white shirt. His face was hard to focus on. Lucinde suspected Obfuscate.

“Do you me a kindness inviting me here,” Lucinde spoke as she fished into her pocket and drew out a lighter. Flicking it to burn, she waited for the figure to signal her it was okay. He motioned with one hand to wait, then bent down to bring the cigarette to the fire. The golden light illuminated its face. But once again Lucinde felt the world spin as she tried to focus on it.

“I have heard of a Nosferatu *Antitribu* governing the City of Pasay. Basilio, I believe, his name was. To what do I owe such an honor?” she said.

“How do you know I am him?” the figure quizzed-

“And not the Nosferatu Primogen Crispin? Who by all rights apparently appears as a young boy of twelve years,” Lucinde smiled, “A detail which could have simply been hidden from me with the same said discipline that conceals your likeness?”

A nod. The figure took a deep drag on the cigarette. The orange glow of the ember matched the orange glow of its eyes.

“You are definitely not Crispin,” Lucinde replied matter-of-factly, because Crispin is not one for politics. In fact, when he was ascended to Primogenship, it was more a burden than a reward for him. Lucinde had learned of the boy in the past and sensed from his story the disdain for having to “take care of everyone else.” And her having met him early tonight, he would have still been reeling from the use of The Judas Heart.

“However, you were aware of my presence in the city from that meeting. Whoever you have in there posing as Crispin clearly has no idea you are actually the one pulling his strings.”

“Interesting,” the figure took another drag on the cigarette. Smoke oozed out of his nostrils and mouth.

“Which means you are likely Basilio, the Archbishop of Pasay City. The bastard of the ports. The wicked thin man who nearly shut down the entire country’s industry by messing the

imports and tariffs. The complications cause congestion at the ports which then in turn threatened the position of the Philippine Peso and made many a local company suffer,” Lucinde smirked and reached for the cigarette between the figure’s mouth, “But that is what you want me to believe.”

The figure tried not to respond, but Lucinde already noticed it flinched.

“And the reason behind that is because you are hiding both the Final Deaths of the Primogen Crispin from the Camarilla and of the Archbishop Basilio from the Sabbat,” Lucinde crumpled the cigarette and stabbed it into the ashtray, “Isn’t that right, Ysmael Prieto, Cardinal of Metro Manila? How goes your conquest to claim the entirety of Metro Manila as your own?”

The figure smiled. Skin began to move, like the unraveling of mummy wrappings, to reveal her original figure. Thin and stern, her muscles were tightly knotted against her bones. Her face lacked skin and instead exposed bone and the absence of a nose. “Incredible,” the figure admitted, “You are the first to have noticed. You are the first to have seen through the skin.”

“Most learn to look past the trickery of Obfuscate,” Lucinde admitted, “But not everyone is acquainted with the powers of the Fiends.”

It laughed. It was amused at how fearless the Justicar was. It suspects there was still fear, but she probably knew how to hide it well. “Know you are safe, Justicar.”

“A pity the same cannot be said of you,” Lucinde replied. Ys barely had the time to erupt into a coagulated sentient blob of vitae before Lucinde’s open hand slammed where her chest earlier was! The blood slushed to the side, spreading across the floor as it filled the space ankle deep to each corner. Lucinde kicked off the ground and landed on the nearest wooden chair. She knew better than to let the Tzimisce have contact with her own skin. They were not called Fiends for nothing. Back in the Dark Ages, these vampires ruled openly without fear, using their Fleshcrafting powers to twist people into horrid tortured servants, fusing them with each other or even with beasts. Some scholars speculated many of the monsters in mythology were attempts to make sense of Tzimisce creativity.

Outside, the staff continued to work as if nothing happened. Lucinde quickly surmised that they had been either Conditioned to ignore anything that happens in the room or were wholly broken that they could only perform rote tasks. She had hoped to strike quickly and take the Fiend down before violence escalated. She underestimated the thing’s own propensity to sense danger.

“So much violence,” a portion of the blood had solidified into a mouth and spoke with Ys’ voice, “We are not enemies here, Justicar.”

“You’re Sabbat,” Lucinde hardened herself for the coming onslaught, “How can you even think that we’re on the same side?”

“We both fight against the Hungry Dead,” it replied, referring to the Kindred of the East, which many in the West also referred to as the Cathayans. Seemingly part living, part dead, these Kuei-jin were strange things that could shift their shapes and feed on more than just blood. Some, rumors say, could even walk under the sun. Their hold on Asia and nearby countries was quite palpable. “With common enemies, we can draw strength if we unite. If we fight against them as one.”

“Not interested,” Lucinde scanned the area for any possible sneak attacks. She suspected the mouth was intended to draw her attention. “I’m here for someone else. And you’re just in the way.”

“The Sleeper is real,” Ys remarked. Lucinde noticed the volume of blood was decreasing in the room. Her eyes surveyed the ground and she soon saw the small drain at the corner, perhaps originally intended for those nights when they needed to mop the room down. Ys was escaping drop by drop into the sewers. “The Sleeper stirs and knows we are nearby.”

“To hell with your Sleeper,” Lucinde saw a nearby glass lamp and kicked it, hoping to spill its oil onto the floor. The glass struck the ground and shattered, revealing it was empty. Merely decorative. Ys slipped through the drain and escaped. The Ventrue wasted no time in leaving the place, walking past the security guard who once again seemed worried for her safety and called out to her as she left. With the Fiend seeking to elevate herself to Cardinal status, the Camarilla would need to be alerted

of the spy in their midst. But that would not be tonight. Not after having to use the Judas Heart to conceal her presence in the country. She ducked down the nearest ally and found a small boarding house that accepted only women as tenants. It was a small matter to use Presence to persuade the owner to let her stay for the night. Windows shuttered, then curtained, Lucinde found an old wooden armoire in the room which would serve as a suitable place to sleep in and avoid the sun. At worst, she could trust on her supernatural toughness to survive any other threats to come.

What she did not anticipate, however, was one that was psychic in nature.

*

Washington D.C.

The Night Before

“We have both been played,” Dor finally admitted. In front of him, the many flat screens were showing various clips of the Susmarjosie livestreams. Dor hated the fact he did not realize it sooner. Seeing Rose in her emotionally wrecked state merely confirmed it further. “You’re going through emotional rebound. I, on the other hand, was just given a taste of Presence with a proficiency that I have not seen in quite some time. That level of Star Magnetism is astounding. And this raises a lot of new questions about your sister.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Rose thanked the retainer who handed her a warm face towel to clean her face of the blood that had caked against her skin. It would have felt refreshing, had she paid attention to it. Instead, she was too bothered by what Dor implied, “Emotional rebound? What emotional rebound?”

Another retainer came up to Dor, offering another towel. Dor waved it away. With a bow, Tuesday carried the tray away.

“Emotional rebound. It is quite more common with you young ones, it seems. When you’ve been victims of Domination for an extended period, you find yourself subconsciously sensing the dampening impact upon your emotions. It is like you can’t accept not being dramatic about things,” Dor planted his face against his hand, as if in deep thought.

“Wait, Dominate? You think someone-“

“I know someone has been Conditioning you. I’m actually more impressed they haven’t been doing it sooner. But I guess it was only a matter of time before the Justicars sought to have their Archons be disciplined little soldiers,” Dor’s fingers flicked on the keyboard a few times, causing some video streams to move again. A few clicks had them stop at specific points at their own timelines.

“Lucinde,” Rose gasped.

“Yes, Lucinde,” Dor smiled, “She’s lovely, to be honest. When I first met her, she was a feisty young childe. Severus

clearly saw something in her.”

“But Lucinde,” Rose gasped again.

“Oh, come now, are you really that bothered at the thought one of the Ventrue just used their power over the weak-willed to keep people like you in check? You were probably tasked to stop arguing with her or acting like such a childe,” Dor stood up and took a step away from the monitors. He did not look happy. “Lucinde had you all doing something for her without knowing it. As it so happens, my calling you was something similar for someone else. Someone whose identity was key to why Lucinde would suddenly up and vanish on you all.”

Rose wanted to say something but Dor silenced her with a finger. Dor then motioned to Tuesday to press the button and he did. All the monitors came to life in unison with Josie talking about chemsex, intercourse, teabagging, rimming, and other sexual acts. Josie was about to ask what the videos was all about when Dor silenced her with another finger. Dor motioned to Tuesday once more and the retainer replayed the videos again.

And again.

And again.

Dor began to tremble as he finally understood the madness hidden in the videos. It was a small trick he learned from his time hanging out with the other Children from those terrible nights in 1444.

“Chemical sex has the best mind-blowing..”

“Intercourse is always the deepest experience...”

“Teabagging is fun, but not as much as snowball..”

“Rimming each other until you can’t hold...”

And again...

Rose stood up. She now began to hear it. Dor looked at the Venture and nodded. “Now it makes sense?”

“She’s real. She’s real and she’s still out there?” Rose gasped.

“She sent a fucking message. And used me as her mouthpiece,” Dor growled.

“And through you, got me to send Lucinde to her,” Rose shook her head, “What are we going to do?”

“Chem...”

“Int...”

“Tea....”

“Ri...”

“That’s enough,” Dor motioned at Tuesday to stop the video. The retainer quickly complied. Dor sat back down and planted both hands on his face. “I don’t know. Should we get involved? Should we alert someone higher? If the Anathema really is involved, shouldn’t the Justicars know?”

Rose had no reply.

*

The screaming from beyond the wall was not what woke Lucinde from her slumber. As one of the Kindred, it was

common for them to sleep during the day – their bodies seemingly ceasing all signs of unlife to the point they appeared as lifeless corpses once more – and it took Auspex and similar powers to remain cognizant of any ongoing events. Perhaps it was fate. Or chance. But Lucinde happened to find refuge in the same sleeping complex where Magda herself also stayed. As Magda found herself trapped in the horrible dream, Lucinde too was pulled into the nightmarish experience. Unlike Magda, however, who was victim to the terrifying mental landscape, Lucinde maintained a sense of order and calm. It was a calm born from literally centuries of unlife in learning to endure the nightmarish harrowings of torpor. She saw Magda running for her life and mentally strengthened herself against the incoming horde.

“I got you,” Lucinde whispered to Magda as she caught the fleeing woman. The ravenous mob slowed down as they saw her, uncertain on what to do. Behind them, exposing much shimmering ebony skin, Josie laughed.

“This is a nightmare,” Magda gasped, “Please tell me this is a nightmare. And I’m waking up.”

“It is,” Lucinde admitted, “And I am afraid there’s more to this than we both realize. But for now, it is best you do wake up.” Lucinde pressed her hand against Magda’s cheek. Josie screamed even as Magda felt the entire dreamworld spin around her, “You won’t get away! I know you’re here now, Lucinde! I summoned you!”

*

Magda bolted upright, her entire body was soaked in sweat. She could still feel her heart pounding in her chest. She tried to breathe, but even that seemed to hurt. The sun glared outside the window, and for a moment she wasn't sure if everything from last night was also a dream.

There was a sudden thud against the opposite wall. Magda stared at it for a good full minute before she began to crawl towards it. She didn't feel she could trust her knees just yet. Reaching the side, Magda tentatively knocked on the wall. She wasn't really sure why she was doing this.

"Is anyone... there?" Magda asked. She felt foolish. But she recalled the woman helping her. Sunlight still struck her face from the far window.

"Yes," a voice weakly replied. Then went silent.



“Bombs do not choose. They will hit everything.”

Nikita Khrushchev

Lazaro would have hoped there was silence in these minutes following the revelation of the Broken Arrow. It would have given him an opportunity to think and reconsider. It would have offered him a chance to weight the immensity of their claim. But instead, as most Filipinos would in times of extreme tension, Binks and Nogales were laughing as if they were drinking buddies talking about the most recent basketball game. Basketball, by the way, was a huge sport in the country. Even street children would craft makeshift court rings and use their broken slippers as “balls” to throw into the “hoops” as they proclaimed themselves the next

LeBron or Harden.

Thanks to the protection afforded to them by Nogales' Obfuscate, the two openly laughed about the ramifications of a nuclear missile being lost in the wilds of Manila.

"It was a month after the USS Ticonderoga left the naval base in Subic Bay when the incident first occurred. His name was Douglas M. Webster. An American Lieutenant who manned the US Navy Douglas A-4E Skyhawk. The pilot was moving the plane from a level 2 hanger to the level 2 elevator when it accidentally fell off the carrier itself," Nogales explained.

Binks was laughing so hard, his fangs were showing. "*Taragis*... the guy dropped his plane? Was he drunk or something?"

"Maybe," Nogales admitted, "There isn't any documentation that further explores that incident. What is known, however, was that the bomb contained at least a megaton's worth of nuclear explosive and the entire incident happened just 80 miles from Okinawa."

"Why didn't they do something about it?" Binks asked.

"Neither the pilot nor the aircraft were ever recovered," Nogales admitted, "And worse, the Pentagon itself did not clear any mention of this incident until after the 1980s. That's fifteen years where they kept this event a secret."

"And the bomb has been there all this time?" Binks asked, exasperatedly. He had a thin rivulet of blood tears running down his cheeks from all the laughing. Lazaro, however, noticed

none of this. He was barely paying them any attention. Instead, his focus was on the group of five young street kids who were converging outside the restaurant. Their clothes clearly implied they were beggars and given the way they moved, it was likely they were intoxicated or worse, high on drugs. Now, Lazaro has dealt with other threats in the past. He had faced off with Setite assassins in Paris and once fought hand-to-hand against a frenzied Gangrel in Chicago. He was no stranger to danger. This also, however, meant, he was familiar with complications and other than animals, kids were the second most common source of unexpected complications. True enough, his worries were coming to pass as one of the children glanced at the three of them and noticed Bink's fanged expression. "Obfuscation sometimes fails in the eyes of the young," Lazaro muttered, quoting the Tremere scholar, Samantha Fletcher, whose attempts to further codify what she documents as "Kindred Disciplines" has made interesting observations on how the powers themselves seemingly are in flux.

With a baseball cap worn wrong-side out, the young boy pushed the glass door open and entered the restaurant. The security guard moved to stop him, but two of his other companions began harassing the guy, forcing him to divert his attentions. With missing teeth and a plastic bag of rubber solvent held to his nose, the boy stared at the three Kindred in the room.

"Fuck is he watching us?" Binks noticed the same kid Lazaro was staring at.

“Yes,” Lazaro replied.

As if his gaze triggered a chain reaction, the other people in the restaurant began to look in their direction as well. The Cloak of the Gathering was shattered. Binks slowly slid off the table, making sure to keep his fangs hidden from view. Nogales however caught something else. He stepped back, keeping his back towards Lazaro and Binks.

“They’re just street kids,” Binks muttered, “So we can just go, right?”

“I’m not beating up on kids,” Lazaro, “Why does this feel like something about to come down?”

“They’re not kids,” Nogales stood behind the two, his hands pressed against their backs. “While I know there are tales of the innocence of a child piercing the veil of the Malkav, those are far from innocent. Even if they are still Childer.”

Lazaro felt the Beast snarl within him. It was hungry. Eager to feed. But quickly he counted the four staff behind the counter, the two other customers, and the security guard as human collateral. He wasn’t too happy with those numbers.

“Are you sure they’re Sabbat,” Binks asked, turning towards the door where one of the kids had begun to beat the security guard to the ground. Each punch seemed strong enough to break his jaw. The three others began to step inside and join their companion. One of the women behind the counter was on the verge of panicking. Lazaro knew things were going to get messy very fast.

“Sienna Mara and I were able to retrieve the broken arrow in 1981. It was hidden somewhere in Parañaque. Sienna chose the location, while I chose the passkey. Find the missile and I can help you gain control of it,” Nogales muttered but before Lazaro could argue back, the Malkavian summoned his powers to cause him to vanish from everyone’s gaze. For the weak-willed, such as the other customers, they even completely forgot the man was there.

The kid with the wrong baseball cap noticed, however, and made it clear he didn’t like it. With a howl that sounded like an angry raspy cat, he charged forward towards Binks and Lazaro. Binks was the first to react, rushing forward ahead of Lazaro to slam forwards his foot at the table nearest to them. The boy crashed into the table being too slow to dodge out of the way. Lazaro took advantage of the opportunity and ran forward after Binks, making sure to crash his foot on the boy’s chest to keep him down. That, however, was the worst thing he could have done. As his foot connected on the boy’s chest, the boy slammed both hands around Lazaro’s ankle. Suddenly, the flesh and muscle of Lazaro’s foot sloughed off like an oversized coat!

The three other kids laughing rushed forward, slamming the glass door of the restaurant behind them. Two were nearly shaved bald, wearing stained white *sandos* that were now closer to brown in hue. The third, armed with a *balisong*, drew the blade with a flourish and stuck her tongue out to emphasize she knew how to use it. Binks yelled at the other people to get out and was

thankful the staff did not hesitate to comply.

“How many,” Lazaro called out, his focus still on his foot. He slammed it back down, keeping it among “the meat” that the baseball cap boy held in his fingers.

“What?” Binks answered, uncertain.

“Masquerade,” Lazaro elaborated.

Binks realized the Ventrue, even at this moment of violence was worried over breaching the Masquerade. The Malkavian couldn’t resist laughing out loud, “Just two, three if you count the last kid making his way to join the rest.”

“Damn it,” Lazaro held back. Two witnesses were still too many, especially for a Bellator. Had he been an Archon or better yet, an Alastor, he probably would have had more leeway. He was definitely starting to hate this. He came here to hunt down a Toreador who was livestreaming her snuff, using all possible meanings or implications of that word. This was starting to feel like he stumbled onto something much larger. With a twist, he shoved his leg into the boy’s throat. A spray of crimson shot upwards, drenching Lazaro.

The men still in the restaurant scattered at the sight of the blood. One man began cursing as he pressed against the glass wall and slid against it as he made his way to the exit. The other, unfortunately, carried his own gun. In seconds, the gun was out and trained towards Lazaro. The Ventrue braced for impact.

Thankfully, the two other boys leapt at him, throwing him backwards as the shot rang out. The bullet ripped into one

boy mid-leap, tearing through his shoulder, down his chest then flying out his stomach. The second one shoved Lazaro to the ground so hard, it cracked the tiles.

Binks grabbed the nearest tray and smashed into the girl with the *balisong*. She shrieked and dropped to the ground as blood rain down from her face. Lazaro burned a bit more of his previous vitae, channeling it down to his injured foot. He did not have time to repair the aggravated damage, but he knew he could fix it just enough to allow him to move better.

Outside the restaurant, passersby began to slow down and peer through the glass walls. The commotion would have probably alerted the police in another country, but here in the Philippines, it merely drew the attention of crowds. The threat to the Masquerade was rising faster and faster. Lazaro didn't like it, but he knew he needed to end this. Fast.

"ENOUGH," Lazaro snarled and stared down at the young vampire. He called upon the powers of the blood his Clan, the Ventrue, wielded with pride. With a gaze locked into the childe's, Lazaro forced his will upon him, twisting the youth's own mind and body against himself. "You have done enough, boy. Now sit down on your hands and shut your fucking mouth."

The force of his commands struck the Tzimisce like a physical blow, bringing him down to his knees. Like a puppet, he felt his own limbs betray him as he fell to the ground and sat upon his own hands. Bink saw the opening and ran forward, kicking the Fiend's face as if it were a football. His nose had

shattered from the blow, and the impact lodged the shards into his skull. The gun with the gun, however, trained it at Lazaro once more, after seeing his terrifying visage. Lazaro was too tired to play more games, however. He stared at the armed man the same way he did the young Sabbat and spat out a command, "Drop the gun."

It was hard to tell what hit the ground first; the gun or the man's urine as he pissed himself in fear.

"We have to go," Binks pulled at Lazaro's arm. "Come!"

"But the Masquerade.."

"Fuck it," Binks grabbed the pistol on the floor as he tugged at the Ventrue to move towards the door, "Let's just get out of here before others show up."

Binks did not have to say it twice. Lazaro followed him as quickly as he could, hobbling out of the restaurant and down the darkened streets.

*

An hour later.

Same location.

The policemen argued with the reporters who insisted they had the right to take footage of the dead bodies in the restaurant. The crowds had grown in number, needing the use of police tape to remind them of their place. Cellphones were held out as people took pictures, recorded video, or posted status updates about how close they were to a crime scene. No one paid much attention to the red and blue lights that chased each other

across the darkened parking lot. No one save for the swarthy man whose stomach was popping open his denim jacket. A lit cigarette hung from his chapped lips. He slipped a meaty hand into his back pocket and drew out a worn-down leather wallet. Old receipts, scotch-taped torn bills, and a crumpled stampita of a Catholic Saint jutted out from the folded leather. He fingered it open and drew out a yellow five hundred-peso bill.

“*Sarhento*,” Guillermo muttered towards the policemen as he stopped at the line. Two of the policemen glanced at each other, wondering what he wanted. An older one stepped forward and motioned at the younger two to head off, “*Ako na bahala diyan*. Leave it to me.”

The older policeman’s hair was a thinning wisp of gray behind his ears. Black liver spots dotted his skin. As he reached Guillermo’s spot, he reached both arms out towards the Brujah Primogen of Taguig – although he probably had no idea the man was one of the *Oripun*. To an observer, the two were merely grabbing each other’s hands in greeting. But in truth, Guillermo slipped the bill against the policeman’s palm. A small bribe for a little favor. Or in this case, information.

“So, what’s happening here?”

“Two boys, dead on the ground. A few teeth on the ground beside a cracked tray. A gun,” the cop whispered back.

“Any witnesses?”

The cop nodded and with his lips, he pointed with a pout across the parking lot. There was an ambulance parked at

the side. Guillermo nodded and took a deep drag on the cigarette.

“Sir, *bawal yan*. This is a no smoking area,” the cop said aloud as he leaned closer and added in a whisper, “Two witnesses. A kid who refuses to stand up and talk. And an old guy. *Nabuang*... Gone crazy, I think.”

“I see,” Guillermo gave the cop a pat on the shoulder, “*Salamat, kapatid*.” He killed the cigarette against his own hand; a small show of strength towards the informant. (He was thankful; however, the policeman did not see him grit his teeth from the pain.) And with that, he walked away from the crime scene and crossed the street. He calmly stepped into the gas station and walked to the magazine rack where a Caucasian man in a crisp white long sleeved shirt and slacks patiently waited. Benedict Graham, the Tremere Primogen of Taguig, stared at the magazines on display and shook his head in disgust as he eyed one of the covers. The headlines were all about the new sexy roles former child celebrities were now “exploring.” A side article was some blind item about another celebrity being gay. “The only thing disgusting me more than the fascination this country’s populace has over its celebrity icons, is the hypocrisy the country embraces in seeking modesty while stuffing their throats with sex. What have you learned, Guillermo?”

“Two witnesses. Things wouldn’t be this fucked up if we still had control over Parañaque. We should have gone to Shienna’s aid when the Crusade occurred.”

“Tch,” Graham rubbed his hands against his silken handkerchief, “Bygones. The Malkavian cried wolf too many times in the past. Her destruction was inevitable. Maintaining the Masquerade is our priority.”

“This isn’t even within our territory,” Guillermo admitted, “Aren’t we better off focusing on the *Maharlika* of Makati?”

“Crispin is handling that,” Graham admitted, “And quite frankly, if that keeps the Nosferatu away from us longer, then all the more the better. On the other hand, we both agree we are tired of Madrigal Rufino calling the shots.”

“And that is why we are here,” Guillermo sighed, “In hopes that we can see something we can use to our advantage to take Parañaque back from the Maharlika.” Both stared at each other for a moment. Though neither were admitting it aloud, both found the entire situation incredulous. After all, how bad could it be to have the Brujah working hand-in-hand with the Tremere? Guillermo could almost imagine the Brujah of North America laughing at his situation. The Brujah of the Philippines were willing lapdogs of the Usurper Clan.

“Assuming that is,” Graham hesitated before continuing, “What we both want.” The pregnant pause between them spoke volumes. They both chose to ignore it, however, and continue to assume both sides were willing to cooperate. Or perhaps deep down they knew they had no choice. “I’ll handle the witness in the ambulance. You handle the other one?”

The Brujah rubbed his face with his hand in frustration. “The kid who wouldn’t talk? Do we really have to deal with him? If he isn’t talking–”

“Guil,” Graham grabbed the Brujah’s shoulder.

“*Oo na, oo na*,” Guillermo growled, “I’ll handle–”

“No, not that,” Graham shook the shoulder, tugging at it to make Guillermo look a different way, “That.”

Outside the convenience store, a tall man waited outside. He tugged at his denim jacket and smiled at them. Graham had met Casimiro Nogales in the past, when the Prince was trying to convince the Tremere to set up a Chantry in his domain. Parañaque, back then was not yet a city, and its generous empty lots offered lots of room for such a structure. Graham turned it down, however. He did not look forward to having the Chantry in what looked more like a provincial area. Guillermo knew Nogales instead by another thread of connection. They were rivals when it came to the Commando Sputniks. Nogales had attempted, but failed, to gain control of the organization.

“*Punyeta*,” the Brujah shoved Graham’s hand away. “He’s actually still alive.”

“Opportunity,” Graham smiled and hurried to head outside. As he walked, he drew out a handkerchief and vigorously wiped his hand clean. Nogales stepped inside to meet him and the two exchanged pleasantries at the door. Graham bent down to kiss Nogales’ hand and the former Prince did nothing to dissuade him. “Prince Nogales, it is good to see you are well.”

“Benedict. Guillermo. I see you both are far away from Taguig tonight,” Nogales said as he reached this time for Guillermo’s hand. The Brujah ignored him. Nogales shifted his open hand from an offered handshake into a swooping motion to comb his hair back. It was a tiny act to save face. But face was an important thing in the Philippines. A fist fight with a total stranger would be laughed off. A scathing insult aimed at one in public has a bigger chance of a demand for recompense.

“I see you’re still alive. Despite losing your city to... the bitch with the puppets,” Guillermo laughed.

“Sienna may have lost herself to her Beast,” Nogales defended, “But what’s your Prince’s excuse for losing Makati?”

Guillermo moved so fast, Nogales did not have time to react. With his hand clutched around the Nosferatu’s throat, Guillermo shoved his face closer to the former Prince, “Your people did not heed our call for assistance when that Crusade fell down. So, don’t you fucking think you can blame us for losing the city.”

A lesser vampire would have submitted. Nogales was no young vampire, however. The former Prince calmly looked down between them and pressed the earlier obscured weapon against Guillermo’s chest. The Brujah glanced down and saw the gun in the Nosferatu’s hands. A shot at this range wouldn’t kill him. But it could launch a slag of metal into his chest which would splinter and tear into his heart. An aggravated injury like that could slow even an elder like Guillermo. Unless it had a

special round in its chamber.

“Must you test the temper of a Brujah?” Graham asked before shifting the focus back to the matter at hand, “Do you know anything about this?”

“Yes,” Nogales readily admitted, “There was a guest. A foreigner. He had a meeting with... or rather an encounter with the city’s Sabbat.”

Both Guillermo and Graham exchanged glances. They both felt there was something that happened recently in relation with a guest. But the answer was just beyond reach. Just enough... to decide it was pointless to figure it out. Such were the lingering effects of the Judas Kiss.

“Then we will leave you to handle this,” Graham gave a mock bow, “As this is your city.”

“Was,” Nogales admitted, “And perhaps we can come to an arrangement? You two clearly had something in mind when you came here to the edge of this domain. Did it have anything to do with the Bellator in town?”

“There’s a Bella-“

“We cannot say,” Graham interrupted Guillermo and threw him a glance. Guillermo hated all these second-layered discussions. So many things would have been sooner resolved if people just talked openly about things.

“Tell your Prince,” Nogales realized it was likely time to play his hand, “I have news for him. Information that might prove vital for the expansion of Taguig and the strengthening of our

presence in the country.”

“And the witnesses,” Graham reminded Nogales.

“Take the child. You’ll find interesting information from that Maharlika. I’ll handle the mortal,” he reassured them and hearing no counter, he left. Graham and Guillermo walked back into the convenience store. The Tremere motioned for the Brujah to wait. He wanted to make sure the Nosferatu was gone. Nogales shifted in appearance and somehow looked similar to the many policemen present at the area. His new appearance was close enough to tread past the line without anyone calling him out.

“I hate this game of secrets,” Guillermo protested.

“Which is why someone else has to do it for you. Head back to Taguig. Inform Rufino there is a Bellator in the city.”

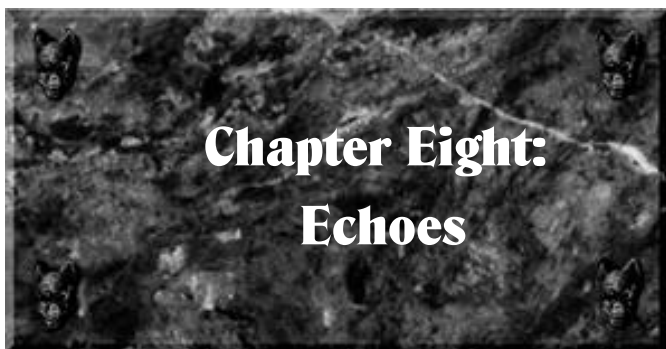
“A what?” Guillermo was not familiar with the term.

“Hired muscle,” Graham explained, “Mercenary Alastors. Anathema hunters who do it for the money. They don’t have true power or influence unless a Justicar has pressed them into service.”

They paused again. There was something stirring in their mind. Something... itching to break free. Guillermo somehow felt embarrassed. Like that emotional state was present at a similar instance. Graham kept staring at his hand. Was he holding something that moment. Why did it feel it wasn’t empty? The two struggled to find the words to express this inner turmoil they were facing. It was like an anxiety attack, swelling from within.

There was a cold wave of numbness that grew outwards from Graham's skull. There was a tingling sensation which he could not explain. It scratched at his throat. It danced on his tongue. Graham was the stronger-willed one between the two. Perhaps that was why he was able to focus and enunciate the struggle he had deep inside. "Do you think the Prince knows something we don't?"

The two stared at each other, uncertain how to answer.



“We are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep.”

William James

Two nights had passed since their Magdalena Faraon arrived in Manila. To her regret, both nights have been quite eventful – if eventful was the word one would use to refer to tragic events. There was the strange but attractive man she met on the plane. He did some kind of street magic trick of some sort and hypnotized her to obey his commands. There was the terribly disturbing nightmare with naked strangers and a blood-soaked woman of darkness and sex. There was no way for her to anticipate that she would find herself sitting face to face with a

literal impossibility. Sitting on the sole chair in the kitchen, the woman seemed like a porcelain statue that captured the light in the darkened room. Her face reminded Magda of those old paintings she had seen once when her assigned flights had her visiting Europe. She looked far from harmless, however. Her gaze reminded Magda of a predatory beast that waited for the moment to strike. This was despite the fact the woman was barefoot, in a pair of silk pajamas. It was the very same woman she saw in her nightmare, who caught her from a fall and pulled her to safety.

She said her name was Lucinde.

“You were in my nightmare,” Magda broke the silence by stating the impossible yet only certain fact she knew. “You live next door and you were in my dream. This is some kind of Murakami shit.”

“Murakami? Do you mean the Author of Dance Dance Dance and other books? Haruki Murakami. He does tend to have strange events in his stories,” Lucinde smiled. It still looked feral.

“How did you do that?” Magda asked.

“Why is she targeting you,” Lucinde asked back. She immediately noticed the confused expression on Magda’s face a split-second before it then transformed into anger and disbelief. Magda apparently found the question ludicrous. And Lucinde spotted that shift. Raising one hand to stall Magda’s protest, Lucinde repositioned her question, “Have you had this nightmare

before?”

“No!” Magda quickly answered, “You talk as if this was... wait. Was it more than just a nightmare?” Her mind raced with the possibilities. “Was it some sort of an attack?”

“Does the name Kemintiri mean anything to you?”

“I never heard of it. Is it.. Egyptian?” Magda shook her head.

“Hmm,” Lucinde broke eye contact. She stared at the far wall as she stared thinking of what this meant. Was this Magda woman just in the way? Was she Kemintiri’s next victim? Was she someone Kemintiri knew from the past? Was there some blood lineage connecting people? In the centuries of her unlife, Lucinde has learned to consider the many possibilities that could resolve a mystery. Blood lineages, consanguineous connections, mystical ley lines, and even ancient curses have proven – in some instances – to be the solution to seemingly inexplicable mysteries.

Magda saw the woman stare at the far side, and following her gaze saw it landed at her oven toaster. Magda quickly surmised Lucinde was lost in her own thoughts. The question on why she was being targeted meant someone intentionally gave her that nightmare. She found herself wondering if there was any connection to that man she met on the plane. He too had some kind of psychic ability. Was it he who was attacking her in her dreams? She had to know.

“Do you know a Lazaro?”

Lucinde's gaze snapped back at the woman. In as much as there was a larger chance it was merely a similar name with a total stranger, tonight was a night where connections seemed to be more evident than not. "I might."

Sensing an opening, Magda stood up and risked hurrying to a nearby table. Part of her was worried this predatory woman would snap at her for moving, but she felt it was more important to explain things clearer. She slid open a drawer and pulled out a notepad she usually used to mark down notes or shopping reminders. With a pencil, she quickly sketched out a likeness of Lazaro. It wasn't a perfect portrait, but it hit the notes that she remembered of his appearance: the slightly almond shaped eyes, the thin eyebrows, the slender lips, the high widow's peak. Magda was about to turn around to offer it when she bumped into Lucinde who already was standing behind her. Magda gasped in shock.

"Gaspar," Lucinde nodded knowingly, "You know Lazaro Gaspar." It was not a question.

"I met him on the plane. That was last night? More wee hours yesterday morning," Magda felt her hands tremble. She remembered his voice as he commanded him to drive. She remembered the sudden lack of control she felt. The fear and the trauma awoke a slumbering anxiety that began to rise up from deep within her. Her breath hastened. Her skin felt cold. Her face began to feel numb. Dark corners in her vision began to blur her line of sight. "Oh god," she muttered before she felt her body

lose strength.

Lucinde caught the fainting woman and carefully propped her down on the closest chair. The Justicar took the sketch from the table and stared at the image. Her mind fluttered back to the many reports her Archons would send her. She recalled Rose Magcalas, a Praetor who had indirectly reported to her the possible presence of Kemintiri in the city. Rose was related, by mortal lineage, to the one threatening the Masquerade, the web celebrity, Josie. Rose would have most likely contacted a Bellator to try and contain the situation privately, before others got a wind of her “sister” being the source of trouble. This Gaspar could serve as a useful ally in this. If Josie was sending out coded messages in hopes of attracting the Red List Setite, then having a Bellator could help in bringing them both down.

With the woman on the chair, Lucinde realized she had met her before. Earlier in the morning, while she was still in the cleaner part of the metro, Lucinde met a woman whose resilience to her Presence was quite remarkable. The idea that she would now both be the woman she happened to sleep next door to... the same woman who would have this nightmare... this all felt far too convenient. Lucinde’s eyes slowly scanned the room, now more curious for anything that would stand out. She didn’t need to look too far. On a wall with lots of framed images, there was a distinct image of a pale woman in a black tank top, jeans and boots. A silver square buckle and necklace completed her

ensemble. A distinct black curvy marking could be seen just below her eye. Behind her, a massive ankh symbol dominated the background.

Was Kemintiri pulling the strings even now?

Lucinde slowly coaxed the woman back to consciousness. Magda blinked her eyes a few times, feeling her flushed skin slowly regain sensitivity. Her fingers were still numb. A cold sweat still covered her skin.

“You’re alright, its okay, you’re safe,” Lucinde spoke in a low voice, trying to reassure her that everything was fine. Magda tried to sit up, but she still couldn’t find the strength to do so. She realized she had blacked out but wasn’t sure for how long. The woman in front of her looked familiar. She had to take a moment to remember who she was.

“The car,” Magda gasped, “You were the woman outside my car. The boyfriend left you.”

Lucinde smiled, “Good, good. That’s – “

“You also were in my nightmare. And next door. This is all happening so fast. What is going on? Who are you?”

“Stop. Calm down,” Lucinde said.

“You said your name was Lucinde. What sort of a name is that? And that other name. Kemintiri. What kind of a name...”

“Calm down,” Lucinde cooed her as she helped her sit up, “You’re with a friend. You’re safe. It doesn’t make sense, but you can feel I’m someone you know.” She projected just enough of her Presence to instill in Magda a feeling of familiarity and

trust. Entrancement was an old trick she had long learned to do when she was still extremely young. To her horror, Magda didn't seem affected by it in any way. The mortal pushed Lucinde back as she sat up. She gently slapped her face a few times to wake herself back up. "Head still aches. And cold. What is going on... who are you people..."

"Lazaro Gaspar. Where can I find him?"

"If I help you, will you answer my questions? I need to understand what is going on. I need to make sense of what is happening here," Magda sighed. She fought back the tears that threatened to fall. She just needed to make sense to the insanity that surrounded her.

Lucinde learned the art of lying a long time ago. She was not one who believed in the value of the word. She never saw the need to keep her promises. But for some reason, she felt this mortal deserved the truth.

"I can only answer as much as I feel is safe for you."

Magda just wanted it all to stop. She nodded her head, "The Grand Luxurious. Bonifacio Global City."

"I see," Lucinde helped the woman back down on the chair. Magda, however, stayed sitting up.

"That wasn't just a dream, was it," she sighed.

"Most likely, it was a message," Lucinde admitted.

"Will it happen again?"

"I suspect they will, until I find the one sending them," Lucinde said, "Or find the one they are meant to reach."

“What is all this,” Magda felt the panic rising, “None of this makes any sense. I just want it to stop.”

“I can make you forget. Would that help?”

Magda nodded. Maybe if it just all stopped, she could stop feeling so afraid. So confused.

“Then look into my eyes and stop fighting it,” Lucinde whispered.

*

The Grand Luxurious
Bonifacio Global City

The hotel lobby of the Grand Luxurious is a massive golden white chamber with tall mirrored walls and an organic-looking front desk for the concierge. Hanging above is a massive 66-light of Swarovski Elements Crystals. The chandelier had the flowing symmetry of a massive teardrop, composed of brilliant lights and accurately cut crystals. The floor was white marble and the rest of the furniture was minimalist with white tones.

Maria Velez stared at the two men who were arguing as they arrived that late evening. The first guy in the long-sleeves shirt was familiar to her. She had studied the list of expected guests and saw the notice that a Lazaro Gaspar had booked a suite for the next three weeks. He did not show up the previous night, but the night manager opted to retain his reservation given the three-week stay had been paid in advance. The second one, she did not recognize. Both of them were disheveled. Maria slipped

away from the table to approach them but stopped when she saw the red stains of blood on their clothes. Lazaro had been leaving a trail of bloody marks on the floor.

“Room,” Lazaro barked as his eyes met hers, “Keys. Give.”

“Here,” Maria muttered by rote practice as she handed the key card to the Ventrue. She would later recount this event and brush it off as her shock of seeing the blood keeping her from keeping her wits about. Dominate worked best when used subtly.

In the elevator, Binks inspected the damage. Lazaro shook his head when Binks confirmed their suspicions: Lazaro’s foot had been a victim of Vicissitude, the terrible power a single Clan has mastered: the Tzimisce. It allowed them to mold flesh and, for the more proficient, bone as if it were clay. Lazaro’s foot had been stripped to the bone. While this was far from impossible to cure for a vampire, it would take a generous helping of blood and time to repair.

“Definitely Sabbat,” Lazaro sighed, “Not even the Caitiff would easily learn such tricks.”

“Good thing we got away,” Binks agreed.

“No shit,” Lazaro wasn’t amused, “That Nogales fellow just left us behind. And since when were you dancing around with the Camarilla? I thought you were happily independent?”

Lazaro realized Binks didn’t answer. Which spoke volumes.

“You fuck. You’re jumping sides. You’re Camarilla or

Sabbat when the need calls for it. You're not even a real Anarch. You're just a two-faced son-of-a-bitch."

"Hey," Binks gave him a shove, "I do what I need to in order to survive. But bottom line is, you're a friend of mine and I took care of you."

"If this is care," Lazaro spat at the floor. There was a broken tooth in a small glob of vitae. "I rather not know how you treat your fucking enemies."

The walk to the room was a short one. The two hurried down the corridor and closed the door behind them. On the large bed, a small silver tray sat with a cardboard message:

Welcome to the Grand Luxurious.

Enjoy your stay.

Binks leapt onto the bed and laid his back against the cushions. Lazaro stared at him angrily and stripped his shirt off. Dropping it to the ground, Lazaro hoisted his pants off and checked on the full-length mirror for any other injuries. Binks saw a discolored area close to the base of Lazaro's spine.

"That?" he asked.

"Five years back. A Tremere. Those witches can actually control fire with their minds. The freak made the flames dance around his fingers."

"Oh fuck, it's a handprint," Binks laughed.

"You told me you've sworn your allegiance to the

Camarilla,” Lazaro hissed, “You lied to me. You’re clearly playing both sides.”

“Only here,” Binks admitted, “I mean, come on man. Things are so volatile here, it pays to be able to slip between the cracks. You think I would have been able to leave Parañaque if Shena knew I was loyal to Siena?”

“Stop,” Lazaro clutched his forehead, “You’re making my brain hurt.”

“I’m loyal to the Camarilla,” Binks affirmed, “Maybe I bounce between the Oripun and the Maharlikas, but I definitely am loyal to the Camarilla. Let’s face it. The sects here in the Philippines are barely similar to the actual sects.”

Lazaro slid a finger against the exposed bone. He could feel the hunger already growing. But he wasn’t even sure which hunting grounds he could visit in this country. “You’re an idiot. The Camarilla is the Camarilla. And it doesn’t matter if it’s called the Oripun, or the Asshira, or whatever non-Sabbat sect name it has because it’s in some foreign country. The Justicars have a reach beyond national boundaries. And the Malkavian Justicar will expect you to act as a proper member of the Camarilla regardless...” Lazaro stopped talking. He realized how absurd the example was going to be only for the fact it was a Malkavian they were talking about.

“I’m on your side,” Binks reiterated. “And what matters is, I keep you safe. Nogales still has a bid to reclaim the Philippines. He insists that many years back, before the Japanese

had their hands on the country, the Philippines was under Camarilla domain. The Lasombra may have had a huge shadow cast over Spain during those years, but it was the Brujah of Toledo had infiltrated the country long before the Keepers arrived. I know even my Sire favored the other side. But I'm no shovelhead. And I definitely am not some Anarch hungry to revolt against a quieter life."

The last time that Lazaro ever heard Binks speak this assertively, it was when the Malkavian confessed to the Bellator his Sire's transgressions.

"So, what happens now?" Binks broke the silence. "Do you fly off? Tell the Justicar that the cities are under siege? Inform the rest of the Camarilla there's a nuclear- "

"Shush," Lazaro raised a finger at Binks' face. He then pointed to his ear, signaling anyone could be listening. The Malkavian nodded and went silent. Lazaro dropped the last article of clothing on the floor and snatched the towel on the bed. "I am going to clean myself up. Probably get some rest in the tub. This leg is gonna need to heal and I am starting to get hungry."

"Crap. What kind of blood you like again?" Binks asked.

"The dying," he replied and limped his way to the bathroom.

"That's... not easy," Binks admitted.

"No, it is not. Are you staying here?"

The Malkavian didn't answer. He still felt bad that Lazaro now had doubts on his truth-worthiness. He had to do

what he did the previous night because of the risk that Shena would have read his thoughts. He also had precious few (which is really read as no one) whom he called close friends. Losing Lazaro from that list was not what he had in mind.

“I’m sorry,” Binks frowned. “I can go.”

“Or you can stay,” Lazaro admitted, “I could use a bit of help with this foot. I mean, assuming you’re not too hungry.”

The two stared at each other from across the room. The Ventrue shrugged and slipped into the bathroom, leaving the door open. Binks knew what Lazaro was implying. One of the few things the Venture Curse ignored was if the blood was vitae. Some Ventrue loved to claim their Curse kept them from drinking Kindred blood as it did not match their sanguine tastes, but the truth was vitae was always acceptable to the Blueblood palate. This would not be the first time Binks and Lazaro would share blood. For Lazaro, it was a matter of convenience. For Binks, who was younger, there was still some level of attraction. He still found it hard to disconnect the euphoric feeling of the act of feeding with the emotional attraction fanned by the Blood Bond. He knew it was an artificial feeling. But it was one of the few ways that still existed which made him feel once more alive.

Binks slowly reached up and began to slide his shirt off. He remembered how when this first happened, he was all defiant and uneasy. Lazaro was helping him bring down a group of loyalists of his Sire, Emerson Scott. They were pinned at a junkyard and Lazaro needed the boost. When Lazaro told him he

needed the vitae to end the fight, Binks went all defensive, ranting about not being gay or interested in having some other guy “touch him in that way.” A loyalist emerged from a higher vantage point, and with a clumsy dive, kicked Binks to the ground and trapped Lazaro in a headlock. It took their combined strength to force the Brujah into Torpor and even then it was not without its price. Lazaro was far too injured and on the verge of slipping into Torpor as well. Binks, panicked that the Bellator would leave him and fail to help him build his new identity among the Camarilla, offered his wrist for the Ventrue to feed on. When Lazaro remained unresponsive, Binks realized he had to force the vitae into Lazaro’s mouth and decided to use his own.

The exchange easily slid into a kiss as both began to suckle against the sudden growing warmth between their mouths. Lazaro felt the rush of power as vitae flooded into his throat. Binks felt the immense sexual explosion of release as the Ventrue suckled against his blood covered tongue. By the time Lazaro had fed enough to be safe from Torpor, Binks was lying on his back overwhelmed by the fact he had just had what probably was his first post-death orgasmic experience. Lazaro thanked him for the vitae, admitting had Binks agreed to give it earlier, they probably would have dealt with the loyalist quicker. Binks found himself unable to make eye contact. He felt like a young teenage boy who had just had his first brush with sex.

And yes, Binks is still absolutely certain he identified as

straight. He would never admit to any living soul however, he missed how alive that made him feel.

The warm air of the shower blew against Binks' exposed skin as he stripped his pants off and stepped into the room. Standing in his underwear, he saw Lazaro in the bathtub, rinsing the wounds on his leg clean. Binks unconsciously cupped his own genitals, as if to check if he was getting aroused. Physically, there was nothing. But emotionally, perhaps even psychologically, Binks felt his heart should be pounding by now.

"This isn't- "

"Of course," Lazaro agreed, "Although I don't see why you had to strip your clothes off. I could have fed from your arm while you stood outside the tub?"

Binks didn't answer. He was already slipping into the tub beside Lazaro.



“Every great story seems to begin with a snake.”

Nicolas Cage

Two nights had passed since their Magdalena Faraon arrived in Manila. Within those 48 hours, Magda has found herself face-to-face with an impossible new world. In this strange dark world, Magda had come to learn that mind control and telepathic connections were real. Nightmares were more than just idle thoughts. But more important than nightmares were memories, and Magda realized the woman’s offer was to take those away from her.

“Stop.”

The words came even before Magda realized why she

Blood Red Pearls

was saying it. The foreign woman in front of her raised an eyebrow, amused at her sudden change of heart. But for Magda, this wasn't just a rash decision. There was a deeper-seated reasoning that empowered her desire to keep the terrifying memories.

As a child, Magda was plagued by nightmares. For many years, her parents would wake to sound of her screaming as she trashed and screamed and kicked in her sleep. Religious people as they were, their initial attempts to help her were to bring her to the local Church as they feared their only daughter had fallen prey to the seductions of the devil himself. When the parish priest confirmed that Magda's condition was not a case of possession, her parents then embraced prayers and constant rosaries as the solution. When that still did not succeed in ending the nightmares, they then attempted psychological options. They couldn't afford it long term, given their financial status, but thankfully, it was long enough to have produced results. Magda's nightmares came to a halt around her high school years after she found a group of friends to call her own and a stronger faith in the existence of something greater than herself. Her parents believed she found God.

The truth was, something found her.

And it watches over her still.

*

Sarhento Mariano Cemetery and Crematorium,
Pasay City

Bahgat Sighn walked along the long cemetery wall which had been beautifully painted with thirty panels worth of murals, each seven meters long. The mural collectively told the history of the city and how it came to be branded as a “Travel City” due to the proliferation of bus terminals and airports in its vicinity. But the murals failed to tell another story. One of poverty, criminal gangs, and corruption. And these stories could be seen in the parts of the city where the street lights never worked. And the policemen were more frightening than the crooks.

These were not things a Ravnos *antitribu* would worry over, however. They were gifted with preternatural senses to spot incoming danger and the toughness to take typically fatal blows without faltering. And some claimed reality itself bent to their will. Whether it was a power of illusion or a twisting of reality for short periods of time, the Ravnos (and their *antitribu*) were far from defenseless. This was no more evident than here in the Philippines where belief in the supernatural, fear of the criminal, and hate for the moral was very common. Pulling a gun, illusory as it may be, out from a car door compartment or revealing a knife that was supposedly tucked behind one’s pants were not only plausible but expected in places where violence was believed to be perpetrated more often by corrupt members of the police.

Close to end of the long barrier, a small shrine to the Virgin Mary sat facing the street. The statue showed signs of neglect with chipped paint and cracked stone giving the mother of Christ an almost grimaced expression. Mounds of melted wax covered most of its base and with adequate light, one could see

the rainbow blur of colors that almost seemed like a dying changeling had puked out its guts. Those who knew where to look, however, would catch the tiny engraving that marked her hands. A glimpse would probably fail to notice anything. A longer stare would reveal to the onlooker the strange markings on her palms which seemed to hint of either stigmata or vandalism. But in Bahgat's eyes, he could see how the markings were actually fine lines that were painted on the palms. The lines, for those gifted with Auspex, could see quite clearly that the symbol is that of the Dark Mother, Lilith.

Walking to the shrine, Bahgat pressed a hand on the base of the Virgin's statue, bowed his head, and waited.

When he was young, Bahgat never thought his life would find itself surrounded by so much secrecy and misdirection. As a young man, Bahgat was rich with dreams and ambition. He loved music and taught himself to play the guitar despite being the least wanted child in a brood of seven. War was upon the Philippines then and the Japanese soldiers had gained control of most of the urban centers, having wrested the country from America. Bahgat's family was split between two political ideologies, with his parents supporting the guerrilla movement while his grandparents and the rest of the clan were loyal to the occupiers. Bahgat's own mother at one point even defaced herself with melted wax to repel the Japanese soldiers from taking an unhealthy interest in her. But it was that fated night when Bahgat and his family were woken at the dead of night by their father and told to flee for the nearby forest. When Bahgat refused to abandon their pet dog, Matias, a Doberman, his father demanded he should choose between killing the dog to silence it or tying the

dog's snout closed with twine. Bahgat wound the twine as quickly as possible despite his pet's protests and he learned that moment what it meant to live a life where stealth was a necessity. In the shadows of trees, they hid and watched as the Japanese raided their home, and after finding it empty, set it on fire. Very quickly, the weeks that followed became lessons in hiding, surviving, and fear. It would not be until two months later, when Bahgat saw one of his aunts while he was stealing meat from the market, would he learn it was his own relatives who had reported the Japanese soldiers of their loyalties. But with each passing week, Bahgat and his family would find themselves hunted despite hiding in the woods, and one by one their numbers dwindled as Bahgat's siblings began to vanish one by one. Their bodies would be found a day or two later, hanging naked from an Acacia tree and completely drained of blood.

By September of 1945, Bahgat would learn of the story that the Americans had liberated the country from Japan. It was a story that paled in comparison, however, to the promise of immortality that a dark man offered him as he neared death in the woods. The man claimed his name was Ghibran and it would be the first and last day Bahgat would ever see him. It would not be until many years later before the two reconciled under the triumphant taking of the Zamboanga by the *Maharlika*. He learned the embrace was merely an act of pity after having killed every single other member of his family. Bahgat called for Monomacy, a challenge among fellow *Maharlika* deemed sacrosanct by the sect. The Bishop presiding over the engagement, a mad Toreador name Esperanza, chose to make it a test of skills and chose a young 17-year old illiterate girl who was currently in prison for

vagrancy to be the target of the duel. Their battle lasted over 48 hours, drove the young girl insane over nightmares of a curly-haired Thing that kept attacking her, and ended with Bahgat striking down Ghibran before his Sire realized Bahgat feigned losing the challenge to land the killing blow. Esperanza was simply amused and took Bahgat to train and eventually serve as the Kai of the Sword.

Now, many decades since he first tied his own dog's snout to silence it, Bahgat found himself once more having to embrace silence to stand by his allegiances. He claimed loyalty to the Lasombra Archbishop Laurel Aguinaldo, whose hold on Makati was constantly challenged by the Ventrue Prince of Taguig. But his true loyalties were to the fast-rising and soon-to-be-proclaimed Cardinal, Ysmael Prieto of the Tzimisce. Unlike the rest of the Metro, Bahgat uncovered Prieto's plans to widen her domain when he discovered the ashes of Basilio, the Nosferatu Archbishop of Pasay. When his post-cognitive abilities unveiled to him the Archbishop's killer, Bahgat realized it was an opportunity to both break free from the Lasombra and to serve someone whom he believed would accomplish far more for the sect. He had done well so far in keeping Aguinaldo in the dark. But given the news of a Justicar in the Philippines, Bahgat realized Ysmael might need to tone down her ambitions until the *Oripun* elder withdraws from the country.

Bells tolled in the distance. North of the cemetery, close to the Cavite-Batangas-Bataan Bus Terminal, a Church stood along Sgt. Mariano street. The bells always rang at 6p.m., 8p.m., and one last time before midnight. Bahgat realized ten minutes had passed and none of the insect servants of "Basilio" had come

to receive him. This was definitely a red flag as far as Bahgat was concerned. For a brief moment, he worried that the Justicar had beat him to finding the self-proclaimed Cardinal. And when a hand seized his hand from behind, Bahgat nearly struck back instinctively with his illusions to bring the perceived attacker down. What he saw was a young girl with a garland of flowers in her hand. She was shaking in her dirtied clothes and her frayed uncombed hair. She stood barefoot on the concrete and tugged at Bahgat to follow her to the cemetery.

“Ys-“ Bahgat was about to ask, but she shook her head and lead him through the crack on the cemetery wall.

“She found me,” Ysmael quickly whispered, “And I presume you’ve come to warn me.”

“Yes. We need to hold back. To avoid notice.”

“Bahgat-“

“Taking the Metro will have to wait. A Justicar in this country... the last time there was one, it led to an entire country being convinced that the sun was dancing. We cannot deal with a Justicar,” Bahgat tried to explain even as they maneuvered between the cube-shaped tombs. While the Ravnos was a Survivor in more ways than one, he had never confessed to feeling an attachment towards the Tzimisce. Perhaps in the absence of a Sire, the Trickster found himself needing a mother. Or perhaps he simply believed in her claim, that she served an even greater force. An ancient sleeping beneath the city. The Sleeper.

“It is Lucinde,” Ysmael said. Bahgat stopped in his tracks. He dropped backwards, leaning on the closest tomb and stared blankly ahead. Lucinde. The Red Alastor. The Child of Severus. The first Alastor to ever exist. There were Anathema that have found Final Death in her hands. Few among the Sabbat were willing to face her head on.

“You... escaped her,” Bahgat asked, sounding worried. He glanced over his shoulder to look if anyone was following them. It was a foolish thing, he knew. If Lucinde had followed Ysmael, Bahgat would have probably found a stake stabbed through his chest this moment.

“She nearly caught me. But she admitted we are not her goal. We are merely in the way,” Ysmael explained, leading Bahgat between two obsidian tombs. This was a new path. Bahgat saw there was a hatch on the floor. The Fiend motioned for him to open it. He quickly stepped ahead of her and found a good position to brace himself against the sides of the tomb and wrap his hands on the handle.

“Then we will hide,” Bahgat smiled. “We can wait it out. Let her hunt her Anathema.”

“In a way,” Ysmael admitted.

Bahgat heaved and the door began to slide open. The Ravnos expected stairs. Or a platform. But instead it was just a black yawning hole. He hoisted the panel to the opposite side and carefully laid it down to the ground. He looked into the opening and felt no breeze. It smelled dry and old. Bahgat wasn't certain

if he should avoid peeking in. But his curiosity got the better of him. He risked a peek and allowed his enhanced senses to show him what was inside.

Skeletons. Bones. There was a small hill of human bones in the darkness of the void. As if years of throwing bodies within had created his macabre pile. None of the bones were Cainite. Some even suggested they were Cathayan remains. Or even skinchanger skulls. With his heightened perceptions, Bahgat saw the bones and realized the hatch was, in many ways, a tomb. And the same perceptions warned him too late of the distinct sound of wood sliding into Cainite flesh.

“We will hide,” Ysmael whispered as she shoved the wooden stake into Bahgat’s back. The Ravnos felt the spike scrape against his spine and penetrate his heart. His body was a distant friend, beyond his ability to move in any way. He wanted to scream. To cry out. To demand she explain why she had done this to him. But the same paralytic curse all Cainites were vulnerable to disabled more than just his limbs but any ability to speak or use his vampiric gifts as well.

“You ask why I have done this,” Ysmael whispered, “I am certain you do. My only answer for you is brief and terrifying. The Sleeper demands it. The Sleeper needs vitae to wake from his slumber. His dreams demand I act, and I cannot disobey.”

Bahgat felt nothing as Ysmael pushed him into the hole. He felt nothing as he struck the bones and they crashed in all directions, splintering apart like a stack of matchsticks. He felt

nothing as he hit the bottom of the tomb, where a fetid pool nearly a foot deep received his fall.

But just before the torpid nightmares began, in the fleeting seconds between fear and surrender, Bahgat felt an intelligence slip into his. An unfamiliar presence intimately entered his mind and made itself known.

It was then Bahgat felt something.

It was his first true experience of absolute fear.

*

Somewhere

Her dark smile was radiant against the crimson light. She slid her hands across her skin, gliding them over the curves of her body. She relished the warmth of the blood coating her and ran her long thick tongue over her lips to savor its taste. She shuddered. But not because of the richness of the blood. Nor from the last few heartbeats that could be felt from the bodies entwined around her. She felt the gush of excitement from the knowledge that her little game was playing out as she wanted it.

The Justicar was here.

It took very little effort to have the Toreador and Ventrue play their parts. The Ventrue was so desperate to please that getting her to function as needed was a simple matter of misdirection. The Toreador, on the other hand, understood the strange new world of social media and – like herself – saw its terrible and triumphant potential for immortal being such as themselves.

But all these would not have been as easy to accomplish had it not been for Josephine Magcalas. The Toreador *antitribu* was, in many ways, the catalyst that allowed all of this to happen. She was the tool that was needed to ignite all the threads of her plan into action.

Kemintiri smiled as Josephine slid off the dead bodies and walked towards the still running camera. The red dot glowed uncaring back at her, indicating that the video feed was still live. Josie bent down to the camera's level, blew her viewers a kiss, and reached over to shut the device.

"Another wonderful night," Josephine grinned.

"It is," Kemintiri replied.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to this. The power. The hunger. The heat."

"Everything is as I promised it to you," Kemintiri smiled. Her eyes pierced the darkness. Golden discs against the shadows.

"I sent the letter as you told me to," Josephine said, "The one about the Justicar."

"As you were commanded, you obeyed. Thus, you are rewarded."

"What about that woman," Josephine's voice shifted in tone. She sounded worried. "The one who kept appearing in my dreams. Who is she? Why is she important?"

"She serves a purpose," Kemintiri admitted.

"Is she more important than me?" Josephine asked.

"No," Kemintiri replied, "No one is more important than you right now."

Josephine stood in front of the mirror and stared at her

naked body. She rubbed the splatters of blood against her skin, as if she was kneading the life force into her dead body. “But only right now,” she asked.

“Of course,” Kemintiri replied. “Would I lie to you?”

Josephine stared at the serpent’s eyes and knew the truth. She knew Kemintiri would. But she chose to say nothing at all.

*

Parañaque

Shena realized she must have dozed off. She blinked her eyes and rose from the leather chair. These black outs were starting to become a habit. She was worried it was some kind of blood-born disease affecting her faculties. Or worse.

She did suspect it was that one of her wayward personalities was trying to resurface. Perhaps it was that mousey one. Sienna. The one who had taken charge for the last few years. So, to anticipate such moments, she had a CCTV camera installed on the wall just above the bookshelf. With a flick, Shena switched the screen on and played back the recording. Her eyes caught the scenes of the unfolding scenario and betrayed the growing anger that she felt. She watched as she, herself, helped the *Oripun* escape. She watched she lifted the Ventrue and carried him out of her office.

“Looks like we have ourselves a spy,” Shena muttered. From behind her, the puppets rose into view. The monkey laughed excited. The bird like puppet flapped its beak like an excited hand. The long-necked turtle danced in its place. But

among them, a fourth lesser seen puppet silently watched. Its green scales glistened thanks to the sewn sequins. But its eyes were illuminated from within thanks to something else.

Something watching.



End of Book Two

Coming Soon

Blazing Hearts Revolt

Book Three of the Reconquista Saga

LEXICON

Aba: Expression. English equivalent, “Oh!” or “Oh my!”

Dios Ko: Expression. English equivalent, “Oh my God!”

Sarhento: Sargent. A local term to refer to policemen.

Sige Lang: “Keep going / Don’t stop”

Skwater: “Squatter”. Illegal resident.

Taragis: Morphophonemic variation of the cuss word, puta. Directly translates to “Mother is a whore.”

Maginoo: Vampire. Originally, a pre-colonial term to refer to the top-class people in society.

Maharlika: Sabbat vampire. Loosely translates to “Royal Noble” among the mortals.

Oripun: Camarailla vampire. Used derogatorily. Visayan word whose Spanish equivalent is *Alipin*, which means slave, or more accurately, someone who inherits their parent’s debt of obligation

Punyeta: Filipino cuss word. Originally Spanish which was used to refer to a “wanker” but in the Philippines, it was used more as an insult or interjection, similar in usage to the term, “asshole.”

About this Work

Blood Red Pearls is the second book of the Reconquista saga, and continues the search of the Justicar Lucinde for the Anathema Kemintiri, the struggle of Lazaro Gaspar to complete his mission amidst the Oripun's attempt to reclaim the country from the Maharlika, and the complex relationships shared by a Toreador and a Ventrue, a mortal and a Vampire, and two old friends who find their friendship tested in many ways.

If the reception to this series of books goes well, a game supplement to use the story's setting and characters will be released as well.

Special Thanks

To Ryan Mendoza, Oliver and Quincy Buenaflor, Rommel delos Santos and Marco Santos. You were my original companions in exploring the World of Darkness.

To the Gallants who keep me moving.

Tag Team Hero: Rocky Sunico

Tag Team Supporters: Rob Abrazado, David Harrison, Mina, Karlo, and Ryan Schoon.

To Rocky Sunico. You are my love, my anchor, and you keep the Beast at bay. I love you.



About the Author

Tobie Abad is a game designer and author based in Manila, Philippines. He is the brains behind TAG Sessions and has written for 7th Sea 2nd edition Pirate Nations, The Sound of Water, Girls Elsewhere, Itras By: Menagerie, Cold Shadows, Tiny Dungeon 2e and more.

He has also written for the Master Story Creators Anthology 1: Of Fans, Dragon and Blood, Queer Gaymers, and has dabbled on online comics.

He has committed himself to playing 12 new games each year and runs completely-free open-table one-shot sessions called, TAG Bites, that aim to help more gamers try unfamiliar games and expand their palate.



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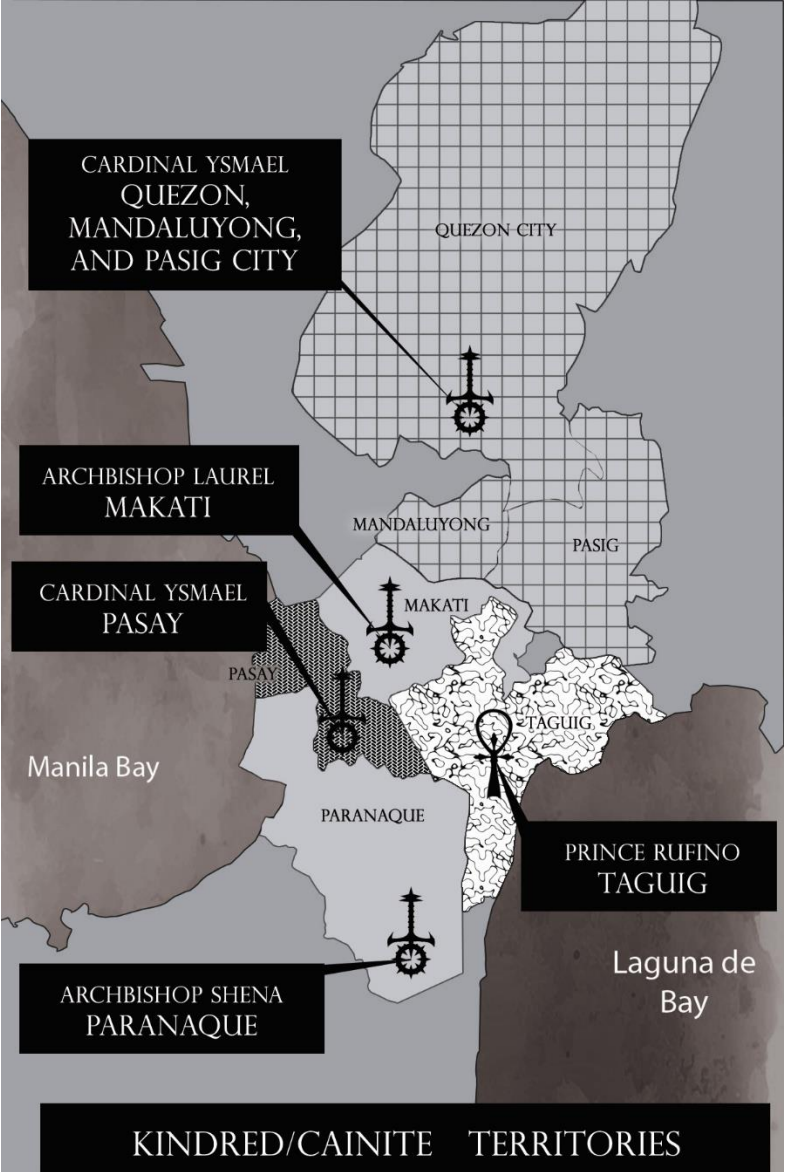
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Blood Red Pearls

Blood Red Pearls is the second book of the Reconquista saga, a story that explores the Camarilla's attempt to regain control of the Philippines, a Ventrue Justicar's search for an old enemy, and the unexpected bonds that form between two people.

It is an insidious tale of revenge, obsession, and love.

This is a **Vampire: The Masquerade** novelette series by Tobie Abad.



For Mature readers only
Part 2 of the Reconquista Saga

