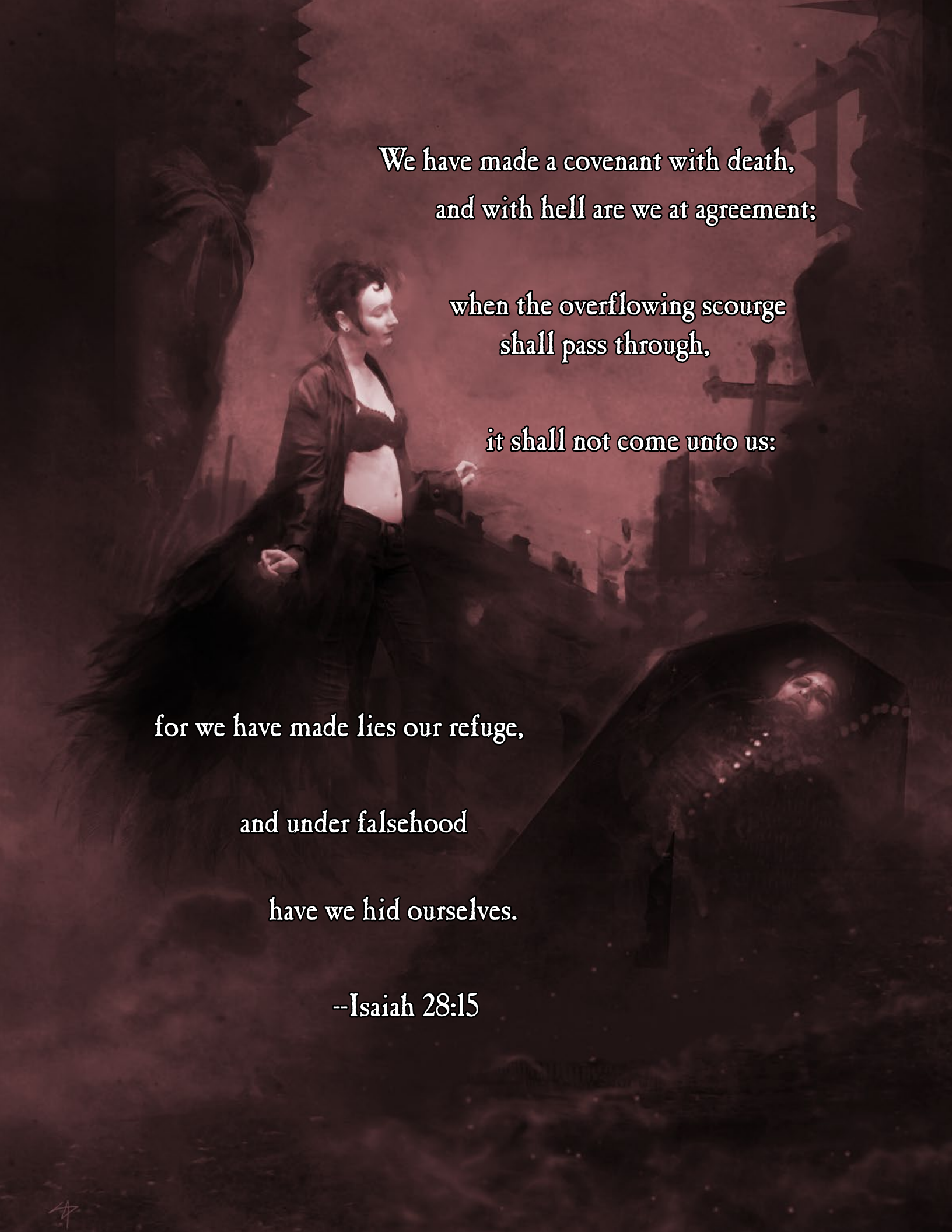


Secrets of the **COVENANTS**



A Sourcebook for
Vampire: The Requiem



We have made a covenant with death,
and with hell are we at agreement;

when the overflowing scourge
shall pass through,

it shall not come unto us:

for we have made lies our refuge,

and under falsehood

have we hid ourselves.

--Isaiah 28:15

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Special Thanks

Requiem players far and wide, and especially everyone who contributed to the open development process.

The clanbook creators, including Joseph Carriker, Will Hindmarch, and Craig Grant, for setting a sterling example.



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CARTHIANs

Another thing that pisses me off, talking about who started
punk rock music. Was it... the Sex Pistols in England? Was
it... the Ramones and the Velvet Underground in New York?
Who cares who started it? It's music, I don't know who started
it, and I don't give a shit. The one thing I know is that we did it
harder, we did it faster, and we definitely did it with more love,
baby. You can't take that away from us.

- Stevo SL Punk

LETTER FROM the EDITOR

Welcome to this month's issue of FUCK THE REVOLUTION. It's been three months since our last issue. Sorry about that, we were busy saving the fucking universe you ungrateful motherfuckers.

So whatta we got for you this issue? Glad you asked. We're gonna talk a little bit about New York history. By that, I mean Carthian history in New York. I know what you're saying. "Dinosaur! I don't

want to read fucking history texts and shit! I want to hear about sex, drugs, rock, roll, blood, and fire!" Well, calm the fuck down, because we're on the same page. I'll make sure to focus on the sex, drugs, rock, roll, blood, and fire in the history. The thing is, New York's got a lot of new faces come to breathe some fresh air into our dead-assed lungs. This issue's gonna be their primer. They've got to learn their history. After all, if you don't know your history, you're bound to repeat it. Repeating shitty history is how you get hair metal. Nobody wants hair metal. I don't wish hair metal on my enemies.

We've also got a lot of other primer shit. Codes. Tactics. All that jazz. So if it ain't obvious: DON'T SHARE THIS. I know one of you guys will. And to you, I say, fuck you. Every time the Movement can't get its head out of its ass, that's your fault. You. Personally. So do the Movement a favor, and fuck off. Swear to the Invictus. Get your pretty watch. Because if we find you, and you haven't left, we're going to kick you out. And we won't stop kicking until we're sure you're out.

Now that we got that unpleasantness out of the way: FUCK THE REVOLUTION!
Yours,

Dinas



NEW YORK - THE CROWD



The thing about talking about the Carthian Movement in New York is you can't just talk about New York. Lady Liberty, huddled masses yearning to breathe free, you know the drill. Except we don't breathe, so that shit doesn't apply. We can't just talk about New York, because the Movement is a culture vampire.

Follow with me for a second.



We devour culture. Since night fucking one, the New York Movement has dedicated itself to finding the best and the brightest ideas from all over the Kindred world. We take their coolest, and we steal their ideas. It works pretty well for us, because we've been in power for a long fucking time, and we're not going to lose power any time soon. Then again, it sucks for the cities we're stealing from. Their game plans get leaked. Their leaders leave for our brighter pastures. Carthian power tends to collapse pretty quickly after we come into town.

But Dina! I hear you. You've got a thing brewing in your head right now about how we're hurting the Movement elsewhere, so we're hurting the Movement everywhere, including New York. That's treasonous and unethical and terrible and monstrous.

Fuck you; you drink human blood to survive. Get off your high horse before judging. It's really the same thing. We take what we need, because we need it. Sometimes we take too much, and the vessel dies. It sucks (I know, you've heard that one before. Sue me.), but it's the Requiem. We're just honest enough to do it on a larger scale.

So. Us. History.

BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

We founded the Carthian Movement in 1778 right here in New York City.

New York City? (I know that joke's a bit dated. I'm a child of the '80s. You can't take that away from me.)

It was real fucking early in American history. People were feeling out this new experiment in Western democracy. As some things worked and others didn't, people started organizing into groups that could achieve greater influence than their component individuals could. The kine formed a lot of these groups; the one you've probably heard of is Tammany Hall. It drove most of young New York's city politics in the early nights of America. Our Movement came from that model. It's not to say Kindred had much of a hand in the mortal Tammany Hall. I think maybe there was a ghoul or two in the ranks. But we liked the design, and we took it. The big difference though between our Movement and Tammany Hall, was we didn't have much contest.

Back in that time, New York didn't have a lot of old guard. We had a couple Invictus here and there. They came with the aristocrats from England and France, but they were mostly younger licks. Their elders looked at America as a slum. Hell, there's some record of Invictus talk of using

you ↗



“the colonies” as a prison colony for their undesirables. There’s an old Gangrel living down in the Pine Barrens, we call him Jersey Devil. He was one of their first experiments, one of those undesirables. He’s independent as fuck, but he’s a friend of the Movement. We might not have survived some of the biggest attacks if he hadn’t stepped in and stopped them.



Competition aside, we won because we appealed to the masses. The masses were unique in New York, because they were from all the fuck over the place. These masses didn’t know each other. They didn’t look like each other. They didn’t even speak the same languages. But they had some things in common: They were all New Yorkers, and they were all more like each other than they were like the rich, hoity-toity motherfuckers you expect vampires to be. We were like the blue collars to their stand up Dracula collars.

Long story short, a bunch of us, a bunch of Kindred from all the fuck over, we got together, and we decided we were gonna do New York, and we were gonna do it different than anybody else ever had. Now, let’s take a short break from ancient history. Now let’s talk Cairo.

The French Movement claim to have founded the Movement in 1779. Of course they would. But 1778 < 1779. That’s just math. We founded the Movement. They snooze, they lose.

On the Name

We were gonna be called the Tammanend Movement. A lot of us thought that sounded stupid. Most of the kids called it the

“Tammament Movement.”

Nobody could get it right.

Then you had some assholes trying to say it in Munsee or

some other Native American language they didn’t know.

So we called it the Carthian Movement, named after

Carthage. It lasted a long damned time, and Aristotle thought it was peachy keen.

So, it was good enough for us.



CAIRO: FOREVER *and* a NIGHT

Of course Cairo knows revolution. Fuck, they’ve been having them for millennia. That place is like a hot potato. Except instead of a potato, they throw around rulership. And instead of throwing it because it gets too hot, they typically stake the fucker and everyone supporting him.

Sorry to my fellow ladies for the gendered pronoun there. But Cairo’s not had a woman in charge for as long as anyone remembers, which is about fucking disgusting.

Cairo's like an object lesson for Carthians. Sometimes, you can have too much revolution. But when is revolution too much? When is the safety of maintaining a status quo worth the stagnation of progress? Imagine my saying that in the voice of the wise old man in that curio shop on Canal and Centre.

We're gonna focus on the most recent revolution. The turmoil going on in the mortal world made it real easy and convenient for the Kindred world to twist turn upside down. The Prince of Cairo was an old Lancea et Sanctum member called Prince Ali Bagher. Ali Bagher was a typical theocrat. Basically: Do this. Don't do that. Exceptions are punishable by death. I'm sure you know the type.

He did his tyrant shtick, as Princes are wont to do. He got his ass dusted one hot July. It was not your run of the mill power seizure, either. It wasn't some pompous-assed blowhard stepping up with a bunch of his toadies demanding the former Prince step down because yadda yadda popular opinion or whatever lies new Princes tell themselves so they can sleep during the day. A Neglatu took him out.

Neglatu

I say Neglatu like you're supposed to know what that is. You know what revenants are, right? That's when you kill someone with fang, or kill a ghoul, and they come back. This is mostly a problem for shitty elders, and licks that kill a lot of people. Neglatu are like revenant masters. They keep stables of revenants who will follow their masters right into hell. It's like having an incestuous personal army.

From the few witness stories, our intrepid Neglatu raided Elysium when everyone was present. They marched on the scene, and twenty or so revenants outright fucking slaughtered Ali Bagher, his Sheriff, and a few other officials who tried defending him. Most everyone fled. Some revenants died in the chaos, more than non-revenants. Fourteen citizens died, the most popular count says. Point is they took the city in less than ten minutes of massacre.

Thing was, our revenant? He's Carthian. I mean, he's not Carthian in the way you and I might think of Carthians, because you and I don't think of raids with a bunch of mindless, hungry monsters to be a very Carthian behavior.

Now, he's in charge. He rules with his little brood of revenants. The crazy part is he administers what's probably the most directly democratic Carthian domain I've ever heard of. There's "one vampire, one vote" for most issues, and he allows opt-in volunteer committees to advise him on less pressing issues. Everyone I've talked to say that except for the slobbering monsters at his side, he's a great leader. Now, that's a huge "except." Because I've seen the Cairo news; there's some shit that's hit their air and print that would get a fucker killed in any reasonable city. He's teetering on the brink of shattering the Masquerade. One of my informants tells me a group of Israeli Invictus is looking to move in and depose him for the greater stability of the region (and shut up with your cracks about the greater stability of the Middle East).

Cairo looks stable. Everyone says it looks stable. The leader talks a good game about defending the rights of the individual, and guaranteeing the vote to every Kindred in Cairo. He's defended territory rights, and kept the elders from claiming all the prime feeding grounds. He's democratized policy. That sounds great until you note that about fourteen vampires aren't going to get to vote in any of these

pretty little elections. Maybe Ali Bagher was a dick. Fuck, he was almost certainly a dick. But killing fourteen vampires just tells me you're willing to kill a lot more for very little reason. Cairo's still in its honeymoon phase with our Neglatu Prince. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he'll turn out great. Who knows?

When we heard word of it, it sounded interesting. So we (and a few others) sent people to look into Cairo. They confirmed the best and worst of it. The city seems stable, aside from the threats to the Masquerade. And considering the turmoil right now in that area, a broken Masquerade could be absolutely devastating. But it's not our place to fix it, and I don't even think we really could if we tried. Best we could do is adopt some new laws to make sure that doesn't happen here.

Law One: The act of creating a revenant is punishable by death.

Law Two: Anyone involved in forcibly deposing a government official cannot serve in the next elected governing body.

Now, these aren't perfect, but it's not hard to not make revenants: If you kill someone, dispose of the body. Ashes don't rise as revenants. You should be doing this shit anyway. If you don't want to dispose of bodies, don't fucking kill people. Mayor Blasio is making our Requiems a whole lot easier. Let's not make his statistics look so bad, so he can keep up the good work. We don't want Neglatu running around. We can all pretty much be on the same page there, right? This isn't black and white, though. The Law's in place. It should be enforced. I haven't heard of anyone biting it because of this law yet. But, I've heard rumors of a Neglatu in the sewer system, so who knows? Then again, I've heard rumors of alligators there too.



And who is involved in deposing government officials? Like, can you be the one planning the assault? What if you trick people into revolution? That's a tough one. The Carthian Law will sort it out. So far, it's not been an issue because it's a new law. But we'll find out soon enough, I'm sure. Best bet is, don't fucking forcibly depose government officials. We have systems in place. You might not like the systems, but they like you. Work with the systems, because the systems give us society. It's all social contract.

There's Cairo out of the way. I like Cairo, because we took some advice from them, but we didn't actually steal any of their culture in such a way that they couldn't use it anymore. That's the closest thing we get to heroic: We didn't steal shit from them.

**HANDI:
EVERYTHING
TURNS GRAY**

There was our positive. Not particularly positive, but you take what you can get when you're dealing with Murder Culture. Now we're going to go for the negative. Oh boy! But it's okay; it's mostly about a culture overseas that pretty much nobody in America knows about. Unless you talk to a Vietnamese-American, most Americans' knowledge of Vietnam ends with the Vietnam War, and even then, it's spotty and full of propaganda. Seriously. Tell me something you know about Vietnam that doesn't relate to a war that ended forty years ago, or pho. Thought so.

Murder Culture

Murder Culture basically means a culture that normalizes murder. We blame our victims. We rationalize it with our need for blood (even though a shocking number of our victims don't die from feeding). We say that the fall of the Masquerade would mean a lot more death in the long run. We tell ourselves all sorts of bullshit in order to protect our precious fee-fees about murdering people.

This isn't to say that war didn't cause lasting ripples you can see to this night. You can. Fuck, across eight years of war, America dropped a million tons of bombs per year. Vietnam, for those at home, is a little smaller than California, and most of the conflict didn't spread to its edges. Not all of those bombs went off when they were supposed to, but decided to go off later. The US used Agent Orange to shred the foliage so their helicopters could see National Liberation Front forces using the plant life to hide. That stuff caused millions of life-ending complications. Seriously, Google some photos if you're feeling like getting hit in the gut with

tragedy. It destroyed tons of rice fields and forests, some of which were invaded by other species, and will likely never be farmable again. This hurt the farmers, who had to move into the cities, which weren't exactly bastions of great jobs to begin with.

Long story short, it's always about ripples. The war might have ended in 1975 on paper, but that's a simple way of looking at things. I'm also not going to pretend that their civil war defined them as a people, and defines every aspect of their modern culture. So let's talk about a little history. Vietnam is an interesting place, because despite

its distinct split in the mortal world, it's long been united for Kindred in a way few places ever are. Lieu Hanh's Imperium stood strong for nearly four centuries. Then the Carthian Movement happened to it.



LIEU HANH'S IMPERIUM

Co-Authored By: Phuong Nguyen

Lieu Hanh is a rare exception to Kindred trends in a few important ways.

First, she ran an Imperium for the better part of four hundred years. I can't think of a single Kindred who has remained active that long without extended hiatus. This might be some of my New World privilege talking, but elders over a couple hundred years are rare, and when you do find them, they're usually of the "waking up from a million year dirt nap" variety.

Context for the kiddies: As we get older, we get stronger. Our blood thickens. We become more tolerant to influence from the Blood. It's not like humans, who wither and die. Vampires just grow closer and closer to critical mass every night. Eventually, the weight of badassitude gets to be too much, and they fall asleep. As they sleep, the blood thins. When they wake up, they're fresh, new, and not so badass. But it's like a collagen injection; it'll go away in time, and that power will rise. Worse, after a couple centuries, they stop being able to feed from human blood. You've probably felt this a bit already. Do you know how every night, animal blood

sounds that much less appetizing? That's how ancient Kindred are, except instead of eschewing animal blood for human blood, they eschew human blood for Kindred blood.

In scientific terms, Lieu Hanh had to be mega-fucking ridiculous powerful. Since she didn't meet Final Death during the revolution... eh, I'm getting ahead of myself. Point is, she's a huge x-factor for Hanoi, and Vietnam at large.

Second, she's more or less a historical figure. She comes up in stories that say she was a real-world princess back in like the sixteenth century. Maybe. Many people question the story's historical accuracy. This is in part because the story involves banishing people from Earth and her being immortal. But she's Mekhet, so she could probably make the world think she was banished from it. And you know, vampire. So immortal's not the kind of thing we tend to question.

As the story goes, she took over the kingdom back in the day. It wasn't a huge affair; she inherited it from her sire or something. Within the first century of her rule, she conquered all Kindred under the Vietnamese empire, and spread her influence as the mortal side did. Her family wisely sided with the Nguyen rulers who seized much of Vietnam's political power in that era. Her critics accused her of selling out her people to French interests, and indeed, she may have. In the end, the French were able to conquer the land, thanks to push from militant Catholics. However, this hardly reflected in the Kindred world; Lieu Hanh remained empowered throughout French occupation. French Kindred even traveled to Vietnam to pay respects to the elder Shadow, to court for her favor and alliance.

I don't want to spend too much time talking about a very long period. I'm not here to educate you about all the ins and outs of Vietnamese Kindred history. Phuong Nguyen, one of our Ventrue, she can tell you all about Vietnamese Kindred history if you want. She's a specialist.

Lieu Hanh ruled not as a tyrant, but certainly as an authoritarian. She disallowed all but the rarest Embraces, keeping Vietnam's Kindred population disproportionately low in comparison to its mortal populace. Her law, as it stated, was that "The wine of longevity comes from a small cellar; one we must keep from running dry." Critics painted this decision as an effort to keep dissent to a minimum. She did nothing to assuage those concerns, however, unilaterally slaughtering both childer and sire of nearly every violation of her law. In three popular cases, she let the childer in these affairs survive; she kept them on as surrogate childer of her own. The sires, though, met with fearsome public destruction. As the story goes, she cut through them with a wooden sword one hundred times before her Court could blink. The courtiers simply watched their bodies slide apart like cut fruit, before falling to ash.

Friendliness with the French became the downfall of Lieu Hanh's reign. During World War I, the French demanded Vietnamese support in both food and troops, neither of which Vietnam was prepared to provide. Despite this being a mortal issue, Lieu Hanh remained decidedly silent, and refused to rebuke her French Kindred allies. Vietnamese Kindred organized and quietly expressed their displeasure with her rule, while not yet speaking up for fear of the ancient's reprisal.



JAPANESE INVOLVEMENT

In late 1940, the Japanese moved in to attack Vietnam, or "Vichy French Indochina." This was mostly to cut supply lines the Chinese could use against Japan. After all, the Japanese were in the dead middle of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Japan received some help from Germany during



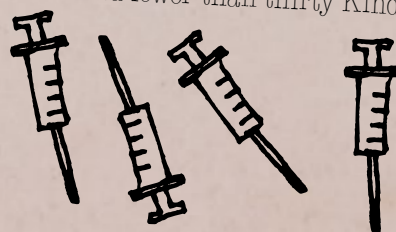
this whole thing, and you know about Germany in the 1940s. Vietnam's Viet Minh resistance had support from the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Germany made an agreement with France to allow Japan to station in Tonkin (in the north, bordering China). It's worth noting that when Japan invaded Vietnam, this was before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, so Japan wasn't engaging actively with the rest of World War II yet.

As the Japanese strangled Vietnam of its resources, millions starved. At least one million died as a side effect of this occupation.

Hanoi was of particular interest in this struggle, since Lieu Hanh held her court in Hanoi, and Hanoi also housed the Viet Minh government for its short rule of the country. Lieu Hanh kept French Kindred advisors, locals viewed outsiders as mostly dangerous. As famine took over, the Kindred hungered in kind. Lieu Hanh claimed this as a victory, as proof her rigid policies on the Embrace were clearly in preparation for such a tragedy. The city wasn't buying it.

This got worse after Japan left Hanoi. The French stepped right back in and took over. The Viet Minh wasn't having it. The Kindred looked to Lieu Hanh and her French advisors, blaming conspiracy for this shift in power. It seemed Lieu Hanh could do nothing to calm her people. Worse still, the three chief organizers against her were three of her "childer" adopted from past Embrace crimes. Where the three (of varying ages) were supposed to help keep her in tune with modern Kindred and mortal society, they withdrew from her, barely speaking to her in favor of their gangs of dissenter.

By this point, Hanoi had four factions. Lieu Hanh mostly maintained the loyalty of her French advisors. Her three surrogate childer, Dung Giang, Khanh Ly, and Huong Do each commanded another faction. None of these factions numbered more than a dozen members (Hanoi had fewer than thirty Kindred in 1950, in the most liberal estimates) and none official thus far.



THE RESISTANCE WAR AGAINST AMERICA

In 1955, Hanoi was still in turmoil thanks to the Japanese, the Viet Minh, the French, and just about every other fucking world government, it seemed. Shit was tense, and the Viet Minh revolutionaries just kicked France out of the country. With it, Lieu Hanh's council fled as well, leaving her with almost no support against her three protégées and their gangs.

To resist the crises faced by the region, the North Vietnamese government instated numerous reforms that pushed the country toward more Communist rule. These political campaigns targeted landowners, with extreme rent and land reform that ultimately led to the executions of many thousands of property owners. Some voices in the Southern part of Vietnam disagreed with this path, and numerous world powers chimed in to support one side or another. The United States aggressively supported the southern part of Vietnam, as part of a push to reject Communist ideology for fear of the Soviet Union's growing political influence on the world arena. They thought, at the time, that if one country fell to Communism, the world would quickly follow suit. That was pretty much bullshit, but hindsight is 20/20, right? It's probably worth mentioning that everything suggests the vast majority of the population would have voted in favor of Communist power. Famously, a rigged vote skewed heavily in favor of those resisting Communism. One hundred and thirty-three percent of Saigon voted against the Communists. That's worse than Chicago numbers.



Let's not get it twisted, though. The Communist elections typically ended with 99% or more when they happened. Shit was fucked up all around.

That's a lot of words that lead to a pretty reasonable response: The people were pissed. The people lashed out. Since Ngo Dinh Diem won the presidential election, and he was super conservative and aligned with the US and other powers against Communism, the backlash came mostly from Communist forces. He was not some freedom fighter GI Joe motherfucker, either. If you collaborated against his government, he had you imprisoned, tortured,

and likely killed. This happened to thousands of his opponents. So even in South Vietnam, the supposed side against Communism, you had massive groups organizing against this shit. North Vietnam helped that along, since that kind of organization could lead to its desired goals as well. It wasn't a hard picture to paint, either. The United States was a scary fucking place. Vietnam was close enough to see what it could do if you fucked with them. So they looked like imperialist bullies. Through the early 1960s, North Vietnam began to set up shop and militarize in opposition to Diem's government and its United States backing.

JFK didn't help. He wanted to look like a quiet supporter. He wanted South Vietnam to beat back the northern Communists on their own. So all his support looked like rich shitbag white people help. Case in point: The US and the Diem regimes worked together to relocate the non-Communist South Vietnamese into little isolated communes, where they couldn't be influenced by the scary Bolsheviks. Repeat after me, kids, any time a wealthy world power decides to relocate a massive number of citizens from a poorer nation, it does not fucking end well.

When Lyndon Johnson took the US presidency, things got worse. Within a year of his taking the seat, he decided to push hard into Vietnam, in order to fight back the Communists. Three million soldiers, over a full percent of the United States population, deployed to South Vietnam. Much of Johnson's justification for sending soldiers (like some skirmishes on the Gulf of Tonkin) was fabricated to win over public support.

The Kindred, the childer, they didn't take sides. They couldn't. In a warzone, every vampire has to focus on survival, first and foremost. This is why Kindred revolutions almost never happen during human revolutions, but frequently happen after them. We'll touch more on that later. Through the fighting, everyone banded together. The already meager Kindred population in Hanoi fell dramatically, leaving less than twenty vampires by the war's official end in 1975. Ironically, Hanoi's human population rose, as more and more refugees flocked to the city in light of the combat. Saigon fell. Maybe three million mortals died. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam rose from the remnants.

THE "REVOLUTION"

Sometimes, shit's just not working, a leader recognizes it, and they know better than to fight the winds of change. Lieu Hanh was smart. Her city didn't fail; her people didn't starve because of anything she could have prevented.

Let's think perspective, though. Starving vampires are WAY different from starving mortals. When mortals starve, they typically turn inward. They might steal food. But mostly, they, you know, starve. Starving vampires become spiked fucking wrecking balls that'll demolish everything to get their fix. They're not the destitute people of whatever third world country you see late night commercials about, featuring so-and-so washed up '80s actor. They're a little bit junkie, a little bit Hannibal Lecter, and a little bit Incredible Hulk. When half your city's mortal population is on death's door that only exacerbates the problem. Feed from anyone, and there's a good chance they'll die. That means less blood all around. This means hungrier vampires. This means lost control. This means more dead humans. This means less blood all around. See how that works? Basically, it was hell.

So when Lieu Hanh's childer stood up and said, "Shit's gotta change," Lieu Hanh said, "Sure. Change it." And she fucking walked. That was 1981. Nobody's seen her since. It was a revolution met with a shrug.

oh.

Immediately after Lieu Hanh left, the three held an election for a ruling council to lead the Movement. The three won with no contest and with no surprise from the remaining Kindred public. Their first act in office was to upend all former laws. Within the first year, the Kindred population tripled, as most vampires in the city scrambled to Embrace in a desperate attempt to found influential dynasties, and to throw future elections. I'll remind you that right now in Hanoi's history, most vampires were running hungry thanks to the famine the region suffered. Adding a ton of vampires to the mix did not make that problem any better. Now in addition to a bunch of new vampires, our new regime had to commit a number of executions thanks to some utterly egregious Masquerade issues.

These numbers may not be fully accurate, but they're close as we could find. It looks like Hanoi had about twenty Kindred during the "revolution." By 1985, there are records of at least one hundred thirty Kindred living in Hanoi, but the actual population was closer to sixty. This is to say, over half the Kindred in Hanoi died or fled during those four years. The actual population rose over four hundred percent. The population doubling would be troubling enough, but this kind of growth is nothing short of cancerous.

Tonight, Hanoi holds over one hundred active Kindred. Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, Manila, a lot of cities in Asia have larger Kindred populations. But there's not a single major city with the raw per capita Kindred population of Hanoi. Rumors suggest as many as five hundred Kindred have died in Hanoi since the revolution. Records put the number to closer than two hundred. I've got a lot of petty comments about the Tree of Liberty or some shit. Still, that's a lot of ash, even in the best estimates.

Undesired Side Effect: End of the Empire

While Lieu Hanh ruled the entirety of what we now call Vietnam, once the revolution came, that fell apart. Immediately, her childer lost control of everything outside Hanoi.

Outside forces stepped in to fill the void, and the three childer just didn't have the power to argue the point. So instead, they focused on locking down Hanoi the best they could.

NO TERRITORIES: FUEL TO THE FIRE

A few times over the course of the '80s and '90s, Hanoi's Movement made efforts to curb the massive executions caused by the famine. While a couple of licks put forward the idea that maybe, just maybe, the Embrace should be limited; the ruling three

shot that down without even the slightest consideration. It's not fair, they said. Instead, in 1997 they looked toward a reactionary Communist-inspired idea: Territory is unfair, and causes arbitrary and unnecessary scarcity. Without territories, you can feed wherever you need to, and thus nobody needs to starve.

Now, I want you to put this magazine down, take five minutes, and just think about all the ways this idea was stupid. Not just stupid, but inspired levels of stupid. Like, if there were a Leonardo da Vinci of stupid, this idea would be his Mona Lisa. It was like the BATMAN & ROBIN of Kindred politics (which also came out in 1997. Coincidence? Maybe...)

For almost twenty years, the law says declaring territory is treason against the Hanoi government. Saying, "This is my haven, get the fuck out" is a capital offense. I can't even.

Needless to say, this didn't help the famine. It didn't curb the deaths. In fact, it caused quite a few more. Population fluctuated even more still, as sires scrambled to Embrace larger factions to help ensure representation and some semblance of safe feeding. Sure, it's a capital offense to claim territory, but if you're squatting with eight other vampires, nobody's going to move in on that turf and fuck with you. At least, that was the going theory. In a couple of high-profile cases, Kindred were executed for "de facto territory claims." Whatever in the fuck that means. Basically, they assumed those Kindred to be holding territory on everything but paper. I'm sure this doesn't require much explanation, but all evidence suggests the trio used this "de facto" bullshit as a way to justify murdering dissidents.



Then again, at least they bother lampshading their murder. Invictus just say, "We have the right to kill who we please, by virtue of being the First Estate." So I can't throw stones and say they're any worse than your average Western Kindred regime. Unlike your average Western

Kindred regime, everything I hear suggests even the leadership kept tight to the "no territories" rule. People had havens, but feeding grounds were just not really a thing. Yay for leaderships that manage to keep away from hypocrisy. That's rare and admirable, even if it resulted in a ton of deaths and some corrupt bullshit taking advantage of their integrity. Apparently, for those it worked for, it worked for well.

This gets worse. No territory also means people don't have to be accountable for when and where they feed. If you can't pin a problem on a given vampire, there's no sense in that vampire being discreet or sensible. This means that sometimes, entire neighborhoods get plagued with a dumb vampire's sorry ass. This lack of accountability has led to massive cases of anemia, which isn't great since Vietnam already wasn't dealing well with healthcare.

Long Lo Suoi

The Long Lo Suoi was an answer to this problem with famine and pestilence brought on by Hanoi's Kindred. It's a network of mortals who have looked into the abyss, and come back with knowledge of vampires. So you've got all these people who know who were are, and how we work. Long story short, vampire hunters. And not just your average, cross-in-the-face-power-of-Christ-compels-you hunters. These fuckers learned from the guerrillas.

The Long Lo Suoi essentially has three wings; they've got leaders, they've got a military arm, and they've got a political arm. Their leaders exist to organize and motivate the hunters. The military arm lays traps, and battles the local vampires through attrition and terrorism tactics. This usually means fire and outnumbering. It almost always means sunlight. Their political arm informs local citizens. They don't run around saying "vampires exist" or any shit like that, but they commit to local action campaigns, instating curfews and neighborhood watches. They encourage the young to always conceal a weapon.

They don't seem interested in "ending the vampire menace" or anything like that, so Hanoi hasn't mobilized against them at large. Once you get on Long Lo Suoi's radar though, you're working on borrowed time.

When a lick overfeeds in a slum, they can sometimes leave thinking everything's cool since everyone survived. But then one person gets sick, and that leads to one family, which leads to one block, which leaves everyone in dire straits. Then you have numerous dead, and an entire chunk of the city that's completely worthless feeding grounds for months to come.

THE FACTIONS

Hanoi's is a Movement divided. Dung Giang, Khanh Ly, and Huong Do each manage a faction owing allegiance to the Movement. Lieu Hanh was Unaligned, but sometimes her childer call her a Carthian or an Invictus to suit their particular needs at the time. The childer tell that the covenants were not so deeply entrenched in Hanoi until the revolution. Maybe half the Kindred owed allegiance to a covenant, and most Carthian. Later, everyone was Carthian. We'll talk about that in a bit. Our information suggests limited membership in others exist, for example, rumors of a Dao Mau Circle of the Crone cult are common, as is a faction of Lancea et Sanctum hiding within the ranks of the Carthian Movement, inspired and perhaps still mentored by a member of Lieu Hanh's French advisory circle.

Dao Mau Circle of the Crone

The rumors of a Dao Mau Circle of the Crone cult are widely regarded among the Kindred of Hanoi as less rumor, more inconvenient truth. The state demands all members pay membership to the Carthian Movement and no other covenants, but not all members are so strict. In fact, the three faction leaders have each independently said that religion is not a bane to the Movement, but that organized religion threatens the sanctity of their city.

If this cult exists (and it probably does), it venerates Thien Y A Na, or her earlier form, Leiou Ye. Leiou Ye is the credited first of the Cham people. Their faith, from the bits and pieces cobbled together for this piece, appears to be inspired by medium channeling, and by old East Asian Muslim traditions. She tells us that one such cult blends its goddess veneration with a strange anti-elder dervish-like religion from Thailand. It teaches that elders must be destroyed, essentially recycled regularly for the betterment of the Kindred species. While this sounds like it wouldn't go over well anywhere, the relative youth of Hanoi's Kindred keep the idea from reaching true taboo status.

Another less-confirmed cult worships Au Cor, the mythical creator of the Vietnamese people.



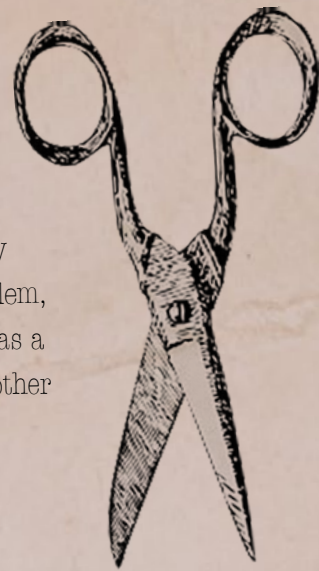
DUNG GIANG'S FACTION

Dung Giang was Lieu Hanh's first surrogate childe (or at least the oldest that survived to the revolution). He's also the most hard-assed. If you hear about an execution in Hanoi, it was Dung Giang.

Early on, he set his gang up to be the best of the best, and the smallest faction. He set extremely high and often contradictory standards for those who wanted to hang with him, and demanded intense performance if

they wanted to keep it up. This kept his gang small, but he knew every member closely. This also built a strong sense of competition, so the members would each meticulously investigate each other for corruption, with hopes of removing members and making room for their allies.

While Khanh Ly and Huong Do didn't necessarily approve of his methods, they gave Dung Giang due respect. He did most of the dirty work. If there was a problem, his gang rooted that problem out and destroyed it efficiently. They also see him as a necessary evil for the status quo. He gets to be the "bad cop," which makes the other two factions look nicer by comparison.



KHANH LY'S FACTION

Khanh Ly has the opposite distinctions from Dung Giang in almost every respect. She was the middle child. Her faction is the most populous, and the least discerning. She took in the tired, the weary, the weak, and the disenfranchised. By most criteria, her faction looked the way you might expect a city's Carthian Movement to look, if set upon by a stronger oppressor in the form of Giang's gang.

Her advantage goes both ways. She gets to set her faction up as the underdogs. So they're motivated to push forward and advance legislation and actions "for the people." They get to look like the heroes when Dung Giang's people act like utter monsters, even if they're just acting like slightly less terrible monsters. As Dung Giang's forces "police" her people (read: murder), she gets to paint them as the bad guys, which helps her own morale. Essentially, those two factions have this sick, symbiotic relationship where they cyclically devour each other.

HUONG DO'S FACTION



Huong Do's awesome. Huong Do's our girl. We liberated her from Hanoi. I'll get on with that in a bit. But, we like Huong Do.

Clearly, we're biased, but Huong Do's faction was the middle of the road, moderate, reasonable group. They billed themselves that way, even. They called themselves a word that means "mediators," and spent a lot of time standing between Khanh Ly and Dung

Giang, defending one member or another from Final Death.

This positioning put her in a unique place to pass more laws than the other two factions combined. Even without the raw voting power of Khanh Ly's faction, Huong Do was a legal powerhouse. She pulled votes from both sides, often both at the same time. Huong Do didn't start the bills to break up territories or open up the Embrace. In fact, her faction was notably dissenting against them. The other big bill she didn't support? Let's talk about that.

ALL IN or ALL OUT

proven guilty, is punishable by death. "Proven guilty" changes from case to case. Sometimes, it means hearsay from influential members. Sometimes plotting against the regime on camera isn't quite enough. It's one of THOSE laws.

- It means Hanoi's borders are closed to about 80% of outsiders. You cannot come into Hanoi unless you're recognized as a member of the Movement, with an influential member willing to vouch for you. A few Kindred from China, Laos, Thailand, and other parts of Vietnam have found this out the hard way. At first, they made exceptions for those willing to disavow their former covenants for the Movement upon arrival. THAT changed quickly when one alleged spy entered Hanoi with that loophole.

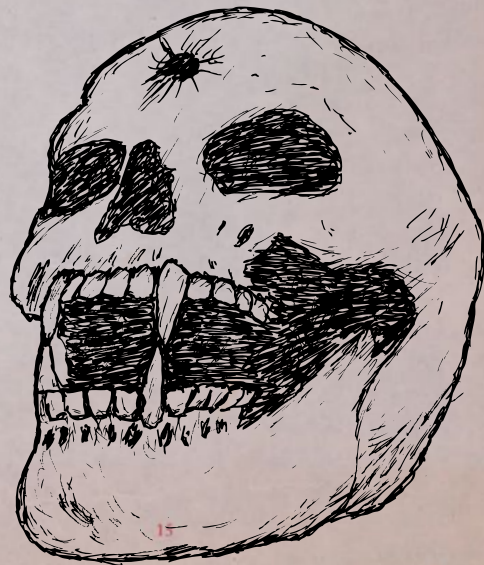
- In practice, it means every single new Embrace has to be introduced to Kindred, the Masquerade, and all that business before the Embrace. After all, being a Carthian is an at-will thing, so you have to make the conscious, informed decision to join. Since you have to do it immediately after becoming Kindred, you have to get the skinny before you're bitten. This means every Embrace must first be a Masquerade breach. This also means that those not so keen on joining the Movement have to be killed.

- It means fascist outfits aren't really that sexy, because everyone's wearing them.

This brought on the first few real attempts at overthrowing the new regime. These attempts came from within, of course, with some uprisings against Dung Giang, and one against Khanh Ly. The attacks on Dung Giang were put down savagely, and were

The territories law became controversial over the course of about five years. So in 2003, Khanh Ly and Dung Giang supported the law that probably put the nail in their regime's coffin. Hanoi declared membership in the Carthian Movement mandatory without exception. This came with it a few interesting stipulations:

- Membership in other covenants was similarly outlawed. Even if you're Carthian, you cannot maintain membership in an additional covenant. This flies in the face of the Carthians' general acumen for moonlighting all over the place.
- Speaking against the Carthian Movement is considered an act of treason, a high crime that, if



You chose..... poorly

mostly planned to conquer the city as a whole. The attack against Khanh Ly was a maneuver to conquer her faction, and thus swing votes to cancel this law. Think on that for a second: Carthians fought – and died – for vampires’ rights to join other covenants.

We know of a cadre of Invictus from Ho Chi Minh City are planning to march in and conquer Hanoi. This has been the case for nearly a decade. It could happen at any time, and only the most optimistic Carthian thinks Hanoi has a chance against a truly organized front. All estimates suggest most of the Movement is currently waiting to defect, but are afraid of Dung Giang’s enforcers.

WHY AND HOW WE RESPONDED

Hanoi’s Movement done fucked up.

Between the territory law, the open Embrace, and the Carthian membership requirement, the city’s a strange and nonfunctioning blend of anarchism and tyrannical police state. They’re overdue for another revolution, and when it comes, it’s going to come hard.

We responded in kind. Hearing this stuff, we had to.

When we liberated Huong Do (more in a moment), we listened to her story, and we drafted a bunch of new laws.

- The Carthian Movement can never be the majority of New York’s Kindred population. We have about two hundred Kindred in the city. If we make up 49% of the total, nobody can join the Movement until that changes. If we have 49% and someone outside the Movement dies or whatever, we ask a low-ranking member to volunteer for “probationary status.” During this probation, the volunteer cannot vote in Carthian or city elections. As well, she’s tasked with advocating for the other recognized covenants in New York, to try to bolster their numbers a bit. This has only happened twice so far. But we straddle the line right around 49%, and have consistently since the law passed.

- The Embrace has to be a Big Fucking Deal™. We have a representative democracy here in the Big Apple. Every ninth vampire gets a representative. We determine who is in a given nine randomly; they vote. We change up representatives every year through election. If you want to Embrace, you need at least a two-thirds majority of our representative council. This sounds a little weird, but when you remember that if you don’t think you’ll get approved, you’ve only got to wait a year for the tides to change. I’ve heard a couple horror stories about representatives demanding favors or whatever for their votes in favor of the Embrace. But none of those stories was substantial in any provable way.

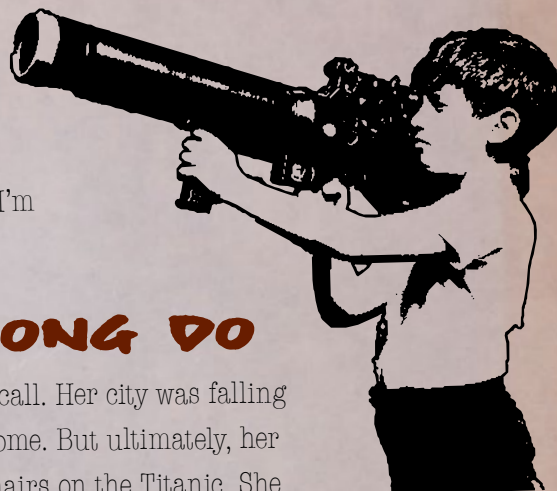
- Territory’s a hard, recognized thing. We have maps with every single city block tracked, and every block has someone responsible for it, with the exception of a few blocks of open hunting grounds here or there. Major streets are open for travel. One of our guys even made an app that’ll tell you whose turf you’re on at any given time, using the GPS function. He set it up so you can turn on alerts when you’re hunting; if you go out of your allowed feeding grounds, it vibrates and alerts you. It’s like living in the future. Except instead of everyone having hovercars, they have apps that tell them if they’re okay to feed somewhere. This is doubly nice; because the Sheriff doesn’t need to hear pointless arguments from people that “didn’t know” they crossed into someone else’s feeding grounds.

The Youth Are
Getting Restless

I should probably note that three shitty laws don't define Hanoi. My little story here covers a long span of time, and there's a lot of outrage, beauty, and problems between that I'm not hitting on.

APPROPRIATING HUONG DO

In 2005, Huong Do reached out, and we answered the call. Her city was falling apart. She was the smart moderate, trying to save her home. But ultimately, her efforts were no more effective than polishing the deck chairs on the Titanic. She



asked for backup. She asked for advice. She got plenty of offers from all over Asia. But, in typical New York fashion, we opted to roll hard. We brought in a crew, and we marched in and offered Huong Do a way out in the form of an armed escort, plane tickets, and a place in our beautiful democracy.

In retrospect, her choice might have been a bit limited, since our visit (admittedly with jack-booted thugs that would make North Korea's Carthian Movement look like a children's show) made her look treasonous. Hey, hindsight's 20/20, right?

Now, Huong Do advises us. She holds a respected citizenship within New York's Movement. She's already acted as representative for her groups for six of the past eight years. She's bought in completely, and it's beautiful. You'd think she was born here. Her experience has been invaluable to the Movement, and she's a workhorse. She's not stopped working. She's not stopped achieving. It's like she's got a new lease on life.

What about Hanoi? Well, Hanoi is utterly fucked. Huong Do was the stretched, snapping fabric barely holding Hanoi together. Huong has some contact with her former allies, but almost all have turned their backs on her. Even those she can connect with are afraid to speak openly across the Internet or phone lines. So we can't even get solid information at this point. But we know that most of her faction is now dead or imprisoned. We know that the remaining two leaders have doubled down and are now striking preemptively against any potential revolution, which is dramatically hurting the city's overall defenses. We know outsiders from Thailand, China, and other parts of Vietnam are looking (and potentially colluding, if sources are true) to strike and remove the regime.

I sat down and listened to Huong Do tell the stories, and list those she thinks are now dead or locked away forever. I tell myself that it's unfortunate, but losing her might be the catalyst for a revolution that was a long time coming. I ignore the fact that the revolution will probably mean Invictus outsiders marching in and dismantling everything beautiful in the city. Outsider gray is going to come in and act like a primer coat over a flawed painting; they might be able to eventually paint something else over the canvas, but what they've painted before is lost forever.

Then again, maybe it's all a test. Maybe Lieu Hanh lies in waiting, ready to step in when the city needs her most. But there's the rub of most savior stories, right? They've needed her for a long damned time. Even if it's true, can we forgive her for overlooking all the chaos and suffering?

Then I shut up and remember that now, we've got Huong Do. Least we can do is preserve the most beautiful thing they had, so it can't all be painted over.

LOS ANGELES: SLEEP NOW IN THE FIRE



Sorry. Ranted a bit there about Hanoi. I know I spent a bit of time there trying to justify what we did with Huong Do. But that's the thing, isn't it? You've got to tell yourself stories in a way that lets you control the narrative, and make yourself feel okay. Spin the story right, and we're just shitty, horrible people. Nobody wants to tell the story about how they're a shitty, horrible person.

Now let's contrast New York with its historical foil, Los Angeles.

(Spoiler alert: This story makes me feel good about myself, too. LA is a shithole; it's the worst the Movement has to offer, and at least we're not them.)

Los Angeles was always a *Lancea et Sanctum* stronghold. You'd never think of it, with the way everyone sees LA as some liberal, hippie, progressive, politically correct bastion. But that's mostly because people don't know the reality of Los Angeles. Just because Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie fly around the world rescuing underprivileged babies, doesn't mean that Hollywood isn't like the most corrupt, conservative cesspool in the world. Entertainment is a place where people are willing to overlook terrifying politics and celebrate the awful. After all, entertainment makes you feel good, right? To your average sheep, nothing's better than feeling good; and there's no crime greater than denying a little cheap entertainment.

So. *Lancea*. I mean, Los Fucking Angeles. City of Angels. That name didn't come from nowhere. A bunch of imperialist murdering religious fucks settled Los Angeles. Some of them were Kindred. Some of those Kindred lived for a long time after that founding, after all the human founders were long dead. They ruled the Los Angeles nighttime. Archbishop Felipe Montrose ruled from (allegedly) 1820 until, well, now. I say allegedly because all records suggest he was the only vampire in the tiny little ranch town back in those nights. I say, "well, now" because anyone you ask tells you that tonight, LA is a Carthian city. Just not on paper. Not yet. When California joined the United States in 1850, immigrants rushed in, so a few Kindred followed suit. But Los Angeles wasn't a major city until later. It grew quickly with the Santa Fe railroad from Chicago in 1885. Hollywood and World War II construction needs blew the place up. The early part of the twentieth century really marked Archbishop Montrose's reign.

The joke we tell is, before the Carthians came into town, at least the trains ran on time. With LA, the problem they're running into is, they know shit has to change, but nobody can agree on what needs to change, what it needs to change to, or how to change it. Montrose is a shit. He's been a shit for a long fucking time. His "I'm a moustache-twirling monster law" is that every citizen of Los Angeles must attend monthly Mass. This means "communion," which is a disgusting thing where you eat a wafer, and it turns into Vitae, and you feel all magically tickled by Jesus or whatever-the-fuck-ever makes Sanctified sorcery work.

Not going to waste much space on it, but this is a giant fucking affront to the Circle of the Crone, and pretty much anyone that doesn't believe that Longinus was the blah blah king shit vampire prophet whatever. But fuck if the Circle didn't take all that terrible shit and run with it. Some of the members went so far as to start their own little cult



I'm a Moustache-Twirling Monster Law

As vampires, we live by three Traditions. We have the Masquerade, the Progeny, and the Amaranth. Everyone knows those. But we have some informal Traditions that most Kindred live by without being self-aware.

My favorite informal Tradition is the "I'm a Moustache-Twirling Monster Law." This Tradition says that if a single vampire holds supreme executive and legislative power in a city, he or she will bring about a law that more or less exists only to cement their status as a total fucking douche. An excessive feeding restriction is a common example. Disallowing

one group from the Embrace is another. Requiring all potential witnesses to Masquerade violations die, that's another. Any time you force an entire city to practice a single religion, that's grade-A fuckstickery.



to Santa Muerte, and they even appropriated some Lancea et Sanctum magic rite shit. It's freaky, it's beautiful, and it's a powerful show of how oppressive religions don't always get the last laugh. Their cult is amazing. It prohibits violent death of any mortals, it focuses on bolstering the poor neighborhoods, and it's basically the best thing to come out of Los Angeles. Folk Catholicism for the motherfucking win. This cult is more Carthian than LA's entire piss poor Movement.

No idea if it's a real thing or just an image, but the leader of the cult has a skull for a head. I don't care who you are: That is badass. A lot of vampires think it's some zany bloodline or whatever. The cult says it's because she's moved beyond the

need for the flesh. Some think it's a complicated mask. Whatever. She has a skull for a head. That is significantly scarier in person than you might imagine from cartoons.

Long story short, times needed to change. For the past twenty years, Los Angeles has been knee-deep and inch thick of a revolution. It's crazy diverse; you've got forces coming from San Diego, San Francisco, Orange County, and then you've got Mexican groups, a couple of Asian factions. The LA Movement is huge. You'd think this was a good thing, but it's really a story of too many cooks. There's no formal leader. Everyone's got their own ideas for how the revolution should go. So you get this disorganized mess that plays pranks and ruffles feathers. Of course, the Movement's too big for Montrose to just start killing fuckers. Shit, he knows they're ineffectual, so he just leaves them alone, and sometimes rattles his cane for show.

Twenty years of active, vocal revolution, and they've not upset the status quo. They've not removed a tyrant from office. They've not brought about a constitution. There's no Carthian Law. Next party we do, I'll bring some of their draft constitutions. If you're drunk, they're fucking hilarious. If you're sober, they're just sad.

The best of LA are the young. The young are also the least capable of actually effecting change. The oldest members of the Movement are too diverse and too comfortable to take risks. Hell, some of the Movement fights to align the Carthians and the Church into some militant Catholic holy army thing. There's a cool group out of Fairfax called the Oki Dogs, most of them Embraced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They're trying to push for a weird academic anarchist punk thing, and they're finally getting some traction since the Internet's helped alternative philosophical thinking get foothold. But it's still an uphill battle. To paraphrase JFK, they need courage, not complacency. Problem is, there's a fuckton of complacency in LA.

We didn't appropriate from Los Angeles. Los Angeles is lazy. Los Angeles is a bad example. As a policy, we don't touch the poop.

CARACAS: THE MARXIST BROTHERS



Now that we've patted ourselves on the back for being better than Los Angeles, let's talk about one of our legitimate fuck-ups. Hanoi was already crumbling, so from where I stand, we more or less just helped it along.

But Caracas? Holy shit, we hurt Caracas.

I've heard some counter-arguments. There's a compelling argument that Caracas was doomed from the start, that it was a conspiracy to elevate an Invictus monarchy, but...

Actually, I shouldn't ramble. We fucked them up. Let's let them tell their story. This is Ferdinand and Cesar Rodriguez, exchanging missives. I call them the Marxist Brothers.

Mr. Ferdinand Araujo
678 Broadway, Unit C
Brooklyn, New York
11206
United States of America
September 9th, 2013

Dearest Brother,

I write with the utmost hope that this letter finds you. I preface this letter by saying I wish for neither your pity, nor your help. I have reconciled my lot, I am working within my current means, and I have settled regardless of why I am here.

When I left Caracas, when I left our dear revolution, I left not of my own accord. I left when American revolutionaries waving our banner - that of our Carthian Movement - abducted me and brought me to their New York City. They brought me under the pretenses that I could help their faltering revolution, that I could rejuvenate their waning power. They did so by robbing me of my identity. They restrained me before their greatest Ventrue, and over the course of one horrendous month, they shattered everything that made me Ferdinand Araujo. Nearly ten years have passed, and I am now my own person again. Finally.

Enough with the lament and melodrama. Dearest brother, do you walk? Do you lead Caracas still in my absence? Please, tell me your greatness has not waned since I've gone.

Sincerely,

Ferdinand Araujo

Senor Cesar Rodriguez Araujo
Avenida Sanz
Residencias Terepaima, Entrada D
Caracas 1010, D.F.
Venezuela
September 30th, 2013

Dear Brother,

Hearing from you is a light in the darkness. I thought you were forever gone from me; I presumed for years that your disappearance was part of our sire's grand plan to conquer Caracas. Perhaps it still was.

I wish that I could tell you of my greatness, and not of my failings. I walk, but I do not walk tall. I walk on my knees; I walk the walk of the meager. Sometimes, I wish I walked no further. Sometimes, I stand on my roof, awaiting the sun's kiss. Then I realize my soul, my very sense of self is too strong, and that the sun can never truly destroy me the way it could our sire.

When you left, Caracas became too much to handle. Our revolution was beautiful, but without you there, the city fell apart. I had my supporters, but your supporters loved you so, that they could not see the revolution without your heart and your fire. They didn't revolt. They never revolted. They simply stopped

caring. They stopped standing. When part of the city stopped caring, the rest saw that. As you know, apathy is the cancer of revolution. Without passion, we had no momentum forward.

Crime soared. We had no respect for territories; we had no mutual respect. A precious few of us bothered to maintain the Masquerade for the whole. We struggled with overpopulation as the Embrace became more and more difficult to rein in. Within a short couple of years, Kindred could not travel in the Caracas Metro tunnels, because of a plague of revenants. Every excursion we sent to solve the problem vanished without a trace. The threads that held our city together unraveled slowly and lawlessness became the expectation.

Five years ago, our sire rose to the occasion. She stood before the city, and told them that through discipline and dedication, through honor and service, they could see their city safe once again. Through the disillusionment, a great many flocked to her banner. That night, and in the nights that followed, most of the Movement swore fealty to her Invictus order. As a show of solidarity, she organized this new order to turn on its former affiliations. She had them capture and execute their worst offenders.

Our dear sire offered me the choice of a year's exile, a year's imprisonment, or execution for my part in the city's collapse. I chose to spend a year in Valencia, where I studied with some of the Movement at the University of Carabobo. When I returned, the local Movement politely requested I volunteer to shed my past reputation and standing, for fear of upsetting the city's order. I agreed grudgingly. I became as a neonate once more.

Let me end on a positive note. I am very glad you are among the living, as living as we can call ourselves. How is New York City? My biases speak ill of the city, but I have also heard fairy tales of the place. I eagerly await your response.

With Love,

Cesar Rodriguez Arango

Mr. Ferdinand Araujo
678 Broadway, Unit C
Brooklyn, New York
11206
United States of America
October 21st, 2013

Dearest Brother,

I opened your letter with tears in my eyes. Seeing that envelope confirmed for me that you still lived, that this decade was not your last. I worried so. I fretted that my abduction was your downfall, and that my negligence led to that occurrence. The relief was like none I'd ever experienced. Thank you for responding, even though I would understand if you chose not to.

But I ache to hear of your ills, and those ills of Caracas. What of our revolution? What of our people's paradise? What of all the beautiful words? The chants? The slogans? We had power beyond politics, in our lovely Caracas.

You say our sire took control of the city? Our sire? Caridad de Flores? I never expected her the type. She was lax in her ambitions. She brought two young brothers into the fold, and never once scoffed as they decided to join the Carthian Movement. She supported us quietly, advised us, and warned us when we were making unwise decisions. She helped bridge differences between our

revolution and the Invictus. It just comes as such a shock to me. It's not that I don't believe it; it's that I don't want to believe it, and I cannot imagine what her city would look like.

How is her grandchilde? How is your childe? Consuela? Is she fine? Is she with the Movement now? Or did she follow her grandsire's footsteps?

You ask of New York City. New York City is very much a city. It's not Caracas. It's crowded. It's very loud. The crime is just as pervasive, but not so obvious. The most dangerous criminals wear white collars. The police are lying thugs who accost anyone who does not look like them. But many of the people have strong hearts. They have passion. They have a survivor's instincts. These are people who traveled the world for opportunity, to escape oppression. They wanted to give their families better lives, and fought tooth and nail, only to risk everything and land somewhere frightening and foreign, where they were outsiders in every sense.

Opportunity exists, but in a place with millions of people but only thousands of opportunities, it can look desperate. America sells stories of hard work bringing reward. Every one of these immigrants works hard. People work themselves nearly to death to come here, but most barely scrape by. If America rewards hard work, these people should all be wealthy, each and every one. They're not. Sometimes, one will find work in theater. Sometimes, one will succeed in the drug trade. By and large, these are people who have to miss meals to pay rent. Oh, the rent. Brother, you would not imagine. Some flats in New York City cost more in a month than most people in Venezuela earn in a year. Many homes contain multiple families, many of whose members work two or more jobs so that together, they can pay for the single apartment. Venezuela's people are poor, but that does not mean New York's are not as well.

I know you are likely angry with the New York City Movement. But I want you to know that if you decide to seek vengeance, some of the Movement is honorable. Some are worth saving. The one called Dinasauro, she saved me. She discovered what happened to me, and she found a Ventrue to free me from those shackles. Now, she's a good friend. I would not want those wholesome members of the Movement to come to harm. I know your temper.

Best wishes,

Ferdinand Araujo

Senor Cesar Rodriguez Araujo
Avenida Sanz
Residencias Terepalma, Entrada D
Caracas 1010, D.F.
Venezuela
November 30th, 2013

Dear Brother,

I've read your letter over each night for a week. It helped me find sound rest, knowing you fare well.

I must first say, you overestimate my temper. It is you, dearest brother, who has the fire within you. Perhaps that is why I did not struggle when our beloved sire conquered Caracas; I did not have it in me to argue her points, or to prove that our revolution was a good thing. I will not be rampaging through the streets of New York City in your name, unless of course that is your heart's desire. I would not disappoint you, after all. But I do not do vendettas. Remember the nights of the

Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement, when we took the opportunity to bring revolution. I did not engage in fights, save for in immediate self-defense. I hope you take this with no offense. I do love you, but I am not one to engage in campaigns of vengeance.

What of our revolution? Our revolution is dead. We laid its groundwork in the 1980s. We engaged in multitudes of planning and legwork in the early part of the 1990s. Do you remember imprisonment? Your trials at the hand of the New York City Movement were not your first time in captivity. You and I spent a year imprisoned by the Lancea et Sanctum, by the former regime. They held us for fear of coup, which was admittedly a legitimate fear. We could not speak to the people directly, but we spoke through agents, we organized the revolution from deep underground, both literally and figuratively. Then when we pressured the Church to release us, the revolution heralded us as heroes, as martyrs for the cause. They knew our souls were true and honest, and desired nothing more than to change Caracas in the name of the People. Do you remember our graffiti in those cells? Sometimes I visit them. None in the city knows those cells still exist. I occasionally dream that if we build a new revolution, that those walls, those writings could stand as an artifact for the Movement.

In 1998, you and I took our city for the revolution. We rose en masse, standing strong against the eldest of the Church and their supporters. We lost many soldiers that night, nowhere near as many as the enemy lost. The enemy simply had more to lose. They lost age. They lost power. They lost their façade of control and stability. They could not keep the People down any longer. That night, we held an election. They unanimously elected us to a collaborative Presidency. The city stood as a paradise for the Movement, and an icon of the People's victory.

We held strong for six years, until 2004 when New York City took you away from me. From that night, the revolution didn't die, but it may as well have. Its heart hung from its chest by weak, decaying veins. Every night, another vein collapsed and disintegrated. I was but the gaping chest that held those veins, and I could not hope to keep the heart from slowly drooping and falling off. Make no mistake: By the time Caridad de Flores took Caracas, the revolution was already long dead. The revolution coughed and feigned life for two years after you left, but she put it out of its misery.

New York City sounds like a desperate, frightening place. But I'm sure one could say the same of Caracas. Have you learned anything from the way the American Carthian Movement conducts its revolutions?

Yours,

Cesar Rodriguez Arango

Mr. Ferdinand Araujo
678 Broadway, Unit C
Brooklyn, New York
11206
United States of America
December 15th, 2013

My Blood,

Hearing from you has been delightful, despite any negativity in the comments. Perhaps soon, we should attempt the telephone. It is no more or less secure than our postal correspondence. I worry Venezuelan or American

mortal authorities might intercept one of our messages as part of their efforts to combat terrorism. It appears anti-Venezuela sentiment has died down largely since Hugo Chavez's death, but I cannot trust American authorities. Has the anti-American sentiment slowed in Venezuela? I cannot imagine a world where that is the case. It has been so very long.

I asked you about Consuela. I'm sure you missed that paragraph. I do apologize, Brother. How is she?

New York is a desperate, frightening place in the way that all cities are desperate, frightening places. Mortals struggle. Mortals must establish hierarchies and systems, and in every system, some are on the outs. In American capitalism, it happens that most of those are those with whom I care to associate most. For millions, it's fine. It's a good day's work for a good day's wage. I see hundreds of smiling people at night. The feeding is good.

New York needed fresh ideas, and fresh personalities. I fault their practice of abducting and indoctrination. Clearly, that policy is not universally popular, and when someone breaks it, they go unchallenged. They wanted new spirit, and they couldn't rely on finding some neonate to fix all their problems. They sought out well-tested hearts and ideas, tempered on the fires of true revolution. They wanted tried talent. As disgusted as I am with their actions, I am flattered at their choice.

Now, I work to subvert their past behaviors, and motivate them on to greatness. My language barrier is waning, but has caused some conflict. Fortunately, a coterie of Spanish-speaking Carthians has been able to disseminate my messages to the populace. They've been clever enough to act as intermediaries, as buffers for my worst critics. I'm helping to build New York into something beautiful, and something without the corruption that recruits through mind slavery.

If you have no place in Caracas, perhaps you should come to New York? My New York. We could plant the seeds of a new revolution. New York isn't paradise, but Caracas doesn't seem to want you. I want you, Brother. Please consider.

Always,

Ferdinand Araujo

Senor Cesar Rodriguez Araujo
Avenida Sanz
Residencias Terepaima, Entrada D
Caracas 1010, D.F.
Venezuela
January 12th, 2014

Brother my Brother,

New York City, you say? You think I'd have a place in New York City? Brother, I am far more conservative than you are. I don't know that I could look an American in the eye, let alone feed from one. Your new Movement knew this. They knew what they needed. If they thought I'd be valuable, they'd have grabbed me while they had the chance nearly a decade ago. No, Brother. I am not a valuable member of anyone's Movement. I let the fires of revolution die. That is the only true Carthian crime.

No, Brother. I'm not long for this world. The world turns, and moves on without me. I'm a bygone. Even when you were here, this was your show. The revolution

fell apart because it needed you. I was a bureaucrat. A legislator. A paper pusher. I was a necessary evil, but the evil, the role was necessary: I was not. You're better than I am. New York saw that. I don't begrudge your achievements, but I will not diminish them by claiming I'm on your level.

Who knows, though? I want to travel. I want to see the world. I want to see it all before I move on. I may stop in New York to visit. But I'm no revolutionary. Not anymore.

Tell me something about your new life I can appreciate. If I can't live successfully through my own means, help me to live vicariously through yours.

With love,

Cesar Rodriguez Araujo

Mr. Ferdinand Araujo
678 Broadway, Unit C
Brooklyn, New York
11206
United States of America
January 30th, 2014

Brother, Brother, Brother,

Please, don't flatter me, and don't denigrate yourself. You're wonderful. You're valuable. I want you in New York, particularly if Caracas has no place for you. If you don't think you're a suitable leader, I can put you to work. You like to have your hands busy; I can facilitate that. Please. You gave me mentorship and protection all my life. Let me give you a job. Please.

Brother, again you've failed to answer me about Consuela. Does this mean she's not well? Did she fall in the aftermath of my leaving? Please, she's family. I wish to know.

I'm sorry if this message is short. But I want to know you're better. You're sounding fatalist. Don't commit to New York, but come to New York. Visit me. We'll talk. We'll catch up. We'll soul search together. If it's best for you, you can stay. If it's best for you, I'll leave with you. I care for you, Brother. Let's find solutions together.

Concerned,

Ferdinand Araujo

Senor Cesar Rodriguez Araujo
Avenida Sanz
Residencias Terepaima, Entrada D
Caracas 1010, D.F.
Venezuela
February 24th, 2014

Dear Ferdinand,

Do you truly want me in New York? I don't know that I can safely leave. I don't know how your abductors managed to smuggle you across international lines, but

Venezuela watches its borders. If you have any ideas, I am listening.

Caridad knows we're writing. She knows of our correspondence. She knows you live. I don't know how she knows these things, but she knows. This is no warning, no threat, simply a statement so you understand. She brought it up obliquely at Elysium, speaking of "those of past crimes, those we thought dead." She knows you collude with those within Caracas, and she fancies you a conspirator against her regime. She said she seeks to root out "the corrupted." I think she aims to motivate others to pry into my affairs with this speech. I won't move yet; I will remain where I am, to demonstrate innocence and not alert the dogs.

I did not mean to denigrate myself, only to exalt the truth of the situation and praise you. What sort of work do you think I can do in New York City? I feel every bit the old man. I don't wish to learn English, nor do I think I could if I wished. I'm too proud for physical labor; I'm no thug or workhorse. I cannot imagine a job where I could succeed and flourish in a foreign land, but you have a greater imagination than I do, Brother.

What of my prejudices? I am a man of even temper, but then again I do not see the excesses of the bourgeoisie each night in my current home. I don't know that I could maintain myself indefinitely around their crimes and exploitation.

I don't know, Brother. This sounds like a pretty thing, a possibility for dreams and hypotheticals. But it's one I'm willing to entertain with your support.

Tell me: Do the People have control of their Movement in New York City? Or is it a revolution of personalities?

Pensively,

Cesar Rodriguez Arango

Mr. Ferdinand Araujo
678 Broadway, Unit C
Brooklyn, New York
11206
United States of America
March 12th, 2014

Dear Brother,

Brother, I'll ask only this one last time. Please, tell me of Consuela. I won't bother you further on her if you do not respond. I only wish to know what happened with her. But I lead with this so it cannot be mistaken.

You ask of New York City's Movement? It's democratic. Every member of the city has a voting representative. We vote individually for certain important issues. City law prohibits any one member of the Movement from achieving immense pull within the Movement. It's not perfect, but it mostly achieves the goals it set out to. We have nearly one hundred members in our Movement, and nearly two hundred citizens in the city at large. While the Movement rules the majority and influences constitutional decision-making, they do not truly rule in the way Carthians in some cities might.

More importantly, essential laws have a review period. When voted in, they take action, but require a follow-up vote by the next council of representatives. This way, the bill becomes law largely through merit; laws that fail do not fester long. I think this is a very practical way to run such a collective.

Brother, one in five people in New York speaks Spanish natively. This puts you in a unique position, even if you choose to never learn English. You can be my liaison, my eyes and ears in those communities. You'll mostly be dealing with the working class, so your prejudices should not be an issue. Frankly, Brother, if you kill the occasional slumlord or exploitative executive, New York will be better off.

I can get you out of Caracas. I have friends. We could stage another abduction, so you don't appear complicit in your vacancy. If you say the word, I will have you out within the month.

Concerned,

Ferdinand Araujo

Senor Cesar Rodriguez Araujo
Avenida Sanz
Residencias Terepaima, Entrada D
Caracas 1010, D.F.
Venezuela
April 1st, 2014

My Ferdinand,

I am sorry. I've read your questions about Consuela. It's a difficult topic, and one I avoided because I struggled with putting it into words. It's the reason for such delay in many of my letters. I've drafted dozens of letters in one case, and multiples in every. I've given long-winded explanations of the situation with Consuela. Each and every one, I trashed. It hurts me just to write these words.

But I owe it to you, Brother. While Consuela was my childe, I know the two of you were lovers. She resented me for the Embrace. While I felt we belonged together, you were the closest surrogate for me that I could find. So I fostered that relationship.

Caridad, our dear sire, told a gang of revolutionaries to hunt down one of their more "treasonous" members. That gang included Consuela. According to Consuela, when she confided briefly in me, Caridad's language seemed to encourage her to commit Amaranth upon her former coterie-mate as a show of good will toward the new regime. However, in the hunt, her coterie fell. She was the only survivor. She did commit the dread Amaranth against her former mate. When she returned to report, our dear sire took her into custody, and tried her for breach of Tradition. During sentencing, Caridad offered Consuela the choice of execution or of a full Vinculum, and eternal service to the First Estate. You remember our sire, Brother. You cannot say no to her face. You cannot defy her. Consuela did not defy her.

Now, Consuela is the single strongest supporter of our sire's rule. She's a "knight," a warrior for our sire's whims. She's slaughtered no small number of revolutionaries unwilling to support the new order.

When I was exiled, she commuted my sentence. She escorted me to Caracas limits. When I parted, I tipped my hat to my daughter. She spat on my boots. She's completely under Caridad's sway. She's lost to us.

I want out. Please, Brother. I cannot bear this place any longer. You're the only home I know anymore.

Always,

Cesar Rodriguez Arango

Mr. Ferdinand Araujo
678 Broadway, Unit C
Brooklyn, New York
11206
United States of America
April 10th, 2014

My Brother,

I understand. I hurt for Consuela's loss. But we cannot continue to mourn forever. I will come to you. April 30th, my friends and I will arrive to remove you from Caracas. We will protect you. We will escort you. We will give you a new home, away from this pain.

My Brother, I love you. I shall see you soon.

Sincerely,

Ferdinand Araujo

There's some bias in here. I guess Ferdinand gets to have bias, right? We abducted him. We brainwashed him. We legit fucked up. We've got to cop to that. He can never go back home, so we'll always make a place for him in New York. He's a good guy. He's invaluable. But, he's ultimately our victim, and we can't forget this, and we have to fight to make sure his voice both exists and is respected in the future.

Let me finish this story for you. We visited. By visited, I mean we brought eight motherfuckers to roll on Caracas, and get Cesar Rodriguez Araujo out of that shithole. When we got there, he was dead. According to the locals, Cesar Rodriguez was wanted for suspicion of treason. One night, he vanished, never to be seen again. A week after his disappearance, Caridad proclaimed him guilty of evading trial, and his life forfeit due to his past crimes. Although, the going rumor was that a group of Caridad's thugs found him and fucked him up. What's the old saying? "It's best to not call a blood hunt until after the target is already dead or in captivity."

We think we found his ashes. It's hard to confirm a stranger's remains, even if you have a skilled Shadow on your posse. But there was enough circumstantial evidence to back it up. We found them with half the letters you're reading here tonight. Ferdinand gave permission to print the whole lot of them, to tell their story.

We refused to leave empty handed. I worked with Ferdinand to find Consuela. We cornered her. We abducted her. We took her home. Now, we're in the process of deprogramming her, and getting rid of all that poison her grandsire fed her. Are we committing the same atrocity we did with Ferdinand? Ferdinand doesn't seem to think so. He says we're liberating her. Of course, we told ourselves we were liberating Ferdinand. Maybe we did a little too well at assimilating Ferdinand. Maybe I shouldn't assume we great big American imperialists are so good at erasing people. That's infantilizing and kind of shitty. Maybe Ferdinand came to his own fucking conclusions. And maybe, just maybe, we're in the right this time.



DUBAI: EAT THE MEEK

FUCK, FUCK, FUCK! That was depressing. All full of thinking and shit. We ruined a city! We're fucking awful! God, I need to get over myself.

Do you know how I like to get over myself when talking about political bullshit? I like to look at places that are a million times worse than our incestuous pit of socio-political juvenilia. To do THAT, I've got a story about Dubai, written by one of our members who had the distinct pleasure of spending some time there. Erica's one of our cross-covenant friends; she's part Movement, part Circle of the Crone. All awesome. Read her shit. It's from her blog, so never mind references to comments. She also teaches Devotions to anyone that wants to learn. Hit her up. Give her cash. She loves cash. Her ad's somewhere in this zine. Go digging.

The tickets were non-refundable. Any time you do something where you know you're going to face the sun, the Beast pushes back. If your mortal mothers in danger, if it means going out in the sun for twenty minutes, you might just go back to bed instead of helping. But non-refundable international tickets? Those even scare the Beast into compliance. You beat that inner monster back into the corners of your psyche, you put on the heaviest jacket you can, you pop the collar and wear a hat, and you get your ass to the airport. The worst part of daytime flights is that last twenty minutes when you're waiting to board and you have to stand around a bunch of testy pricks in front of a giant picture window. Every time a kid cries in line, you get down on metaphorical knees and pray the airline boards them immediately, before your Beast decides to turn the place into a buffet line.

Fourteen hours, twelve minutes. I wish I could have spent the whole time covered by a blanket. If I got too comfortable, I'd pass out. Then, I'd look like a corpse in seat 26C. My cure was shitty, decade-old sitcoms on the in-flight television. Part of me wanted to sleep. Part of me wanted to die. But I couldn't do either... I froze watching artistic train wreck after artistic train wreck. One featured three unemployed twenty-somethings in a million dollar Upper East Side condo. And me, the immortal monster celebrated by all popular media, I'm flying coach? Next time, I'm voicing someone into first class.

I planned it so I'd land as early in the evening as possible. My point of contact, an Acolyte called Mahmud, offered to meet me at my hotel. I traveled all the way around the world, and ended up booking the Holiday Inn. There's some kind of social commentary here, but I can't pinpoint it.

Mahmud told me the lay of the land. He explained it'd be smart if I just kept to my hotel whenever possible, since as an outsider without extensive training in local customs, I'd have it rough. I laughed it off. I figured he meant that I'm a white girl in a Muslim country. I had to meet him the next night for the event, for my cult's winter celebration. I fed well before leaving, so I could do the entire trip without hunting on unfamiliar soil.

After Mahmud left me, I wandered the hotel. I walked the halls. I listened to some of the people at the hotel bar, as they went about their business, their flirting, their whatever. I don't know Arabic, I don't know Urdu, but I know people. I love listening to people when the specifics of the

language and the words aren't there to confuse me. I like feeling out the subtleties of their interactions, and how they differ from what I'm used to. The way the women tilt their heads and bat their eyelashes is a little more pronounced than in the States. It makes me aggressive and hungry. I can't imagine how it makes the Neanderthals at that bar feel. It was a real subtle sexy, and if I had to face it head-on, I couldn't say no to it. It's for the best I didn't: Girl-on-girl is a huge offense. I'd hate for my meal ticket to get beheaded for thirty steamy seconds.

A few hours later, I don't know just when, my bad luck kicked into gear. On the way to my room, stepping out of the elevator, I sensed two other Beasts. Footsteps slammed down the hall rapidly from that direction. I made the quick judgment call to just let it be somebody else's problem. I didn't want to duck back into the elevator and raise suspicion. The chase burst out into the foyer I stood in. Two vampires, both dressed in business suits, slammed through. They smashed some potted plants and busted a water fountain. I clenched my jaw, and slowly walked to my room. At least, I thought I did. I mistook the path, and diverted. By the time I corrected my course, the stomping stopped.

Three doors down from my room, one door stood open. Traces of dust and water led inside. Against my better judgment, I peeked into the room. One of the suited men bore down on the other, forcing him to the bed. He drained the last of his victim as I watched. As the monster fed, the victim desiccated into nothingness—it was as if he aged a decade in a second. I put my hand to my mouth and watched, frozen in place. I carried the weight of an overwhelming, primeval fear. The victim crumbled to dust, and the murderer caught my eyes momentarily before I could run. He snarled, and my Beast cried out for help. I ran like I'd never run before. The monster chased me, but I was more willing to escape than he was willing to catch me. I realized it was about 5:30am, and people were on their ways to their Fajr prayer. I pushed the Blood to my legs, and leaped through the fourth-story window. As it shattered, I drew the eyes of all those praying. They gawked, and my pursuer was unwilling to engage, so I escaped.

I traveled a few blocks, and charmed my way into a hotel room despite the window of prayer where I shouldn't have been able to make a business dealing. I slipped into my room, and dropped an email to Mahmud with the cliff notes version of my encounter.

I woke, and shortly thereafter, Mahmud reached me. He apologized. He then told me I couldn't attend the celebration. He told me I would be best to leave Dubai immediately, and avoid any Kindred contact. I pressed him for more, and he agreed to briefly meet me so he could escort me to Dubai International.

He came by the hotel, and picked me up by the loading docks. I couldn't imagine what that meant. We drove on back streets and alleyways. He explained that my pursuer, the diablerist, was a man called Ishaq, a mover and shaker in the local Carthian Movement. I asked why the Movement doesn't mobilize against him. Mahmud explained that the Movement's rules permit Amaranth. As he explained, Dubai's Movement ruled by Meritocracy, which essentially looks like anarchism. If you're strong enough to devour someone's soul, you're entitled to it. If you're weak, the population will intercede. Ishaq is the closest thing Dubai has to a Prince, and everyone knows he's a serial diablerist. Nobody stops him because, surprise surprise, he'll diablerize you if you try. This has apparently happened numerous times.

Close to the airport, our car crashed suddenly. Out of nowhere, we wrecked into Ishaq. Ishaq howled out, and I felt his words burning in the back of my mind. I felt his voice like leeches, trying to rob the life of me. This happened in public, on a busy city street. His façade gone, he was every bit the obvious monster. Ishaq looked like a djinn, a devil. Mortals panicked. Some fled screaming. Some fell to fetal positions crying. Mahmud jumped from the car, as did I. Ishaq wasn't the only one with dirty tricks, though. Except Erica's dirty tricks are New York style. He snarled at me, trying to stun me so he could move in for the kill. I taught him some new English curse words, picked up that old Lincoln Town car, and brought it down on the fuckers' head.

He tossed the car off about three seconds later. Mahmud jumped him, and told me to run. I liked Mahmud, but I didn't think twice. I ran. I didn't look back, but I heard Mahmud scream in the distance. I heard Ishaq rip him apart. Then, I heard Mahmud cry out a prayer in Arabic, which cut off a few seconds later. Fortunately, that gave me the time I needed.

So with Mahmud's help, with Mahmud's sacrifice, I fled. I Doiced everyone I could find until I had enough money to buy an emergency one-way ticket back to New York. I had to stop in London and stay a day. I didn't care.

I will never go back to Dubai. If I hear of any Kindred willingly traveling there now that my story is public, I will suspect they're going to get away with murder.

HOW WE RESPONDED

Makes you glad you live in New York now, doesn't it?

We heard Erica's story. We heard it well. Our reaction was simple, but thorough: It takes a two-thirds majority of all our representatives to allow for a Kindred death. With the way our cycling representation system works, that means no one Kindred should ever be powerful enough to single-handedly choose to end a Requiem.

Holy fuck. Permissible diablerie? I get that it's shitty to look to other cultures and point and gawk or whatever. But there's a line. I think it's right around the point where you say it's okay to eat souls. I don't think it's controversial to say that's utterly fucked. Can we all just be on the same page here and say that's not okay? That's what I thought, glad you all agree.

(Also, don't even dare call me an Islamophobe or whatever. I'm from Lebanon. Born and raised Muslim. I'm pretty sure soul eating doesn't come from Muslim culture. I'm pretty sure it comes from crazy motherfuckers, which happen independent of religion.)

HOUSTON: THE AMERICAN JESUS



In our last feature of this issue, citizen Texx (that's not their real name, that's just what we call them) writes about their original home, Houston. This influenced some of our public policy (discussed below), but I'm sure not everyone knows just where that policy came from when they voted for it. Since I'm a huge fan of educated and informed electorates, I asked Texx to share a little ditty about Houston.

Sorry everyone. I'm not a writer. I'm not an educated person. But I love New York, and I love my new home in the Movement. I think we all have a lot to learn from each other. Maybe you can learn from my experience. I hope you can. If you can't, I'll buy you a drink to make up for the time I've wasted. Actually, I won't because this is a pseudonym. But I'll make it up to you.

In most cities, the Invictus and Lancea et Sanctum are in bed. They form this weird little political/religious bloc. Everyone else gets to be outside that bubble, that niche. In Houston, it's way more complicated than that. In Houston, the Carthians are a Christian Movement, who models their whole thing after Christian doctrine.

This is difficult and imperfect. But religion's always that way, isn't it? It's not as hard as you might think, though. Most of the essential doctrine relates to accepting some facts about the gospels. Then there's some stuff about killing, fidelity, and salvation through grace. It's way different than Lancea et Sanctum doctrine, though. That's the biggest hurdle. Ironically, Christianity is essentially heretical to Lancea et Sanctum teaching.

How did a Carthian Movement go completely the opposite direction of its usual, hardcore secular thing? It's easy to understand if you look at the context. The Carthian Movement is all about experimenting with human solutions to Kindred problems. In Houston, the human population is heavily Christian, so the stock was there to support the Kindred population. And religion, at its heart, is a solution for some deep, fundamental problems we all have. Lastly, it's all about science. Kindred "science" is a difficult concept, but in social sciences, all things need to be tested. For what amounts to magical creatures, a little magical thinking is a logical thing to test.

What I find is the most important test is, when does ideological purity become essential? Christian doctrine isn't inherently incompatible with Carthian doctrine. But they're not the same thing. Carthians are about testing and trying things out. Christianity is about accepting truths and working from them as a foundation. You can say you're testing and trying the practice of accepting truths and working from them as a foundation.



But isn't that what the Lancea et Sanctum do? Isn't that what the Invictus do?

I personally think it's a good thing. I don't think it's something the Movement at large should look at. But I think it's a good thing for Houston to try. Even if it fails, it's something the rest of the Movement can learn from. You can even follow the Ten Commandments, so long as you're willing to accept redemption as a reality. It really works as an exception, as an experiment, because there's never actually been a widespread group of vampires accepting Christianity as a foundation for their ideology. So in a way, it's new, different, and edgy.

It sure pisses off the Spear. Most of you should be able to get on board with that, right?

I had to leave, though. I left because I was leaning toward the Movement. I was in the Invictus. I was one of their soldiers, one of their warriors. It wasn't that I started hating the violence; it was just that I was tired of protecting their ideology. I was tired of defending something that wasn't working for me. I saw what the Carthians had to offer, and I started hanging out with them. I started going to their get-togethers, in and out of church. I grew up in a Christian family, so their words sounded great. The Invictus wasn't having it. They kicked me out, and the Lancea et Sanctum leadership in the city exiled me. I left, and came here to New York. I thought I could be of use.

Texx

HOW WE RESPONDED

Thanks to Texx, we're now experimenting with allowing Kindred to be both Carthian and other things, openly without restrictions. Most cities have Carthians who moonlight. There're always restrictions, usually relating to high-ranking positions and protected information access. But in New York, we've said fuck it, if you're Carthian, you're Carthian. It doesn't matter if you cross-identify. You should be free to congregate and express yourself as you see fit.

Critics say this allows us to have more Carthian votes, and allows us a convenient loophole on our 49% rule. You see, in the census, you count as all your given covenants. So, if you're Carthian, Spear, and Order (hypothetically, because I'd *love* to see that happen), you count three times. So you skew the percentages. I get the criticism. But frankly, I think the benefits outweigh the costs. If you don't want people moonlighting, don't let them join your covenant if they're Carthian. No skin off our backs. That just makes us look more open and accepting.

IN CLOSING

With that, we close out another issue. Write me. Mail. Emails. Texts. Twitters. Smoke signals. Whatever. Tell me what you want to talk about. This zine isn't your Movement, but it helps to bring your Movement together. It's just one more avenue for organizing this clay into an awesome statue of a really hot guy with a big, throbbing... you know.

I love you all. See you at Rant. This month, it's the 28th at the Double Down on Avenue A. It's the one that still has a Myspace page in 2015. That's our level of tacky. Good night everyone.

FUCK THE REVOLUTION!

Dina

Letter from Abroad!

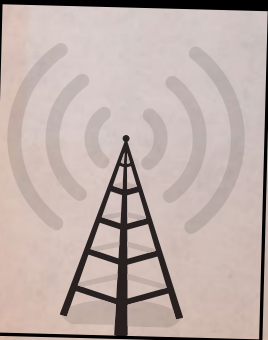
Hello Fuck The Revolution,

I've been reading your magazine for a very long time, but this is my first letter. I'm Dinosaur's biggest fan. I am asking for advice. In our city, we cannot have a Carthian Movement. The Western covenants are not allowed. We have three families that rule the city, and do not allow covenants because of an outdated agreement. I want to start a Movement, but, will I have support from other Carthians? Does the Movement provide any resources for budding revolutions?

In Tokyo, a human corporation holds Kindred hostage. We must work with them, because they know enough about us to put us all in danger. I wish to correct this, for the humans' sake as well as the Kindred. This will not end pleasantly, but the three families prohibit any planning against the corporation. I need to be able to speak freely.

Sincerely, *車*

RADIO FREE CARTHIAN



Tune into 6850 kHz. Usually, it plays jazz. You can barely hear it in New York. Every night, one short transmission plays around midnight. Sometimes it happens a couple of times. It usually sounds like a woman talking to an answering machine, leaving a bullshit "call me" message. That's for us. It generally means nothing. If she says, "you don't call" during the message, it's a false flag. If she says, "why don't you call," that's important. Pay attention to the third and fifth sentences. She'll mention a street name in each. That intersection is where the Movement meets that night in case of emergencies. If she uses a name in the closing of the message that means it's a trap, do not go because she's been compromised. You don't need to listen every night. Put someone on it. Not someone in New York, preferably. Get an Internet nerd to do that for you. Tell them it's a Russian conspiracy, and report what they hear every night. Don't key them in on the code. Don't tell anyone you're working with them.

Dear writer,

Sorry. I don't read Japanese, so I can't address you by name. My person who can is busy, and I'm trying to get this issue out the door. I love to hear from fans outside of New York, and especially overseas. I'm going to be in touch privately with some contacts in East Asia. I know a few Carthians in Seoul and Hong Kong; maybe they can help you. Kyoto has a strong Movement, but I don't know them. Osaka and Okinawa have some presence. I also know someone from Utsunomiya, and Google tells me that's pretty close.

This sounds like an utterly fucked situation. I don't have clear-cut answers for you. But I'm going to publish your letter, and see if we can't get the word out. If anyone wants to connect with you, I'll drop them your address. Let's commit to having a Movement in Tokyo by 2020.

Lots of love,

Dina

New Rack

Check out DUMBO. Until this month, a coven of witches ran it. You can see their Melpomene graffiti still around the neighborhood. Anyway, they left. Gone. No trace. Now, it's all galleries, tech firms, and no property owner. Read: Easy feeding. It'd be political suicide to assign the turf to a Carthian. So let's just leave it free for now. Clean up after yourselves.



A CARTHIAN LAW PRIMER



A lot of you come from cities without strong Carthian Law. Sorry. Best we can do is educate you on how it works. And the best we can do there is to give you what we know, which isn't much.

Sometime in the late eighteenth century, the laws in New York began to enforce themselves in weird ways. At the time, there wasn't much rhyme or reason to it that we could point to. It was shortly after the birth of the Movement (Side note: The French Movement didn't get Carthian Law until like 1830 at the earliest). When we'd declare something illegal, people would suffer punishments out of nowhere. Which was kind of great, because it revealed much of the early corruption in our ranks.

But what is it? Is it the will of the people made palpable? Is it a chaotic blood magic like Lancea wizards toss around? We don't really know. We know a few things need to be in place for Carthian Law to happen:

First, there needs to be Carthians. You need at least five of them in a domain, or else it just doesn't happen.

Second, there needs to be recognized rituals in the Movement. This can be as simple as jumping in ceremonies or monthly raves, but they have to be semi-formally recognized.

Third, you need established laws. These can be city laws, or Carthian internal laws. But if it's Carthian internal laws, they only apply to Carthians.

For Law to take effect, a few things have to happen:

First, the law has to be challenged voluntarily. Sometimes a Daeva can tempt you into breaking a law or whatever, but a Ventrue's voice is just out of the question entirely. If you're blood bound to someone, they can't make you break the law. But you might do it for them without coercion. Mundane coercion seems to work fine; if you threaten a dude into breaking the law, it counts.

Second, the Law has to be acknowledged publicly. There aren't hard numbers, but in our experience, it looks like about 80% of the city (or the Movement for Movement-specific laws) has to know about the Law for it to work. They don't have to respect the law or agree with the law; they just have to know it's the law.

Third, a Carthian of rank has to sign off on it. This assumes at least an informal hierarchy. But it seems like the guy who gets pat on the back a lot counts just fine. You don't get to sign off on a Carthian Law if you're some dipshit nobody off the streets.

That's pretty much how it works. Most laws are prohibitive; you have to break them for something to happen. But that's not always true. It's worth noting that the law doesn't (and can't) discriminate. If you're an asshole Carthian Prince who says, "It's illegal for Kindred who aren't me to kill people," that's a discriminatory law, and Carthian Law will smack you down if you kill someone.

I'll be at the next rave giving a workshop on the law. Remember, ignorance is no excuse.

-Damien

CARTHIAN IDENTITY

I heard a newbie say Carthians are at the head of technology and progress, that's why we're great, and that's what it means to be Carthian.

Nope. Just nope.

Carthians aren't the "cutting edge" covenant. Carthians are the "self-aware" covenant. There's a lot of Invictus into tech. The Circle of the Crone has people that dig social media and advocacy. Ordo Dracul are deep into biotech and 3D printing technology.

Carthians aren't always on the top of things, because we're too busy being fucking real. We don't lie to ourselves about what we are. We don't try to make it sound noble, or woo-woo mystical, or destined, or any shit like that. We drink fucking blood. We reconcile that with our other needs, and accept a slightly altered hierarchy of needs. That's all. That is why we're great. We're not fucking cartoons.

-Rashan Malique

CIRCLE OF THE CRONE

*Dearest Dead Lady,
enclosed is my experience
with Fallcraft-Minster and
the materials I showed to him.
I hope it will help prepare
you for his arrival in July.
-Regards, Mona.*

Michael Fallcraft-Minster was in all ways my elder. He was, in all ways that he thought mattered, my superior. He was tall, with broad shoulders, long silken hair, and piercing blue eyes. He was as good looking as anyone had right to be and over the century, gathered enough wealth to dress not just well, but perfectly. He was a perfect vampire too; his manners were impeccable but strange. People of all genders tossed themselves at him, letting him drain them dry emotionally, physically, or financially. He commanded an extensive knowledge of Crúac and the sacred traditions that he claimed came from Rome. He had no proof; but he said it, so people believed him. Worse, he is my great grandsire, and thought that somehow gave him rights to my blood. My work. My city.

At least, that's what his letter said. Michael had shown me the "courtesy" of mailing six months before he flew into Honolulu to both congratulate me on my budding praxis and to tell me that he would be coming to "take over" for me. So nice of him.

What I read between the lines was that he'd overstepped in Berlin for the last time and so he had to throw his weight around somewhere else for a while. Fucking perfect.

Michael arrived at a private airstrip in Hawaii three hours after nightfall, later than projected. Just like him to make me wait around on him in my own damn city. Compared to my grandsire I am short, thick, and decidedly Hawaiian in skin tone and upbringing. The black sands are in my blood, and I had all rights to it, but here was Michael Fallcraft-Minster with a retinue of ghouls and sycophants getting off a private plane to tell me otherwise. I'd come alone. There was no reason to expose my cult to his bullshit before I'd gotten him sorted out.



As he approached, he whipped dark glasses off and smiled at me with all teeth. He tried to dazzle me with a trick of the Serpents, but it bounced away harmlessly in the night air, the Mother's gifts protecting me from his charms.

"That's how a Lord rolls on his granddaughter? All right then." I rolled my eyes at him and stuck my hands in my pockets. "This way. I have a car waiting for us. Your people can manage on their own."

The retinue huffed, objected, and quietly tried to tell Michael how to handle it. He waved them off, smiling, always smiling, and followed me.

The car, originally here to pick up a TV exec and diverted by my Command, was an uncomfortably quiet place as we drove to my hotel overlooking a bluff. The modest place pulled in tourist cash, but wasn't what you'd call extravagant. Much of the staff was my mortal family; the rest of them filled in by the mortals in my cult. All of them were, more or less, in the know as to who Michael was and what his visit could mean. As a result, they didn't hide their dirty looks when I lead the man into the hotel and back to my office.

He kept on smiling.

"You have a problem with authority." He finally suggested, as we walked into my office. My desk was a mess with the letters I kept and was currently writing. Files and files full of Masquerade-breaking correspondences from all over the world, my hub of communication. A dangerous thing, but wasn't Crúac dangerous? Wasn't being a vampire dangerous? Wasn't also the full floor to ceiling windows facing east that marked one wall of my office and overlooked a steep drop to perilous rocks and unforgiving churning water?

"To have a problem with authority, I would have to recognize it exists in the first place. I don't." I folded my arms, leaned on my desk, and watched him pace, touching files and flipping through papers. We'd fought about my letters in the past. He'd given up on that battle, apparently.

"I am better than you. In every way."

I sighed, then looked straight at him and yawned.

He stiffened.

"Prove it." I motioned to him with a hand. "Because I can prove you're wrong. I have a hundred thousand letters here, maybe more or less, that prove I know more about being a vampire, a witch, and a leader than you ever could. A hundred years. That's what you've got, more or less; I have the years of a hundred thousand letters and their real experiences. Or at least their imagined experiences. I have that."

He scoffed, pacing the floor. "Show me." He didn't demand proof. "Show me, I don't know. How you will handle attacks on your praxis and your court?"

"Well, I'll start out by not calling it a court, like we're Eurotrash wannabes. Beyond that?" I leaned back on my desk, yanked a letter out, a photocopy of a photocopy, and handed it to him. "Probably something like this."

Dearest of the
Dead,
Material included.
-Mona

SACRIFICIAL

So I got your "clever" letter the other night, posted anonymously to me out of embarrassment or cowardice. You referred to me, twenty-eight times, as a goat or a sacrificial sex toy and various other forms of objectification. You suggested that because I am a man in the Circle, I should be used to "abuse." You also seem to

imply that I am unfit to rule this city because, and this is inference, I am not manly enough to be a leader. Apparently, because I may or may not have removed my penis as a part of ritual within the Circle, I am no man, and not fit to be Prince.

I am trying to figure out what you use a dead lump of skin for that makes you a better leader, but I suppose you mean for this whole line of thinking to be metaphorical rather than literal. So. Let me address the only part of your laughable and poorly spelled screed that seems even worth addressing. Yes. Once a year, a coven of Acolytes kills me. What's more, it's a really rad party and it's pretty sad that you can't land yourself an invite.

You have called me the Sacrificial King, and I guess I just have to live with that. It's not actually a bad thing for someone who died male to submit sometimes.

Every winter, I get dragged out into a field and murdered. I know it's going to happen, but the coven does a damn fine job of making sure both the how and why are a bit of a surprise, and so I tend to spend a month on pins and needles waiting for it to happen. Since you are clearly tragically cool, let me tell you all about the party last year. It was splendid. About a week before, as I was leaving my haven in the early evening I tripped over a dead sparrow with a long pin through its body. This is an old sign.

"Run," the sparrow suggests, "run because we've marked you and this is the only warning you'll get." I knew pain was coming, and that knowledge filled me with anticipatory excitement. The buck feels this as well as the doe when an arrow has flown, you understand? Probably not. So I ran. Not so much in the literal sense, but in that I began evasion tactics. I make it a challenge most years. That makes my witches better at their duties. It makes them stronger when they have to chase and catch me. We are all better for the struggle. I took to my car and headed to Elysium where I had an edge. In public, they'd respect my rule; my mistake was habitual. I fed from a favorite vassal, and soon after, the psychotropic kicked in. A woman in green and blood called to me and led me via a glass shard rainbow to a field. She sang, wept, and we made love; and when the trip was over, I was in a box underground. My coven has never drugged me before, so that was new!

I stayed under, alone in the dark with my fears for six nights. On the seventh, I was hungry, angry, frightened, and had an erection that I couldn't account for. Maybe it was something in the drugs.

They unburied the erection first. That bit I'll leave to your imagination.

Then, bit-by-bit, they opened, maybe little doors in the lid of my box and wrestled to catch a hand or a foot and yank it out to be cut off. Oh. I frenzied. I became a raging Beast unable to get at my tormentors. I believe I bit off someone's fingers though. They kept score, it was a game to see who could catch and cut off what. My erection and head were out of bounds, obviously. When the blood ran out and I fell to the nightmare of Torpor, the Goddess was waiting for me. She is always waiting for me there. Afterwards, when I woke after the mortals were gone, the party started for real. It was incredible and as always, I was king of it.

It is always brutal and always gory and I think the only reason the whole thing hasn't driven me crazy yet is that I know some of the women in the coven spend the three months ahead of time arguing that 'this year maybe we should skip that.' It doesn't have to be me, granted, they'd pick someone else if I put my foot down about it, but they'd find someone else and not a lot of Kindred can keep their Beast calm while being murdered, ritually or not.

Since we do it with a full ceremony including human members of the coven, and they don't know about Kindred, every year we get a few who believe they're party to murder. That's kind of funny to me. When I turn back up in a few weeks, it's interesting to see which of the humans are relieved, and which ones are kind of disappointed.

I don't have a vote whether the ritual takes place at all. That's not an angry feminist thing; it's not because I'm a man. It's because it's a conflict of interest. My position as secular leader of the city, such as it is, is an important line in the sand. I've found my place in the chaos and learned to enjoy it.

Here's what I hear, from young Carthians who don't get it and old Invictus who won't think it through. I hear, "You're just letting a bunch of crazy bitches walk all over you. It's reverse discrimination! How can you put up with that?"

First, it's a tragic mistake to assume that anything about the Circle is especially feminist. Centered on women and progressive or feminist aren't the same thing. Plenty of covens all over the world fall into the same paternalistic Joseph Campbell Hero Mother Elder Crone shit. Gender essentialism at its finest. My city isn't immune to it. I wouldn't get murdered every year if it didn't follow the beats of a modern interpretation of ancient myths. Male narrative and the stories men write about the myths men have created greatly influence the Circle directly, by force, or in reaction. So, there are a lot of angry, powerful, and dangerous women in one place who think it's pretty legit to drag me into a field every winter and ritually disembowel me, or set me on fire, or whatever they're inspired to do. Why do I stay? Why not use my political sway to stop it or leave the covenant and have them all destroyed for what they've done to me?

Because I don't want to, mostly. Because I don't need to. Because the anger is often righteous and beautiful and the power is sexy; and while I don't especially deserve to be dismissed or even occasionally insulted by gender essentialist views, I am powerful hand-in-hand with the Crone. The Mother goddess touched me early in my Embrace, and the burning print of her hand on my skin still bleeds and charges me.

I saw the Dark Mother the night of my Embrace. She spoke to me. She whispered words I can scarcely understand, but feel to be true. She seeded Crúac in my blood and uplifted me. She has since shown me how to play, dance, through politics because there is nothing real or permanent, even the kingdoms made by those who think themselves immortal. We'll all be reaped one night, and the hull will be separated from the kernel. I think that's a great equalizer.

Now, for your charge that someone should rise up and take my position from me because I am too weak to hold it; let me explain in very simple terms.

My witches are jealous and dangerous and they know where you sleep. They are coming. As you are reading this, they are outside your haven. By the time you get to the door, you will find your body twisting in agony and unable to move. You will bleed from all parts of your body, yes, including your penis. It will take them nights, maybe weeks, to finish the rituals of torment and suffering they will apply to your corpse before they finally let you die. Even then, there's some discussion of keeping your suffering ghost around for a while to hold up as an example for those who threaten the Circle in my city. I'd try to stop them, and all, but I'm probably too weak to do anything. Sorry about that.

Michael scanned the letter and looked up at me, dark brow arched, expression nonplussed. "This is your solution? Frighten them as if you were a bogeyman? You don't even experience Crúac."

I shrugged. "I don't need to. I study the experience of Crúac."

He scoffed and tossed the photocopy back at me. "You'd have to have the support of a powerful coven to have that kind of power behind you. You'd have to be trusted and beloved by elder witches of considerable strength, especially since you don't have any actual power yourself. You're just a child."

Outside, the wind picked up and carried with it rain. Rain splattered against the window in big fat drops and streaked down the glass. The sudden splatter brought both of our attention to the window. I had flowers growing, a touch wild, outside of that window. Hibiscus, large and red, bounced in the rain as it fell. Brilliant yellow and orange birds of paradise appeared to dance in rhythm to the hibiscus, the fronds, the leaves, and the wild plant life outside of the glass, vulnerable to the elements.

"We should be out in this rain, celebrating, not in here debating." I muttered, he didn't catch it, he'd put his back to me flipping through a file folder. I pictured him, stripped to the waist of his fine silk jacket. Hair wild, whipped by the rain. Pale skin lit by sputtering torches and oil. It would have been hot; I smiled to myself, which is when he glanced back and peered at me.

"What?" He said.

"Nothing," I kept smiling though and he shook his head.

"What did you mean you studied the experience? That doesn't make any sense. Crúac needs to be felt to be understood. You can't learn it from a book."

"I don't actually intend on learning it from a book or from feelings. I don't actually want to learn it at all."

He scoffed more. "You're afraid of it. You are afraid of the Dark Mother's gift and yet somehow think you can hold a city when you cannot even hold the thing that is bound to your lineage, a dozen generations of the undead and before."

My grin dropped away and I sighed. "I'm not afraid if it, any more than I'm afraid of the lightning that's liable to start up any moment now out there. But that doesn't mean I'm going to run outside with a metal rod and stick it up at the sky just for the hell of it."

"If it didn't kill you, it would make you stronger."

"Stronger, but not wiser. Look, there are those of us with a natural talent for blood magic, and those of us with an understanding of what it does to our bodies, our cities, our family lines. Those two groups are rarely the same, and I think I have an opportunity here to spread some wisdom. Some learning. The Mother teaches that we learn from Tribulation. That's great. But she doesn't say that we have to ignore the things that others have learned so we all keep making the same mistakes, endlessly, over and over. That's what this is. Saving those with the willingness to listen and think, a chance to skip some mistakes and find whole new ways to fuck up our unlives."

He shook his head. "In order for your little trick with the coven murdering your enemies to work, you need the backing of such a coven. Do you think your elders in this city will simply obey you and use their hard-won magic for your benefit?"

I got up from my seat on the desk and crossed the room to get in front of him. "Do you mean, do I think a bunch of old crones from Hawaii would back someone who looks, talks, and worships as I do would favor my rule to that of a man who looks, walks, and talks like the white fuckers who overran their islands and tried to destroy their culture? Yea. Yea I kinda do."

Michael paused. This had not occurred to him.

"What is this?" He gestured to a stack of paper held together in a lightweight binder.

I followed his gestured, lifting it up for him to take. "That's a sad one. It's a shame too; I

think I owed her money. This is a story of white fuckers and witchcraft and being a walking lightning rod trying to dodge lightning."

"A story?"

"Or a diary. We're all making up stories, all the time. This one seems to ring true, though." Despite himself, Michael was curious and flipped open the binder.

EFFORTLESS DAMAGE

They shot another boy in the streets today, it happened in broad daylight. Between the heat, the storms, and the power structure falling apart, eating itself alive, it's all going to hell. Tampa's going to burn before too long, Mona. I know a lot of you young Kindred think it's fun to talk about revolution and fire and people rising up. I've seen enough Kindred burn when humanity rises up against itself to understand that it may be necessary from time to time, but it isn't glamorous or even desirable. Chaos leads to rebirth and change is good, of course, but I won't ignore the suffering that happens while we change. That would do it a disservice.

It's Tuesday, and they came for Meredith tonight. No one is surprised; of course, she's been directly flaunting the "law" and practicing in public. Her gods give her the right to do that. Of course, she made up her gods, so it gets a little complicated at that point. Last week it was Erik, I guess he'd "lain with another man who was mortal" and that was enough. With the Spear the way they are now, we pretty much can't keep up with changing laws, and how they apply to us.

Raven says it's only a matter of time before they just declare being in the Circle a crime and have us all called in for trial. The others are afraid, but I'm not.

Did I ever tell you about Meredith? She was kind of a spectacle, and I'm surprised they waited so long to drag her in and kill her. She was beautiful, and intelligent, and a walking social distortion. She was, on an emotional level, radio static and it was sort of hard to be around her for long. She sucked energy and thought right out of the room the way she sucked blood. She was a master of both and in my own way, I respected the chaos she sowed. She probably deserved to die, if any of us do, and certainly more than Erik. But less than me. Far less than me.

Last week, or maybe a month ago, (time compresses between nightmares and rituals, you understand.) So last week she marched into a prayer meeting and announced she'd begun to worship a god named Shitfuck. She said that since no one could disprove it existed, it was real, and deserved to wield the same power over her life that the distant god of the Lance did. She said Shitfuck demanded that all Kindred of the city stop feeding from humans in the underclasses and we should all focus our attention of feeding from the pigs and the fat cats. Some of the ever-silent and oft-abused Carthians in the city cheered, but were quickly silenced by the looks of the Cardinal's men. She then proceeded to sing a "hymn" to Shitfuck loudly and with as much profanity as I'd ever heard contained in one place. It was masterful, in a way, and clever, and the Spear didn't think it was very funny.

They didn't put her down on the spot, though. Instead, they told her she needed to leave and that the judges would gather to discuss her proposal.

They, I assume, did not hold that meeting in good faith.

She must be in her trials by now. The Cardinal likes to keep a certain distance from his acts of killing, and prefers to leave the gruesome deaths he causes to be "judgment by the Dark Father" rather than his own actions. This is cowardice, but he's the power that be and Tampa has not yet burned to the ground. Likely, she'll be suspended over a fire and told to prove her worth by not burning, or something equally impossible.

Won't they be surprised by the sheer amount of time it will take her to burn. We've been practicing for their fire. We've been making our bodies ready. It's not so much about surviving these trials, that's impossible, but it's about making an agonizing spectacle out of it. I hope he never forgets the curses she'll shriek at him. I can hear them in my mind if I close my eyes. We all planned and practiced our death throes as well.

I'm getting this off to the post in late afternoon, Mona, but that's getting harder and harder to do. Since that boy got killed, line have been marching in the streets. They say he was a good boy and going to college someday and he'd done nothing wrong. I believe them. The Spear, with their fingers in the police, has started hiding their purging through extra police presence and riot suppression. There have been no riots. But when Kindred need to be pulled out into the streets and beaten into torpor, riots are manufactured. I had dreams again, those dreams. I saw inside myself, Mona, and looked down to the roots of the magic that's grown inside of me and I found that they root in no soil. In you, I have seen, the roots are in blood and passion. That's not how it is for me. There is nothing inside of me for the magic to root in. Not just nothing, but a lack of thing. There is an abyss inside of me, Mona, and that abyss feeds the Crúac. I am a cursed thing and my destruction will unleash something terrible on this city. Pray they do not catch me soon.

We decided to burn the temple. We'd gathered three hundred years' worth of study, experiments, and sacred sacrifices in that temple. The sea and the gulf have given us so much to consider and understand and that's all gone now. It wasn't a decision taken lightly, though maybe Raven was as little too eager to accept the suggestion when I made it. Crúac doesn't root inside of her, but if it did, I'd worry more.

Over the last three months, I'd led the chorus in moving underground, or maybe we'd started it last night, I'm not sure. But we'd begun a process to get everyone and their retainers out of the public eye and into the safety of anonymity. Some of us talked about trying to all move to another city, or take to Citrus Parks, but as long as we had the temple, it was hard to go.

Change is always good.

They broke in just after dark, several mortals, and some of the Cardinal's heavies without official positions but plenty of personal power. I think they called them Paladins. That's the sort of word people like this would use. They pushed in the doors with police style pneumatic battering rams and flash-bangs. Frank, who was always listening for the whispers of ghosts, went down fast when the flash bangs went off, his senses overloaded. They didn't make demands or tell us to get down. They didn't tell us who they were after. They were after all of us.

Of course, there's Crúac rooted in most of us, and in me, it feeds off a terrible void. I closed my eyes while the lights flashed and Frank howled in pain and Raven ate one of the mortal interlopers. I closed my eyes and felt inside of myself, looking for the emptiness that I tried to suppress. This is what it feels like for me, Mora. Not some ecstatic glory or act of creation, which is how I know that I am poison, when I reach inside I touch the cold of an unforgiving universe and know that in a blink of an eye, everything we are and ever have been will be erased and dust when the universe collapses in on itself.

In that darkness, in that cold place, I find Crúac has rooted, and Heaven help me, but I let it out and let it loose on those Templars. The void inside of me consumed the white of their body armor and ate the muzzle flashes of their assault rifles as they tried to mow us down. I heard Raven scream at what I had unleashed, and I realized that what was inside of me had birthed a thing that I could not take back. It ate at the Templars, slowly, as if it would consume their meat and blood for hours if it were able.

"We have to run," I told the others. Those who could get to their feet did, we dragged Frank and I think I grabbed on to one of the mortal gunman, he was still breathing, and we fled down through entrance we'd build into a storm drain to escape the building.

"What did you make?" Raven asked. "How did you ..."

"I don't know." I told her. We stood outside of the place, the Paladins still screaming from outside. Elsewhere in the city, there were fires spreading, protesters who had been pepper sprayed and been beaten became rioters, and buildings were burning.

"We have to burn it down. That's the only way to make sure it doesn't get out."

"Those... those men were still alive. We could..." Frank sunk to his knees again and gagged but didn't throw up.

"We can't help them." I told him.

"I'm on it." Raven said, without hesitation, and I wondered what was inside of her, not even for the first time.

Hours later, the press has abandoned the rioters, the police have suppressed the events as best they can, but the embers are still burning.

The temple too, is in embers, and

whatever it was that I released, well, it's gone now. I cannot process where it would have gone or if it could even be destroyed. I just know, or need to believe, that the fire was enough.

Change is always good. Many will leave tonight for Citrus and places further from the Cardinal's grip. I won't though. What's inside of me grew in this place, under these conditions, and it wouldn't be fair to carry it elsewhere.

Frank and Raven have stayed with me, though I wish they wouldn't have. Raven keeps asking me about the temple fire and asking if I can teach her what I did. As if I can teach a person how to be a sucking void instead of a...

I'm sorry, Mona. My melancholy helps nothing. I'll keep sending you reports so long as I am able to do so, but those nights are drawing shorter and shorter. I fantasize that some night, when all of this is over and the Cardinal grows weak with age or madness, some elder Crone will sweep into Tampa and avenge all of us. But I guess I also dream of opening my chest up so that what is inside of me can finally crawl out and turn this whole cursed place into a scorched pitch where no one is suffering and no one is punishing anyone else for crimes only imagined. I don't pray for saviors or apocalypse, no matter what my dreams suggest, though Mona. Don't worry about that. I still don't pray to anything, just to be safe.

Frank cries out and twitches in his sleep. Raven kicked him out of the bed they were sharing at the hotel we're holed up in. I took him in, though I suppose he didn't much care for the offer. He told me I was "colder than even the dead should be." He never used to complain about that, but then, when we were together was a long time ago. Even before Raven joined the Chorus. Back when he was just a lost Carthian hanger-on. Back before Crúac had really taken root in the core of me and I found what was inside of me.

This is indulgent, I'm sorry. Tonight and tomorrow we're spending time checking dead drops for signs that there are other Choristers still alive and in Tampa. I don't hold much hope at this point. I'll send you along word when I can.

Last night I dreamt about the god we had made in the temple. He had been a little jolly thing with shades of Bacchus and with the intention of feeding resourcefully and growing herds. Like a god of husbandry, but only for us. The orgy rite we'd used to celebrate him at his creation was one that leaves me with bittersweet memories even now, in these darkest hours. We created him before Melissa and Raven. Before Frank. Though most of those who were there the first time have by now been purged, he still existed when the temple burned. I think. It's hard to say with the gods we create to fuel our worship and to understand the Dark Mother. (Aspects, the girls called them. I called them faces.)

In my dream he'd wasted away to be golden skin hanging from a fat skeleton with no eyes or hair left. He cried out, pointing an accusing finger at me, but hardly existed enough to tell me anything. I suppose in his petty way, he believed I was the cause of his destruction. I rarely let the insults of gods get to me, but this wounded somehow. Our Mother is distant from me now, Mona. She has turned her back and in my abandonment, the void inside me deepens. I can look for people to blame for that distance. I can blame myself, but at the end of the night, blame means nothing. The accusations of a dying god mean nothing. All that matters is that change is coming.

And change is always good.

Our Mother is a concept. Our Mother is a literal entity that exists and can be flesh or spirit or nothing. Our Mother is a convention we create for ourselves so we can exist night to night without just killing ourselves. Our Mother is Crúac, nothing more or less than that. All of these things are true. The one thing I know that our Mother is NOT is the void growing inside of me.

Melissa spoke to Frank tonight. She was reckless in her abandon, a person damaged long before she was tortured to death by Kindred who hate her. I hesitate to even say that she was a ghost, there are better words for the embodied malevolence she'd become. She plans to haunt the Cardinal's bloodline until there is not a drop left. I'll call it extreme, but it isn't.

"He's a demon," Frank said, wiping blood from his face. Raven watched him closely, I watched her closely.

"He isn't," cackled Melissa from beyond the veil. "That's the really funny thing! This is not the work of even the apex predator he claims to be! I've seen into his soul and his hate is purely human. His desire to wipe us all out is a small human terror. He's a child in the skin of a monster. He'll kill and he'll kill to satisfy this childish fear of himself until there is nothing left."

"Or he is dead." I said.

Melissa laughed again, delighted either way. "Oh the havoc he'll create! Has created!" Ghosts, I guess, have the same problem with time that I do. Past and future mingle and we get lost.

We abjured her, because it was the only way to free her from Frank's ghost-trap. She wailed at us and hurled insults. I hope she'll make good on her oaths to destroy his line. Innocent blood needs to spill to answer the innocent blood already spilt. I'm sorry Mona. That's a terrible thing to say.

Melissa, for reasons known only to herself, has left us a series of clues to the location of a few sleeping Choristers that the Cardinal doesn't yet know about. They are, after a fashion, sitting ducks.

"Leave them to rot." Raven said with considerable venom. She was arguing with me about my Crúac when Frank brought it up, and stayed surly about it. "Survival of the fittest at this point, if you ask me." She crossed her arms. "Of course we'd all be much more fit if..."

"Shut up Raven." Frank wasn't the sort of guy who took charge ever, and his bark shocked Raven into temporary silence. "Melissa's clues suggest that these old Acolytes are strong. They may know rituals we don't. They may know how to build stronger gods than we can, just the three of us. If we're going to stop the Cardinal, we're going to need their help." I nodded; he's changed in the fires of the last few nights. He'd become something new. Change is good.

"We already know how to destroy the Cardinal. She could do it. It doesn't even seem like it would be hard for her!" Raven pointed a finger at me and I stared her down, my jaw set.

"That isn't going to happen, Raven."

"That fucker killed a dozen of us, burned Melissa for rights until she turned into that fucking spectral monster! We loved Melissa once, if you haven't fucking forgotten. And Erik. I remember the way he smelled, the way he tasted and we could march into that prayer meeting and have our revenge right the fuck now except you're both too cowardly to..."

I slapped her. I slapped her right across her arrogant, hotheaded, beautiful face. I did it so that Frank didn't feel like he had to. My fingers stung and we all stood looking at each other for a while. "We're falling apart," Frank said, finally, weakly. "This is what he wants, really, at the end. He wants us to tear each other apart and do all his work for him."

Frank wasn't wrong, even if he was a little dramatic. I picked up my bag and headed for the door of the shitty hotel we'd been squatting at.

"Where are you going?" Raven sulked while she asked, rubbing her cheek.

"To find the old dead Crores. Maybe they'll have even worse things inside of them than I do."

I guess I said something she could get behind, the possibilities ran across her eyes like she were calculating potential wealth after a windfall, and those eyes absolutely sparkled. Frank fell in behind us, and we went to follow Melissa's clues.

If there is anything less forgiving, less compassionate, and more confounding than an ancient god, it's an elder vampire. Mona, what we found made things worse. Maybe she plans to curse us for failing her. I don't feel any special grievance with her if she did. We're doomed fools walking toward oblivion.

Is that dramatic? Don't take it as such. Oblivion would be a change from where we are now, and change is good.

Oaklawn cemetery on Harrison is one of those spots that wound up popular with kids and "ghost hunters" from the Internet. The place is old, traditional, and a lot of people with names wound up buried there. There are several dozen videos on the web showing them allegedly capturing "evidence of ghostly activity" there, but I found them unconvincing. Still, it was one of the places that the Cardinal marked as forbidden. Mourners were holding a vigil outside as a result; the body of the boy who had been shot would not be buried at Oaklawn. It wouldn't be buried anyway, according to a press statement; the police had "lost" the body. We moved under cover of the mourners, though it was distasteful, it was the surest way to sneak into the place that was occasionally patrolled by the Cardinal's Paladins. Paladins whose friends I had murdered in spectacular and horrific fashion.

I will agree with the superstitious line, that the place had a palpable feeling of menace, and if you didn't know that vampire elders slept in the soil, you could suspect ghostly activity. Frank wasn't the sort to tell us what he saw unless it was pertinent, and at that point, ghosts weren't a priority. Only the eldest of us.

"We could take their power for ourselves," Raven whispered as we approached the crypt that Melissa had indicated in her riddles. Raven licked her lip after she spoke, and I realized at that point she needed to die before all this was over, if only for Frank's sake. Or maybe I was picturing her already dead, maybe she was dead by the time we got to the cemetery and I have time confused again. Earlier I had a conversation with Erik. Not his ghost; just that our conversation happened in the wrong place in time. The problem with prophetic visions is they don't exactly leave when you're done with them.

Frank took bolt cutters to a new chain, woven through the doors of the crypt, and Raven pointed out sigils scraped into the stone. "Holding magic in and out," she said. "They must be terribly dangerous." She glanced at me, like she was teasing me. I ignored her and stepped inside. The room inside was big enough for the three of us to go in and still gave us a few feet between ourselves and the three marble coffins sitting up against the walls under false

windows. As if the sleeping or the dead needed the view.

One of the three coffins was open, destroyed, and ash lay scattered thick on the exposed bottom where the stone had broken open. I pictured the creature inside, fitful in slumber, waking and cracking the stone, only to see the sun and have it destroy them because it was that far removed from humanity. Of course, I always have had an overactive imagination. "Your blood is the strongest," Raven told me. "You do it."

Frank shook his head and looked at his boots. She was right.

I went to the middle coffin and pushed at the lid. It didn't move, which was ultimately a good sign for us, so Frank and Raven broke out the crowbars to pry it off. It moved with some effort, and the body inside was a desiccated mess. Its bones had scattered, the connective tissue that held them together long gone. This was no sleeping elder.

"It's a trick, give it blood anyway."

The idea of bleeding onto a skeleton made my skin crawl, but Raven wasn't backing down and Frank had returned to a state of passive remorse. I split my index finger open with a pocketknife and willed the blood to leave me. It would not go easily, and as it slid from the lips of my wound, oozing slowly across the pad of my finger and down through the air into the mouth of the corpse, I thought it was thicker and moved slower than the last time I had done something like this. Was it blacker too? Shining less? Dull like a starless night? Who can say? But the consistency alone said that I had changed. Change is good.

Nothing happened. We waited a around on the skull's teeth.

"I'm sorry," I told Frank himself. "We'll try the

We turned to the stone behind us and worms spilled up slowly a figure, bent and stone floor. She moved as we could not hear. When and her eyes glowed red. "I smell thick blood," she hissed, dragging the words up a dark, seldom-used tunnel. I saw, in that moment, inside of her, and inside of her was the void. In that moment, I know that what was inside of me was inside of her as well and that she recognized that horrible kinship between us. "You dare to wake me, for what?" She swept a pale hand in the air, indicating all three of us, though her burning red eyes never moved from me.

"We're sorry to interrupt your slumber, Mother," Frank said with quiet deference. "But the city is in danger, and we are worried malevolence will come to your door. It may be best to flee."

"Malevolence is already through my door, little boy." She said to Frank, or to me, it was hard to say. "You brought it with you."

"The leader here, he's, he's a power-mad Spear, and he's almost wiped us all out." Frank went on, his hands forming white-knuckled fists. The Beast stirred under his skin and I felt it, palpable. He worked so hard to keep his clan and his Beast from overtaking him. Soon, I thought, all that effort would prove to have meant nothing.

Raven thought that was funny.

while. Raven smeared my blood but nothing happened.

who had sank even deeper into last one."

investigate the final coffin when split with a deafening crack. Earth out of the crack in the stone and angular, rose up out of the broken if dancing to a bumping twisting rhythm she stopped, she was thin and covered in soil she hissed, dragging the words up a dark, seldom-used tunnel. I saw, in that moment, inside of her, and inside of her was the void. In that moment, I know that what was inside of me was inside of her as well and that she recognized that horrible kinship between us. "You dare to wake me, for what?" She swept a pale hand in the air, indicating all three of us, though her burning red eyes never moved from me.

Outside the crypt, we could hear a distant sound, police rifles firing. The crowd of mourners and their vigil were being 'dispersed.' There would be no news crews to witness.

Frank huffed and straightened his shoulders. "We're young, and you are old, and you're in danger. We want to help you escape the city."

Now, slowly, she pulled her eyes away from me and set them on Frank. To his credit, he didn't fall away to ash instantly. I would have thought she could turn a man to stone with a look like that. "You are lying. Your mind thinks you are doing this, coming to me, for my sake, but your Beast says that's a lie. Your Beast wants me to rise up like the destructive force of Kali and trample your enemies into paste under my feet. Your Beast would give you over to me, completely, to do what I want with, if I could prove to be so powerful and make real your desire for revenge."

Frank's jaw fell open, and we all knew in a moment that she was telling the truth, though the truth often warps around Acolytes as old as she is.

"You could teach us how to destroy him." Raven, emboldened, rushed in with her words though her body stayed stuck to the spot she'd been standing, pinned there by her doubt. "We could raze this city and start over. It would be beautiful and..."

"No."

We all stopped.

After a moment, Raven stammered. "W-what?"

"No." The old witch repeated. "No. I won't do your work for you. I am old and tired. You have everything you need to survive the tribulation the Mother has thrown at you. There are no easy outs in life, my lovelies. Only suffering, sacrifice, and the wisdom that comes of both."

"W-what about your companion..." Raven stammered harder, gesturing to the third coffin.

"That old fool? I ate him fifty years ago for fun. He's in here, if you'd like to talk to him." Her eyes glowed brilliant green for a moment and we all looked down, shaking our heads. "Get out before I eat you too."

We fled, then, because odds were good she wasn't bluffing. There was an ambulance at the gates of the cemetery, carrying away a body.

Tampa is going to burn.

We were followed from the cemetery. We'd decided to bed down somewhere different from the hotel, and an abandoned gas station nearby seemed reasonable.

We should have gone further, maybe, or prepared better.

Raven was in the middle of shouting at me more. "You heard what she said! She said we had what we needed to take down the Cardinal. She meant you, you fucking coward."

"She said we had what we needed to survive this tribulation. She didn't say anything about—"

"Shut up Frank! For fuck's sake, what's wrong with the two of you? Where are your damn spines? What kind of fucking monsters are you?"

In a flash, in my mind's eye, I showed her what a monster really looked like. I

imagined opening up my mouth and vomiting inky nothing onto the ground to consume her. The void inside of me quivered at the sight. I found the fingers on my hand twitching, the muscles in my neck convulsing. My foot slid and I shifted my weight and my hips slid to the side and my body wanted to dance. A twitchy, melody-free dance. No. Not my body, but the emptiness inside.

I pushed the fantasy back.

That's when Raven's head exploded all over me. We didn't hear the shot; this time they were smart enough to use a sniper. He was a fantastic shot, and Raven stumbled around with half her head blown off a moment before she finally, and sensibly, fell to the ground. She wasn't getting up. She wasn't dust yet, but as I glanced over to Frank, he was already running.

That was smart.

I didn't get her to her feet. I abandoned her there, or left her to die, or murdered her too, however you'd like to look at it. I let her be the next to the last martyr, if you'd like to be very generous. I know you, Mona; you're kind like that.

I ran too, in a different direction to make it easier for Frank to slip out. I ran for three city blocks, using the speed my thick dead blood would afford me until they cornered me near train tracks. I warned them, I swear to you, Mona, I warned them that I couldn't undo what I was going to do.

I let it out, and it destroyed them, pulling them a piece at a time down through the train tracks and into the gravel beneath. I think I recognized the Cardinal's beloved son among the Paladins before it pulled off his face. Maybe it was for the best. Melissa would have been crueler.

I'm the only one left now, of Kindred who care, or remember the Acolytes who died here. Only I know what's inside the Cardinal, and what he will be, if left to live. I cannot count on any single other person to do what needs to be done, and so, I have to do what no one should do. In the evening, tomorrow, I will go to the prayer meeting, I will pry open my chest with my bare hands, and I will let it out. I will let all of the painful nothing, the hungry indifference, out of my chest, and let it feast on the elite of the city. It will be a display great and terrible. It will be the only chance I have to get our Mother to turn her face back and look at me one more time.

I miss her, Mona.

Our Mother is sacrifice, Mona. And tonight, I will go be with her.



"Epilogue," I told Michael with a certain wry gravitas. "My lovely Mary did, in fact, birth a horror out into the city of Tampa. A few of them, if you want to count. Witnesses say that the Cardinal could not have seen it coming if he'd had a witch forecast his future for him." I thought that was funny, so I smirked and went on. "The thing that came out of Mary ate his eyes first, then his soul, then his still twitching, dancing body a chunk at a time. It ate nine other Spears that night, and no one knows where it went after, or what it was to begin with. The creation, if you can call it that, murdered Mary of course. But they say something changed in her in that moment of sacrifice. They say that the sorrowful looks she'd long carried faded and a light returned to her eyes, and in the moment of her Final Death, as she fell into dust, she wasn't empty any more. So. I guess it's sort of a nice story, huh?"

Michael pursed his lips. "Her name was Mary?"

"Of course not, I make names up all the time if they make the story better. Try to keep up, will you?"

"So you're making it all up?"

"Not really." He'd gone to sit while finishing the binder, which I collected and returned to its spot. The storm picked up while he read, and plants whipped against the window as if they were trying to get in. I watched them, considering, and now that he was finished, my attention only half returned to him. "Everyone makes up stories. The thing is most of those stories are more true than false. Even the myths we create about ourselves, about the neighboring culture, about witches and about priests, they're all built on something. Often something wholly misguided, but the signs of the truth are there."

He muttered the word "fascinating" but tried to keep it to himself. I heard, more attentive to him than he was to me.

"To your right, that there? The email printed out that says "Daisy" on top. Go ahead. It's short. You won't believe a word of it, which is how you can tell it's the truth."

He arched his brow at me, smirking, and reached over to pick up the email.

DAISY

*Beautiful Corpse,
More about Daisy.
Blessed.
-Mona*

Return-Path: <gary@hotmail.COM>

X-SpamCatcher-Score: 1 [X]

Received: from [136.555.55.555] (honolulutourism.gov)

by smtp.honolulutourism.gov

with ESMTP-TLS id 61258719; Mon, 23 Aug 2004 11:40:10 -0400

Message-ID: <4129F3CA.2020509@honolulutourism.gov>

Date: Mon, 23 Aug 2005 11:40:36 -0400

From: gary <gary@hotmail.com>

User-Agent: iphone (IOS; U 5.1; en-US; rv:1.0.1) Gecko/20020823 Safari/7.0

X-Accept-Language: en-us, en

MIME-Version: 1.0

To: Mona

Subject: Daisy

Content-Type: text/plain; charset=us-ascii; format=flowed

Content-Transfer-Encoding: 7bit

Daisy's in labor. That probably seems like a bad time to send you an email, but it isn't like in the movies.

She says everything "feels normal" and it's okay that it's taking hours and hours. She says labor is like that with kine anyway. So who knows? Maybe she's right. The whole pregnancy has been too long too, she says.

Fuck if I know. This whole thing is so fucked.

I know that the hierophant sent you word about it all, but I'm not sure what he told you. He probably made it seem like it was our fault. Hell, maybe it is, but how could we have known? How could anyone have known? And if anyone had known, they sure as fuck didn't ever tell us about it.

Anyway, about a year ago we were at a ritual celebration. No big deal. Daisy was doing some solo ritual to demonstrate a technique she was developing. Her Crúac has always been a little different. A little weird. That's one of the things that attracts people to her. Even among the Acolytes, she's a little bit weird and the strangeness just pulls you in. She's so low key about it. Like the early flower children and their weird spirituality. She acts like the weird shit she says is totally mundane, no big deal, no airs put on. She'll just say, "You've got blood on your feet, not your hands; think about it." You think about it and damn, she's right and you don't know where she even came up with it.

So she's doing this thing where she's pulling strands of energy from the world around her. They're slithering up along her legs and settling on her hands and along her body and connecting her to everything around her. The energy turns black, and red, and green, and it's as grotesque as it is beautiful and I realize I've got a fucking hard-on. Like, I can't remember the last time I had a real, legit, hard-on. It didn't make me feel powerful though. I remember a time it would have been like a weapon in my hand, ready to go, you know? Now it makes me all needy and aching like I'm totally incomplete. So she seems to know everyone around her is ready to go. And not in a typical vampire orgy kind of way. I can't even feel my fangs, but my dick is like a rock.

Naturally, people start fucking.

She and me, we haven't talked much, I'm not all that outgoing, but she picks me out of the crowd and there's just no way I'm not going for it. I don't blame her. I would never blame her. I'm not sure if any of it was in her control either, as out of control as I felt.

Then we didn't see each other for months. I was avoiding her, to be honest. Because the whole thing was fucking weird and I'm kind of afraid of another hard-on. Look, it was complicated, okay? Don't judge.

But then I see her at a real casual gathering, and she's fat. Well. Not fat. But you know. She's put on twenty pounds and pretty much all of the weight is in her stomach. Heavy. I didn't exactly break out into a sweat, but I wish I could have.

"I didn't want to bother you with it." She told me when I cornered her to ask her what was going on. Her voice was so small and so scared. I did not get a hard-on as I had feared.

"Shit, Daisy. You didn't have to do all this alone. You don't have to do this alone." I told her. I don't think she really believed me then, or now, it still seems like it's something that's happening to her and only happening near me, if that makes any sense. I want to be more a part of it, to help, but the whole thing is so crazy I don't even know where to start.

We spent time talking about what it could be. I poked around and bothered my contacts in the region, but no one had ever heard of anything like this happening. Once the baby started moving, when we started feeling kicks, we couldn't deny it anymore. You could get the pulse and everything. What Daisy had inside of her was alive and thriving. Life will out, I guess.

She told me it was hard; she cried all the time at the drop of a hat. She was afraid most of the time, especially when the Spear and some of the eldest Crones started talking about her in public whispers. We're sure they're going to try to kill us, or at least Daisy and the baby. I'll die before I let that happen, though. At this point, that's pretty much all I can do. Die for them. That's life too, though, isn't it?

Sorry, I. Okay. I had to stop writing because she called out for me. That's the first time she's called for me to help her. I. Shit. She had it. Well, she had her, I guess. The baby. It was bloody and kinda gross, but a baby got born tonight. I... Daisy had a baby. She's not doing well, Daisy I mean. She'll pull through but there's a change in her I don't have the words to describe.

The baby, though, she's fucking beautiful. You've never seen a baby so beautiful. She's got Daisy's eyes, and my nose, and I'm pretty sure some mind control.

More later.

As he read about Daisy, the email held in one hand, Michael stood, slid his coat off, tossed it aside on a side table, and kept reading. He finished reading and pulled the knot from his tie. Then he looked at me, silent for a while. "You mean to tell me you think this is true? You think this is all true?"

I sighed, watching the spot of his throat where his tie had been tied. "I have communication from the hierophant of San Diego that matches up, more or less, with the story there. I mean, it's drier and more filled with panic. I guess it's only a little while before the whole thing ends in bloodshed. Even we're not immune to destroying what we don't understand."

Michael scowled and ran fingers through his hair.

"Why is the hierophant of San Diego contacting you at all? All of these letters and notes. They're so, so intimate. I don't understand why so many Kindred are willing to risk everything to tell you their stories?"

I looked at him plainly. "Because I listen."

He started to pace, speaking with his hands in the air, gesturing. "You listen. You listen. But there has to be more to it than that. This is, this is some ritual, it must be. You've used some lost Crúac to get all of them to trust you and send you their souls on a sheet of paper."

"That'd be a neat trick." I grinned at him, full of teeth. He was watching me, now, for the first time since he'd landed. My grandsire was actually looking at me and listening to my words. All of them. "Look, I know. Okay? I know it seems wild, but these people aren't selling me their souls or anything that dramatic. You don't have to buy souls, Michael. People will give them to you if you let them."

"Madness. All of this." He gestured around again.

"Maybe. Maybe not. The point is, it is what it is, and I'm at the center of it. I talked to Kindred as they came through my ports and my airspace. Layovers and the occasional trip along the Pacific. I've visited Acolytes all along the West Coast, parts of China, and even visited our weird quasi-sisters in Tokyo. It's the same everywhere. We're all practicing in shadows and holding on to stories so painful that we ache, we suffer, and because we don't share what we know, no one actually learns anything from that suffering. So when I listen, when I'm willing to absorb every story without judgment, and maybe even with an offer of aid, I get all the good will I can handle. Maybe more. I can't answer all of these. At best, I try to forward messages to those who can help, when I can make those connections. The workload gets bigger, exponentially. Like kudzu. It's growing wild. Maybe that is magic. Maybe it's something in the blood, some universal thing in all of ours blood, maybe that's the Danse, when you get right down to it. Lonely strangers living lost in a world we only pretend to control, desperate for the intimacy of... of a letter, or a confession, or last words before facing Final Death."

He'd gone still while I spoke, dropping his hands to his side. "You're preaching. Not even. You're testifying." He grinned at me, all teeth.

I wondered what his lips looked like, covered in blood. "Maybe I am." I looked away, made myself look away, and watch the hibiscus slam itself into my window.

"And you believe all of this is the truth? Order out of chaos. Singing and holding hands and telling each other our darkest secrets. That's the way of the future? That's what you're really going to use to manage this nightmare to the Masquerade and your praxis?"

I laughed once. "I'm going to do what I can with the hand I'm dealt. But don't think I'm looking to control anything. You can't control anything. The harder you try, the quicker it all slips away. Sand in the fist."

He nodded, sitting. "And the truth?"

"Our blessed covenant has always had a complicated relationship with the truth, though, hasn't it? I'm not going to change that, and I wouldn't want to even if I could."

*Exquisite Dead,
I tried to preserve
his scent in the
paper.*

-Mona

"Explain," he said, folding his hands in his lap, though even as he did so, his eyes scanned my letters. He wanted more to read, and I couldn't even blame him for it.

"Here. Let the Roman explain." I passed him a letter from one of my oldest friends, a man I could remember the taste of, and found myself licking my lips thinking of the Roman.

HOW I LEARNED TO LET GO AND LOVE THE MOVEMENT

Rome-fucking-Italy. We've got, you know, a history. Actually, we've got all the history if you want to be perfectly fucking obvious about it. Our own civilizations, the shit we stole from every culture around us, and then we got left behind. Shit's in the can for the human population, but the vampires aren't worried.

Vampires in Rome don't worry. They just drink another mortal, have the musicians play louder, and drown out the decay and collapse. I'd say we're folly for it, but frankly, Rome, at least, has seen so many cultures rise and fall, the only vampires who should laugh harder about the whole thing is the vampires of Cairo, but they don't laugh about anything.

The Movement here claims that the Movement everywhere came from here. Which the French kind of laugh about, as so do the Sians and overall, the Circle doesn't care. It's funny, really, because any time you talk to a Kindred from elsewhere in the world and find how many places have been convinced that the Spear is the Second Estate and that there is a First Estate at all but...

But there I go again rambling when I'm supposed to tell you what's going on here, right now.

There's a riot going on outside of Elysium. It's a small one, and well handled, but as I lean out of the window to watch, I feel somehow revived by the spontaneity and violence. Inside, the council is sitting around discussing matters of conduct and rhetoric. Someone spoke out of turn and now they're trying to figure out who gets to take offense to it, who doesn't, and what someone should do about it.

Probably nothing. They'll talk about bullshit until close to dawn then they'll

all rush home and as it has always been, nothing will really happen. Not inside these walls and halls. Democracy doesn't happen here, it happens out there, down there, in the street. Maybe I mean anarchy. I don't think I do though.

So why let this structure stand or decay? Eh. That's complicated. Too often, I hear stories of fledgling cults springing up, weed-like, in a city and being plucked because they were too aggressive. Too demanding. Too violent. I like violence, but you have to know which window to put a brick through. The rioters downstairs throw a brick through a baker's window instead of a bank, and I wonder if humanity is worth herding at all.

I have long held this: all city structures are a delicate lie held up by those with power and slowly scraped away at by time and those with less power. Those with no power just obey the lie so long as it lasts. Here, the Movement claims some kind of historical background for their political ritual and ceremony, their practices, and even if it's rooted in the first Democracy, it doesn't matter. It's a funny bullshit.

The thing is though; you need shit to grow good produce and beautiful plants. Here's what I advise you, young cult, do as we have always done. Find the system; find the part of it where you can celebrate chaos without calling attention to what exactly you are celebrating. Hide the violence and the bloodshed behind the magic and the veneer of wisdom. (If you are young and need this, you don't have wisdom of your own. Yet. Give it time.) If you can mumble in an old language, read simple omens, or better yet, read them; so many will treat you as a seer even if all you ever see is the bullshit they've sprayed themselves with in their attempts to control the system, to control their lives.

Here, now, I have been called to enter the chamber of the council and give an accounting of my study. Rome is an ancient Democracy, to be true, but its Kindred are either young or sleeping. The laws that the Movement have put into place are complicated, and tap into older and stranger political ceremony and social engineering strong enough to be the same as magic. Because of that sympathy, though, the young covenant keeps running across laws that no one put on the books. Laws that effect Kindred in ways no one expected. So. I'm called in to read the blood of a bull and tell them where I expect the next complication to come up. I could give them the real answers, and sometimes I do. Sometimes I tell them bullshit instead of bull blood.

Sometimes I say I see nothing if it's particularly dull. Sometimes, though, I tell them, word for word what I've seen. That shit is chaos. It's fucking beautiful.

Last year at about this time, I told them that there was a traditional period of infertility in this region. I said that the omens suggested that any Embraces performed that month would go badly. I was pressed about it, and told them the truth. Any Embrace would result in twenty-seven revenants for every single intended childer. The number was so specific I knew they would dismiss me. Exactly 51 revenants later, I laughed myself to sleep for nights.

The thing is if I had told them, "beware of Embraces this month, it will result in revenants," they would have heeded me. That's the chaos of existence, my little loves. That's the garden always overgrowing and eating anything in its way. That's the glory of the Dark Mother. Work in the system, throw bricks through the window from the inside, have more fun.

"I know this letterhead," Michael said thoughtfully. Then his eyes went wide. "Is this from..."

I held up my hand. "Don't say his name. You know he prefers us not."

"Sweet Mother of the Night." He chuckled, shook his head, and smiled, considering the page. "I admit I know him. I remember his ritual practices. Quite well." He smiled, fond, filthy memories fluttering across his mind's eye.

I swallowed and felt flush, but did not blush. "It's, I uh. He's."

Michael laughed, standing, and handed me the letter. "This is... charming. All of this. I suppose after a fashion what you're doing has its place. But you can't possibly manage all of this by yourself and manage the city. Abdicate to me, focus your energy here, and go on with this. You'll have my protection and my support."

I set my jaw, violence flashed through my veins and I imagined if I let it, the Beast could lash out, and I'd catch my grandsire completely off guard.

But then, I might destroy the work in the process.

"It's out of my hands, Michael. The Kindred of Honolulu would never accept you. There are oaths in the soil here. Magic bound into the trees and the mortals. Any blood you drank would turn on you. The leaves would be like razors. The rain would burn you like lava."

"You're bluffing." He put hands on his hips, studying my face closely.

"You'd never know if I was until it was too late. The ghosts of the island would reject you. The gods would reject you. Even if I wanted to hand things over to you — and I don't — I would be murdering you by way of history, magic, and ghosts as surely as fire."

He didn't respond immediately, still studying my expression for any chance, any sign that I was bluffing. He saw none, and then tossed a hand up. "Madness. There's something wrong with you. You talk about history but clearly have no understanding of the history I carry with me. Decades upon decades make my leadership the only rational choice. If there is a curse on this island, then my talents with Crúac will be invaluable in breaking it."

"Not a curse, Michael. It's a promise the Kindred of the island made to the gods and the dead to appease them. We will not give over our land to alien blood. The island itself will revolt against you."

He convinced himself he wasn't convinced, and paced from the desk to a bookshelf and back. Outside, the rain slowed, the plants stopped banging against the window, and the patter of the rain became a quiet lullaby. White noise that soothed both of us, though he would not have admitted it if pressed.

"You have experience with ghosts and appeasing them? That's a thing you can handle? It's a tricky thing." Michael asked, finally, running a hand through his hair.

"Not directly, no, but one I do correspond with an expert."

"What do you mean by expert?"

I went to a filing cabinet, fingered through some files, and then finally pulled one out, handing it to him. He opened it, and then looked at me. "You're serious? She's writing you?"

"You've got the paper in front of you."

"Not just writing you," he said, shaking his head. "She's practically reporting to you. Do you really understand who this woman is? What this means?"

I shrugged, dropping into the seat where he'd been reading. "It means what it means. It means that I know people and she needs to know what I know as much as I want to know what she knows."

He shook his head. "You're blackmailing her, in other words."

I nodded.

"Dangerous game." He flipped through, then stopped to read the report, pacing as he read.

NASIRIYAH

In regard to the events surrounding Nasiriyah:

*Dust Mother,
What I showed
him next. Be careful
with it.*

-Mona

As of summer of last year, I was called upon to visit Nasiriyah to consult with Acolytes of that city, as it was relevant to my special talents. I had been residing in nearby Kut for many years, and my reputation eventually traveled the region. As an anthropologist and medium, it seemed logical that when the disturbances to the Kindred of Nasiriyah began, in the way that they began, it was logical I should be the one brought in.

After an exchange of favors with the matron of the cult there, I traveled by car to the outskirts of the city proper. Traditionally, this space had recognition as being built on the ruins of Ur, and the local Society fancied that there was some importance and significance in holding society parties there. As a result, this grouping of ruins had been preserved for the better part of a century from mortal archeology or looting. At least, in that way, they preserved this important space.

My guide explained that for the last century, Society meetings had been matter of course here, and since the city's power structure was old and powerful, things ran as mundanely as possible for gatherings of the Dead. Mother, forgive us. It was in this static state that many of my sisters chafed and rumbled, while those Spear, (Islamic, I make note for you, cousin,) had been forced to appear mostly secular in reference to mortal politics. These

conflicts are as old as civilization itself, though, and so I won't bore you with the political mood.

The point is that in these weather-beaten ruins, I felt a strong presence immediately. My guide and sister, a woman named Miriam, said that sometimes the sands bled, and howling accusations would come dancing along the desert winds. Once, she said, several members of society saw a false sun, and they fled to underground parts of the ruins, nearly causing a collapse in their hurry.

I began my ritual in the sand, the glistening grains reflected dancing candlelight and I felt this was a good place for magic. At first, I feared that I was summoning a god; that it was a god tormenting the society here. If so, it was a new one, a small one, as it had only started in the few months previous.

What arrived as I called out in the oldest words I knew was not a god, not exactly.

"Why do you call me?" He was made of shifting sands and the tears we all weep when we realize the passage of time is resolute and unconcerned with our existence. His shape suggested he was once tall, his shoulders broad, and he spoke Sumerian. Such a beautiful cadence. I had once before heard it from a native speaker, and so, this sounded very correct.

"You're the dead." I expected a god, and so I blurted out my surprise to find a ghost instead.

"And so are you, what of it?"

My companions, my guide, all retreated in fear.

"I... nothing. Forgive me. I was not expecting a ghost, and certainly not one of your apparent age."

He made a gesture I did not know, and paced. "I am as old as the sands you stand on. If I am a ghost, I am the ghost of a ghost of a ghost. The memory of the dead remembered by ghosts. By now, I can remember only that my name had once been Ane Pada."

No one else in the area seemed to note the significance. Sometimes ghosts forgot themselves and clung to whatever bits of their life they could remember, so I did not take his name to be completely certain. Out of respect, though, I would call him by the name he gave me.

"I'm honored to meet you. My name is Allyah, and I have called you here by magic. I will not keep you long, but in the time I have you here, I demand honesty from you."

"I have no need of lies." He said, and I would have believed him even if my magic did not reinforce my command. He sounded sure in the way gods do, not ghosts.

"Why do you torment the society of the dead that gather here? You have been here forever, as far as it matters, and have not always frightened them with the things that their hearts fear. Why now?"

He made a gesture and a snort and folded what may have been his arms, though his shape was not as clearly defined as to be sure.

"I show them what is in their hearts, it isn't my fault they are afraid of themselves."

I hesitated, glancing to Miriam. She shook her head and looked at her feet, as if ashamed.

"You will do as you will do, but why do that at all? Why are these dead of interest to you?"

A wind broke across the sands and kicked it up everywhere. My candles blew out, suffocated. If I breathed, I might have choked on the sudden sandstorm.

"Because I love her!" He howled through the sand. "Because I love her, and want her, and I do not know why! I cannot stop thinking about her! I have not thought about anything in two hundred years or more, and yet, I cannot stop now!" The apparition, the ancient ghost

faded, the storm died down, and carved into the sand, though briefly, was the name of a member of society with some weight and significance.

Later, after investigation among the Kindred of this city, it became clear to me that she brought about the love of the ghost quite by accident. A ritual with another target that had gone awry. Magics meant to bind a person as if by blood over distance. And so, here we have my first real example of a blood-bound ghost. More on this as it unfolds.

Yours forever, Allyah.



"I had no idea that your reach was so extensive." Michael shook his head. "And how much of the rest of this is by blackmail?"

"Less than you would think, more than I would hope. Look, I know you need a new place to settle. Harrod contacted me just after you left and...."

"Enough. Don't listen to gossip." If he'd seemed impressed, it had faded now, and anger replaced it. The elder Lord paced my office, flipping through pages and turning over binders. He was stalling. He was planning. He was regrouping. I wasn't going to give him the time.

"What do you know about god-eaters?" I asked, and perhaps because nature has a sense of drama, the storm outside swelled again. My smart phone buzzed to life, hurricane warnings sent to every phone on the island and broadcast over the radio. The island was interconnected, if you knew how to receive the messages, you could know about anything before it went bad.

Michael glanced at the window, then my phone, and then me. "What do you know about them?" He scoffed, to make light and dismiss, but it didn't ring true.

"I know what I've been told, which is more than most people." Outside, some of my more stalwart ghouls, a pair of distant cousins, battled the storm to pull down the metal storm guards for the hotel windows. They nodded to me as they came to shut out the coming hurricane outside my office. I nodded back. The metal muffled the sounds of rain for a while, but not long after, the sound changed to branches banging against the shutters. It wasn't steady, and enough to put anyone on edge.

"We'll need to move." I said, picking up a single file box.

"Where?" Michael asked, reaching to take the box from me. I let him. "The hotel has storage under this floor; it's dug into the mountain. We'll be safer until this all blows over."

He didn't argue; the thumping against the metal shutters, the creaking of the walls was all familiar to me. To him, it was all new, all new, and getting to him.

I led him to where some of the staff was climbing down a trap door in the floor into the storage area, and Michael scowled.

"Get over yourself." I told him, terse, and leant a hand to a second cousin by marriage as she went anxiously into the trapdoor.

It was spacious enough, once they got inside, with hurricane lanterns and cots spread out. I'd seen to the various special needs some time ago, and lead Michael past the kine to a locked door. I opened the door, glanced at the others, and went inside. Michael followed, carrying my box. When the door shut behind us, it was with a solid metal finality.

"Who are all those people?" He gestured to the door, and I watched him. He didn't make the connection and I wanted to strangle him, just a little, for being so out of touch. My Beast reminded me again maybe he wouldn't even see it coming.

Maybe he would.

"Kin. They're cousins and a nephew of sorts, a few in-laws. That sort of thing. We're all connected on this island."

"Your cult, you mean," he watched me, brow arched.

"You think it's that black and white, do you? Don't you tend to your grove, Michael? Don't you have blood out there, somewhere?"

He snorted. "I have all the blood I need right here." He tapped his chest and showed me his teeth once more.

"Plenty of us tend to a garden, what about the Dust Mother?"

He looked at me, the smile dropped away. "What do you know about her?" with a touch of fear, or disdain, or maybe it was the same in this case.

"Only what she told me." I handed him a letter of yours, the important one. I thought he'd get a kick out of it, or run screaming into the night. He stayed planted on the spot and read.

Dirt Queen,
About you, more
or less, so he
knows.
-Mona

TENDING GARDENS

Had a boy come to my place, he was delicious.

I'm kidding! I don't think I ate him. He was a real tulip, you know? Well, probably you don't. He was tough, and rugged, and arrogant, and I bet he would have been delicious if I had eaten him. Which I didn't. He said that the Queen Father of the city had demanded he observe my garden to make sure I wasn't up to anything. His bravery impressed

me, so I ate him. No, so I brought him down into the garden.

You've been, yes? I brought you down, didn't I? Well. The Tulip and I went down into the abandoned train station that served as my garden here. The bioluminescent moss is enough light for me, mind, but Tulip had trouble with that.

"Mind the vines," I told him after he tripped in the dark, and I guess he didn't think I saw the glare he gave me. Because it was dark and he was prettier than he was smart. Or was. Hell, I don't know, I think he survived the visit. Don't ask me about it!

I told him about the flora, the families of the otherwise-extinct plants I tended, the genus, and how I organized them. He might have yawned; I love when they start to get bored like that.

That's when Granny Mae groaned pleasantly off to our left as we passed the wishbone flowers. "What the fuck?" he said and reached inside his coat, I guess it only sounds like pleasure if you know the sound.

"That would be my great-great-great-great-great-great and some other great granddaughter. Her name is Mae." I told him, matter of fact, and took him by his arm. I guess my grip is more than most people expect, so when I took his arm, he grimaced. "Come on then, there's more than one way to tend a garden." I dragged him; he followed, because what choice did he have, and I introduced him to little Granny Mae.

She was, as far as I can tell, about eighty-seven years old, and had been in my care for ten or fifteen years. I made formal introduction, "Tulip, this is Mae, Mae, this is Tulip," and so on. He stared, eyes wide so that I could see the white all around the iris.

Let me explain.

Mae is helping me feed the garden. "I do this with many of my greatest grandchildren. Dementia, you know, it runs in my family lines, and so when one of my greatest grandchildren turns up unable to care for themselves, I take them in and bring them here. They spend their remaining years safe and sound here, enjoying the garden." I beamed. He didn't seem soothed.

Mae sat in an old recliner, though most of the surface had a covering of slimy moss that helped prevent bedsores. She rested limp against the chair, breathing slowly, and shallow, like she were sleeping. From the ground, vines, grapes in this case, grew up into sweet old Mae and pushed under her skin. I think he could detect that they twitched a little under her skin when she breathed in, pulsing in time with her heartbeat.

"She's not in any pain. Mind. The plants live off of her blood, of course, but just like when you bite some pretty little boy or girl, she's in a constant state of bliss. Many of the plants release something, mmm, psychotropic too. So you know she's having some AMAZING visions right now."

Mae, at that point, turned and looked at Tulip and smiled at him, mouthing 'pleased to meet you.'

He shrieked and jerked back from old Granny and me.

"Shit. Shit! It's fucking sentient?!" I think he was looking for a place to run or something to shoot.

"Of course she is. Don't be foolish." I snapped at him. That startled him enough that he looked at me, wild eyed.

"You're a monster."

"Yes." I took him by the arm again, and introduced him to other greatest grandchildren. Harold had an old TV set he watched while feeding my hemp. Gloria still walked around a little, even danced to music only she could hear, only because she felt no arthritis pain anymore. "It's a blessing, for them, you see. And a blessing for me." I gestured and he remained unconvinced. Or ready to break down sobbing. Which would have been delicious if I had eaten him, which I didn't.

"You have people here as living fertilizer!"

"Not at all. I'm tending my garden. It's a bigger, broader way than just the Mandragora that you, I might add, enjoy the fruits of, like much of the Circle in this city. I tend the garden of my herd, my offspring, my descendants. I observe their lives, try not to interfere too much, but trim and tend when need be." I gestured out to Granny, Karl, Gloria, and Harold. "They're too old to fruit, feeding from them would kill them, but this, it gives them peace and comfort and a use. As I said, it's a blessing."

"You're a monster!" He told me again. "I have to get out of here."

"Do you know what your Prince does with Kindred he can't kill but doesn't want around anymore? The ones who are too monstrous to exist among you? Risks to the Masquerade and the like?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Well. There's one behind you." I gestured to a cherry tree that grew, stunted by the short ceiling. Inside, encased by bark, was an old raving Beast that had faced his last frenzy a decade ago. "We could have killed him, of course. But now, he's a useful part of society again." I plucked a fresh, fat, dripping cherry from the branch and the old monster groaned softly, offering the cherry to Tulip. He recognized it, the smell, he'd eaten my fruit in the past not knowing where it came from.

He started screaming, and ran. I heard him screaming for a long time as he ran blind from the place. I'm not sure if he ever got out. I'm pretty sure I didn't eat him, but maybe, maybe the plants did. That happens too. I hope he was delicious.

"I have only heard of the garden, I have never been there myself." Michael said, distantly.

"But you have eaten the fruits of her gardening techniques?" I asked him, watching him.

"Of course. We all have."

I nodded, and he went quiet for a while, perhaps the weight of age and the potential of a garden as his final resting place dragged his heart into his gut. Then he shook his head and gestured around the room with the hand not carrying my box. "This is an old bunker?"

"The War was hard on the island. I know people who were..." I shook her head. "Anyway, this place was foreclosed on a while ago; I snapped it right up when I heard about it. We'll be safe here while it storms."

He put the box down and folded his arms. It was a ritual space; I had foldaway cots that I began pulling out. I flopped down on one; he looked at the other, but stayed planted.

"What do you know about the god-eaters? Why even bring it up?"

"Because I want you to know what I know. It'll make things easier, in the long run, if we're on the same page."

"I don't expect that you let anyone on the same page you're on, Mona." It was a compliment wrapped in accusation.

"Yeah yeah." I waved a hand, and then put my arms up behind my head. "That's most of my information on the matter. It's happening in more clusters than anyone ever remembered. Like an outbreak of a stronger, more dangerous virus evolving over time."

He looked to the box, sat on the unoccupied cot, and began to leaf through. He stopped on a folder.

"This is from an Academy in Philadelphia? Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you could run across having this?"

"You should have seen the trouble I ran across getting it in the first place. But a friend of a friend knew I was looking for this shit."

He shook his head, laid out along his side, and read through the file. His hips were fine, his thighs strong. I peeked over at him, and then grinned at the ceiling.

BREAD CRUMBS

From the notes of the Voivode's Scribe, September

On this night, the twins Jerome and Jewel were brought before the Hierophant on charges of threatening the Masquerade and the as-till-now-untried crimes of stealing Crúac and worshiping alien gods. While these crimes were outlined in the papers of assertion written so many years ago, the Academy was shocked to hear them brought up.

THE VOIVODE, GREAT GENIUS

Since this city's founding, we have existed in a careful balance between our need to experiment and our need to respect the energies that make this location so ideal for our research. This place, all of this place, is a part of the greatest Grand Experiment I have yet to hear about, and the Acolytes of the Circle of the Crone have had a welcome place in this delicate balance. The rules were clear and simple. The worshipers of gods were welcome to practice their dark arts, feed freely and happily, and be safe inside Dragon protection so long as they worshipped only the gods that belong to this place. What you children have done could destroy all of us. All of us. And worse still, this great and Grand experiment.

As always, our great Genius looked fantastic, walking the floor of the Academy's lecture hall, his arms held wide as he spoke both to those gathered and to the children where they sat. He is as charming as he is brilliant; make no mistake.

Jerome and Jewel sit stiffly, looking at the floor, showing not the wisdom to watch the Genius as he speaks in order to glean what lessons they can from his words. Jewel is in her mid-twenties, with deep skin and honey-brown eyes. Her nose is aquiline, and her whole face is beautiful despite the ignorance and commonness of her dress and manner of speaking. Her brother, twin brother, is similarly handsome but common. Tragically common. None of us seems especially forgiving of their history, being from the streets and all. If I dare to read the mood of the Academy, it is one of quiet disdain.

THE VOIVODE

Can you explain your actions then? In the hopes we might learn something from your crimes?

JEWEL

Learn something?

She speaks up first.

You couldn't learn anything real if I stuffed the truth right straight up your...

JEROME (INTERRUPTING.)

You won't listen. You won't hear. So there's no reason for us to say shit.

Many in the Academy grumble, and the Voivode silences them with an offhand wave.

THE VOIVODE

Learning is what we do, though I cannot imagine your sire would have bothered to teach you that either. I forgive your ignorance of the Order, but ignorance of the law cannot be so lightly forgiven.

JEWEL

Standing up, folding her arms.

You learn from books and labs and, what, fucking discussion groups? Not one of you lives in the real fucking world. You been out there lately? Reality isn't an experiment, it's full of real people living, dying, fucking, and suffering every day.

JEROME

Stays sitting, looking at the floor, but could finish his sister's thoughts in his own words with no cues between the two. They just know.

You're talking about laws and Grand Experiments. The laws are inaccessible to people like us. The Experiment is, what, pretty fucking unethical since none of us signed up for it.

Again, the Academy objected, and again, our great Genius silenced them with a benevolent smile.

THE VOIVODE

I hear what you're saying.

He responded, naturally, to Jewel standing by moving to retake his seat and gestured to her.

I'm listening, but I have questions. Maybe you can teach me...

JEWEL

sneering

It isn't my job to teach the ignorant.

THE ACADEMY

Now see here!

Some shouts from the Academy, and the Voivode's look alone silenced them.

THE VOIVODE

It isn't. No. However, that's where we are. I have the power and authority to have you killed. You've disrupted my social order in a way that has sent everyone's head spinning. You may die anyway, it is in fact, likely, but right now, all eyes are on you. We're all listening. You can leave a mark here, and maybe there's still room to come to an understanding here that can result in something short of execution.

Jewel remains unimpressed, Jerome stands up as well, his posture slack and loose. As tall as he is, he slouches, though I think this posture was a defense mechanism, so that he might appear less dangerous. Or else, he had halfway given up.

JEROME

Ask questions. We'll give you the answers we got.

At this point, our most brilliant and gracious teacher nodded and folds his hands in his lap.

THE VOIVODE

Well then. Where should we start? I suppose the most important question is this; do you understand what you're charged with?

JEWEL

Figuring your shit out better than you could.

At the risk of editorializing, she wasn't specifically wrong. Those members of the recognized cult of Maulin Mae who had been invited to represent the Acolytes share furtive glances. At least on some level, they understand her to be correct.

JEROME

More than that, I guess, we weren't supposed to find out about vampires, but we did, and you all are pissed about it.

THE VOIVODE NODS.

Hm. Tell me then, how did you come to know about us?

What about the other charges? One of the established Acolytes demands, standing, and her sallow cheeks flush with blood and embarrassment.

THE VOIVODE'S HONORABLE SWORN OF THE AXE

Once more and the most recognized and wise cult will be excused from these proceedings.

The Axes' warning pins the Acolyte to her seat.

THE VOIVODE

We'll get to that. One thing at a time. Jerome, Jewel, please, proceed.

The twins exchanged a look and shared a sigh.

JEROME

We found you all because we had to find something...

JEWEL

...shit is all fucked up if you're poor. That's all. Mom's husband was a fuck and he hurt —

Jerome looks at her and shakes his head.

JEWEL

Well, he hurt us. But it wasn't any different for any other kids in our neighborhood. You were kinda lucky if you were only getting beaten on. You know? And that was just the parents or the people fucking your parent. You got shit from school, and the gangs, and the child-touchers, and worst of all the cops if you was tall and tough like Jerome.

JEROME

Systematic violence. Horizontal violence. All that shit. Point is, we had to get out. We had to go somewhere else.

At that point, began the twins telling their story.

JEWEL

You all don't do that great a job of hiding. We weren't exactly looking, but sooner or later if you're really looking for marks or whatever, you're gonna notice real shady types feeding and partying. That's what it started out as. We met some guy who was creeping on me. Jerome said there was something wrong with him, so we watched him.

JEROME

If you can't play some kinda ball, the only way out is to run games. That's what we heard growing up. I know you all think you all invented the game, hell, maybe you did, but that doesn't mean we don't know, you know?

Jerome has a sort of shrug in the way he speaks, his posture. I think for the first time, he glanced up to meet the Voivode's eyes as he asks his question.

His Genius nods. By now, the ruffled feathers in the Academy seemed to have soothed and a tense attentive observation falls on the twins. The cult leaned in among themselves; we do not keep the Acolytes around because they are models of civility.

JEROME GOES ON.

Like she said, we watched him for a while. He left a trail of strung-out females and junkie boys behind him like breadcrumbs, you know? I guess he died and that's why he's not on trial now, huh?

Again, the Genius nodded.

JEWEL

The shit they were up to was crazy. Him and them others. Jewel said pointing to the cult.

They meet up in warehouse and in city parks, get naked, and scream. There was blood fucking everywhere.

THE VOIVODE

And that didn't drive you off?

JEROME

We seen worse.

JEWEL

Crazy people cutting themselves and bleeding all over ain't that much of a shock when you've seen children gunned down in the streets.

The Voivod gestures for them to go on.

JEWEL

They talked a lot of bullshit, you know? Goddess this, goddess that. They're all talking about tribulation and suffering being a teacher, and I could tell you these white bit...

JEROME

...These Crones or whatever.

Jewel licked her lips and then restarts.

I seen the sorts of people who make suffering for themselves because they was bored. They didn't have trouble in their lives so they made up all kind of drama. That's what these girls looked like to me.

JEROME

Since we knew where they hung out, what they did, we spent the next couple of weeks watching and trying to figure out what we was going to do with what we figured out. We started noticing they could do things. Like magic and shit. They could change people's minds, so the blood drinking wasn't just some crazy kinky stuff. These people or whatever really were what they thought they was.

JEWEL

And we figured if they could do it, so could we.

Jewel folds her arms and sticks out her chin, a defiant posture directed at all of us. All of us anywhere who thought we were somehow better than this woman and her twin.

JEROME

Anyway, we took a few more weeks creeping on them and figuring out what they was and how they got that way. They was real open, you know? Proclaiming all kinds of shit. Even saw their goddess, you know? I still figure it's just some kind of crazy ghost, but you all say it isn't, so.

He uses 'so' as a sentence ender, a rhetorical question.

JEWEL

You all aren't subtle.

BEATRICE, ELDEST OF THE ACOLYTES AND CRONE.

How dare they try to slander the dead! I cannot sit silently by while these abominations in the face of the gods say such lies!

The eldest of the Crones speaks, rising slowly to her feet. Her joints crack as if each joint might break under the strain of moving.

We shall not be lied about by those who murdered our sisters!

THE VOIVODE

And brothers.

The Genius is wry, then gestured to the Axe. The Axe moves from his stationary position by our great educator's side and speaks in whispers to elder. A moment later, with her grabbed by the forearm, they two leave the lecture hall.

JEROME

We didn't kill nobody. I told you this already. What they was doing is what killed them.

JEWEL

We took advantage of the situation, no mistake, but we already been in Hell, so.

Jewel added, and they both nod, solemn.

THE VOIVODE

As best you can tell, what were they doing?

The twins exchanged a long, heavy look and Jewel turned away from her brother.

JEROME

They were eating a god. Or trying to.

The present Choristers erupt into shouting protests. The Academy, by and large, also gets to their feet, trying to shout the honorable cult down. It became chaos for a minute and I watch as the twins moved closer to each other, back to back, as if they expect attacks from all sides. They are wise to suspect it.

THE VOIVODE, SHOUTING.

Enough! We have heard the accusations laid out by the Circle and their allies in the Academy. What I want right now is to hear what these children have to say.

His great Genius booms as he speaks, and the Axe and his men moved in to finish silencing the cult.

JEWEL

If we was lying, you'd know. You know you'd know. They just don't want us to give up their game!

Jewel shouts, pointing an accusatory finger in the direction of the cult.

We know all about the Dark Mother. Shit. Makes me sound crazy. But She was there with us that night. How else can you explain any of it?

The Axe and his men stop the cult from responding.

JEROME BREATHE IN AND OUT AND RUBS HIS FACE WITH ONE HAND.

Let me try, okay? To make it clear what happened, step by step?

The deal used to be that the Acolytes could run free and clear in this city so long as they kept all these gods, spirits, or whatever happy with worship or whatever the fuck it is that gods want. I guess after a while your cult here got sick of all the work and tried to find another way to handle things. They developed some ritual that allowed them to destroy one of these god-things and eat it. I guess they kept it secret or else maybe the other gods didn't know how to directly explain it to the big man here.

Jerome nods to our great Genius.

But I guess you all notice some shit was fucked and started asking questions and the cult here got real nervous. So this leech guy that we'd been following was trying to break off from the main cult and ramp up the god-eating.

JEWEL

He was fucking crazy. Screaming about consuming everything like a black hole. Said if he ate enough, he'd be a greater god himself, and could wipe out the Order, and everyone else in the city who threatened him. Said he was going to eat the Dark Mother some night too. That's when everything went fucking sideways.

JEROME

Right. It was in the middle of a ceremony, they'd brought a god in with magic, and they were celebrating the shit they was about to do like some arrogant thugs. Then 'Player' announces he's going to be the greatest god and declares he's going to consume everything, even the Dark Mother. Jewel starts twitching. See, we'd broken in that night to steal some shit and figure out what to do next when they came parading in for their ceremony. Our way out was blocked, but they didn't seem to realize we was there. I guess they couldn't smell our blood or whatever since the whole place smelled like rot and ass.

JEWEL

I'm still not really sure what happened, but the thing on the table, the god or whatever, it started screaming and it sounded like children screaming and I guess I lost my mind for a minute.

Jerome reaches over and takes his sister's hand.

She started shouting in a language we don't know and rushed into the middle of their fucked-up orgy. She grabbed the knife off the table and straight up shanked Player. She stabbed him and the lights in the room dropped.

JEWEL, SHIVERING, WHISPERED,

...there was so much blood coming out of the wound. It sprayed fucking everywhere like he was a water balloon with a hole in it...

NOW THE VOIVODE INTERRUPTS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A WHILE.

So you were both sprayed with the vampire's blood. Did you taste it?

JEWEL LOOKS AT THE GROUND.

Yeah, then, but before I stabbed him I tasted it too.

JEROME

Me too.

THE VOIVODE

Interesting. Please go on.

JEROME

Jewel doesn't remember much after she stabbed the guy, but I saw it all. The thing that was twitching and screaming on the table got up and glowed. It glowed a bright red that hurt to look directly at. All at once, it kinda blurred and morphed like it was melting and for just a moment, it wasn't the ugly-ass thing that had been on the table.

A CIRCLE MEMBER BROKE IN.

It was beautiful and it was terrible. I saw her, there, at that place! It blessed and cursed us all! It was she and it has chosen these children as its guardians!

The other Circle act swiftly to silence the outburst, and I think, but for the Axe being nearby, they may have tried to kill the one impassionedly testifying.

THE VOIVODE

Please. We are at attention and attentive. Please, tell us the rest. What happened with the entity and your sister after it appeared in the red light?

JEROME BREATHES IN HEAVILY, AND THEN SITS BACK DOWN, STILL HOLDING JEWEL'S HAND.

It vanished, see. There a minute, then gone. Only the red glow was there still, kinda, and it was all around Jewel. Suddenly there's blood everywhere. She's cutting these fuckers up like they were made of paper with that knife. I know it's my sister's body, but she's not the one in charge, you know? She's just cutting them to ribbons and this shit is brutal.

Someone in the Academy said 'unreliable witness' and someone else declared it an anointing. There are quiet and conflicted arguments among the honorable Order, though they go silent on their own this time.

THE VOIVODE

And what happened then, after the cult was devastated.

JEROME NOW LET GO OF JEWEL'S HAND. SHE SITS DOWN BESIDE HIM AS HE SPEAKS.

Jewel wasn't herself, yet, you know? She comes over to me, walking over piles of ash, covered in blood. Vines are growing up in the ground like the ash is super fertilizer, and it's spreading everywhere. These things, they look like tomatoes or something, or big ugly grapes, they start sprouting off the vines, and the whole place smells crazy. The vines start ripping up the flooring and pulling down the walls. I'm pretty sure the place is going to fall, you know, but Jewel or whatever it is, doesn't look worried. The vines make room for her to walk. When she gets over to me, she says, "Thank you. She will be my blade and you will be my witness. Do you understand?" I did. She took one of those ugly-ass fruits and hands it to me, then takes one herself. What was I supposed to do? I ate it. She did too. The glow all over Jewel faded and then we was both in a hell of a lot of pain for a while. When we could shake it off, we grabbed some books and ran. I guess that's the 'stealing Crúac' part. Right? The books? Because I'll admit that, sure.

The Academy discusses this quietly, the Crones barely containing themselves.

FINALLY, HIS MOST GLORIOUS AND GREAT GENIUS SPEAKS.

You ate the fruit, but at no time do you actually recall dying?

The two shake their heads.

THE VOIVODE TURNS AND SPEAKS TO AN ADVISOR.

You checked them; you can confirm that they are indeed Kindred?

THE ADVISOR NODS, SPEAKING GRIMLY.

So far as we can confirm, they are perfectly normal young Kindred, though their blood is especially strong for whelps so young.

The Academy descends into louder discussion, and a few of the Circle rush from their spot, howling worshipful chants and declaring the twins some great heroes, or divinity, or some such.

They are euphoric and deeply moved by what they claim to have seen. They, survivors of that night, say that they too saw it as Jerome describes, but were silenced by their elder up until now. She is dead, so they can now speak.

I assume the Axe put her down earlier during this trial, but will fact check that later. Suicide is also a possibility.

Despite this display, the twins appear uncomfortable. They shy from the touch and adulation thrown at them. They mutter quietly to one another, and despite these sudden allies, the air of 'us against the world' does not lift from the twins' attitude.

THE VOIVODE STANDS.

I believe you.

The lecture hall goes completely silent. I have never heard it so silent.

HIS GENIUS CONTINUES.

That is to say, I believe you in so much as it matters. The evidence, testimony here aside, supports most of your claims. I have already acted in response to these claims, of course, and what remains are the difficult matters of ethics and policy. Of course, troubling ourselves over these ethics and policies becomes a distraction for the Order,

and one I will not burden myself or anyone else in the Academy with. To wit, here is what I propose.

We shall settle this matter by trial. An *ongoing* trial. You two shall be educated on the Kindred condition in as brief a manner as I believe to be safe, and then released on your own honors. You are charged with settling with the spirits or gods that have been angered by the actions of this grievous cult, as well as rooting out any remnants of these so-called god-eaters. So long as you remain alive and acting to resolve these issues, you may be considered to have been in the right and absolved of guilt. Should you fail and die, then you must have been lying and will be considered liars in death. Do you understand these conditions?

They exchange a look. Jewel nods, then Jerome. They are clever, these two, and I suspect understand in total what it is his Genius is doing.

THE VOIVODE.

Then we shall consider this matter settled. Please, disperse and return to your good studies.

He finished reading, setting the file against his chest, and was quiet for a while. "This is significant. Does anyone outside of you and I know how far this is spreading?"

I shook my head. "A few, but it remains an internal issue still."

His chest rose and fell with a sigh. "And do you have this issue here?"

Again, I shook my head, pulling my knee up to my chest and rested my chin on my knee. "Not here, no. We've got our eyes out."

He nodded, eyes on the ceiling of the bunker, trailing the concrete and rebar. "So all of this, the letters, the praxis, all of this, it's to keep track of this... issue."

"It didn't start out that way, no, but I guess that's where I wound up. Kindred opened up when I claimed Honolulu. The information started to flow more freely. I began seeing patterns and trends and I realized this was kind of an issue."

"And if you lose the praxis, the information will stop flowing." Michael breathed out, heavy, and turned to look at me. "This is a heavy burden, my girl."

I nodded. "I don't have to bear it alone, though."

He sat up slowly, watching me, and then stood from his cot. He moved to stand above me, and touched my cheek. "I cannot take what you've groomed here. The garden that you're nursing is dangerous, and will probably destroy you, but it is uniquely yours."

"You want to help out, though? You want to read all those stories."

He smiled, no teeth, and nodded. "I do."

"You wanna fuck too?"

He shrugged. "Reasonable."

At that, I got up on the cot and kissed him, sealing a perilous bargain with the oldest sort of magic.

The Invictus

The Game

Transcript of Future Panel meeting.

Welcome to the opening meeting of the third generational Future Panel. I know you're all eager to get started, so let's get to it.

The First Estate recruits from the best and brightest and it shows. Nowhere will you find as much talent, ambition, and determination as amongst our ranks. We need it, too, for ours is the most important task: to keep the Masquerade.

Our great responsibility compels us to keep up with the times. We must guide humanity to a model of society that comes natural to them and allows us to remain in the shadows. To this end, we hold the Future Panel every thirty years. If the elite can be said to have an elite, you are it; for you will shape the face of things to come.

Speaking of faces, I see some new ones in the crowd. Or, at least, I see some new ID numbers. A short introduction, then, on how the Future Panel works for those of you who didn't have time to read the paperwork – tsk, I know who you are. *Yes, I really do.*

The Future Panel seeks that happy medium between mortal needs and our own. While ours remain largely the same, however, mortal needs shift with the times. One generation wants freedom, the next wants stability, and so on. We could override these needs and instill a model of our own, but that is beneath us. Forcing people to do what you want is easy – any Carthian with a hammer could do it. We take a more subtle, and I daresay lasting, route: let our city develop organically, but with checks and limits set by us. This is good for the mortals and, more importantly, it's good for us. It forces us to remain flexible and as past regimes have shown: raw power is irrelevant if not applied with skill and adaptability.

Every generation, the Future Panel carefully grooms a handful of mortals. Often we encourage desired parenting couples, but a few mortals come to our attention during their own lives. Each represents an ideology that we believe will be relevant to the world of tomorrow. When they are at their peak, we Embrace them in opposing pairs. Sires are then tasked with keeping the subject's ideology intact, whilst fostering a relationship with its opposite. Our goal is to achieve a relationship that is marked by both rivalry and trust.

We then invite these opposing pairs to run a live simulation to see which ideology is best suited to our purpose, with an eye to both keeping the secret and retaining power. We, that is to say you, monitor their progress and evaluate how well they do. Well, all that is in the paperwork, which, I'm sure, you will read later.

Now that we have the theory out of the way, let me pull up the profiles of this generation's pairs.

Sarah and Mikhail will be representing elitism and egalitarianism.

James and Janelle – lovely couple – will be representing religion and secularism.


Kara and Michelle will be representing violence and pacifism.

They'll all be working in the greater San Diego area, though they'll stick to the outskirts as much as possible. We have to be careful lest they break anything we still need. We don't want a repeat of 1912 – although really, that was the mortals' doing as much as our own. Can't take all the credit.

How long the experiments will run? Excellent question. The answer is: as long as they take. Last generation's experiment on capitalism versus socialism is still running in part of the test zone. However, I suppose I shouldn't be talking about that.

Any further questions? No? Then I will greenlight our pairs to begin. I will send out reports bi-weekly and we'll have a quarterly "live" meeting to discuss any issues.

Thank you all for your time.

SECURE 


Sarah:
Hey, baby brother.

Mikhail:
I'm older than you are by three months.

Sarah:
Only in mortal years.
I wanted to ask if you're good to go?

Mikhail:
Yes, I am. Just reading up on the document
our sire sent.

Sarah:
Which one?

Mikhail:
The new one. You didn't get it? That's interesting. I
guess I'm willing to share though, since it affects us
both. It's a mission report of sorts, from a Harpy in
Baltimore. Kindred associate the First Estate with
Princes and CEO's, but no position is closer to our
purpose than the Harpy is. It's actually a better
argument for your idea than mine is, as it demon-
strates we don't need to hold the reins of power to be
effective. Maybe that's why he didn't send it to you –
your ego needs no more boosting.
Anyway, forwarding now.
 harpy.pdf

Sarah:
Haha. As always, you're underwhelmingly funny.
But thank you for the report.

Harpy's Night Out

From: J. Carlton, Harpy
To: Bossman
Subject: Mission Report, as Requested

*Note to self: Inform J. that a
half-assed attempt at a detective
novel is NOT the proper format for
a mission report.*

I knew the buck was trouble the moment
he walked into my office. He had hair
straight out of a shampoo commercial and
a killer smile. Except he wasn't smiling.
He was in deep shit. I could tell because
he walked into my office and Kindred only
walk into my office when they're in deep
shit. I'm not popular or well liked, but
when there is a situation, they come find
me. Especially now -business is booming
since the Veronica incident.

Six weeks ago to the night, a nice
lady by the name of Veronica had an
indiscretion with a young man. If you're
reading this, you probably already know
about Veronica, so suffice it to say that
she cut up the body and deposited him
in waste containers all over Baltimore.
Yeah, when our kind has indiscretions,
they tend to be huge. Unfortunately, for
all involved, Veronica isn't too sharp.

Some homeless person went dumpster diving for food behind Dale's Bar on Thames
Street and found a hand instead. Garbage pick-up in Baltimore became a whole lot
more complicated for the next week, with detectives combing through every pile.
Finally they pieced together half of the guy, including his head, which lead them
to camera surveillance (it's everywhere), which, in turn, lead them to Veronica.
Well, hell, if we didn't have to go and fix that then.

Ever since, my boss has been up in my face to be more "proactive" and "visible."
Given that most Kindred in my line of work are Shadows or Haunts, that went over
about as well as you'd expect. Then again, I've never met a manager who did know
what the hell he was talking about, so there's that.

So here I am, being all proactive and shit, telling them to come to me before they
stuff a body in a dumpster. Mind you, I don't work free. You come to me, you'll owe
me, and I'll tell you when the debt is paid. Don't like that? Then don't fucking
need my fucking services.

It's not about the payment though, not really. I could get rich doing this, but I don't care about money. Could hold information over everyone's head, but it's not really about the power either. It's about teaching discretion. Need me once, shame on you. Need me twice, well, then I obviously didn't educate you properly the first time. This ain't high school. Can't get by copying homework, they need to learn to stand on their own. 'Cause this shit, it matters. We need to remain unseen or someone is going to go modern warfare on our asses. Oh, I hear plenty of talk how we'd come out on top. No one's faster or stronger than we are. Here's the thing though: they don't need to be. They carry the day and the world will be a smoking pile of ash by the time we're done. So stay hidden and don't go setting off the apocalypse.

So when Buck - that's his actual name FYI - walks into the alleyway that serves as my office, I knew he was in trouble. Sure enough, he opens with "Hey J, watcha doin'" as if we don't both know why he's here. Fuck that. "Hey B," I mimic him, "watcha need?" I make sure to copy his words and inflection. Let him know to stop bullshitting and tell me the score. So he does. Some of our kind, they're monsters, but they're smart. Kill people left and right, but at least they don't get caught. I know this girl who kept a whole stack of bodies in a freezer and has her shady connections collect and bury them once a month. Others, well, they're like Buck. They're friendly and careful to leave people alive, but they're also dumb. Buck here got caught "making out" with a guy. The issue there is it doesn't look like making out. It might feel like sex, but it's a whole lotta sloppier and Buck got himself caught on one of those shitty phone cameras. A lesser man might break his neck for being a nuisance, but I'm better than that.

You've gotta understand that in this day and age, finding someone is all about having the best toys. I ask Buck where he was caught, hack into the club's video surveillance (told ya cameras are everywhere now), and have the face of the guy filming him in two minutes flat. A little searching with a Google Image Search beta, and there's his Facebook page. Used to be I had to hack into the DMV and hope for a match, but these nights everyone's on social media. It's almost too easy to find his name and address. The whole thing takes less than three minutes.

Now comes the hard part. No way around it. The guy caught Buck and even if I could stop the video from going viral (which I can of course), he's still seen what he's seen. There are tricks for that; but to be honest they're no good. There are always hooks and snags and we can't risk any of that. He has to go. I tell Buck to do it. Newbie has to - we all have blood on our hands, one way or another, and this way he'll learn. He's gone out of his way to remain spotless and I make him throw it away. I'm hitting him where it hurts. I stay and watch. Make sure it gets done, but also make sure I never take it for granted.

I let Buck wrap the body in the shower curtain and carry it outside. I take it from there - I've got the resources to make sure it never turns up. Make sure the neighbors don't see anything either. I'm good at my job. It hurts and I figure that's what makes me good. We mess up and people die. That's something that we all need to remember. Gotta keep the secret.

SECURE 

Sarah:
Let's get this sim on the road.
May the best player win.

Sarah:
By which I mean me.

Mikhail:
Put your game where your mouth is, Stinky.

Sarah:
Oh, you're asking for it.

SDCU

SAN DIEGO CITIZENS UNION

From: S.

To: San Diego Citizens Union

I've decided on our first video. Spread it through the usual channels, YouTube and whatnot, and focus on getting it to San Diego viewers especially.

We need someone fresh for this. Early twenties. Disarming. Looks like the girl you'd want your daughter to be, or your son to bring home.

Set her against a whitewash house. Standing on the porch would be ideal. Make sure to capture some of the garden too. Spruce it up if you have to – Ikea has fantastic plastic plants. It needs to look like an average suburban house: nice, but not fancy. A *home*.

Let the girl read the script a few times, so she sounds natural, but not so much that she sounds rehearsed. She needs to speak with passion without sounding aggressive, accusing, or inflammatory.

Obviously, the girl's story needs to hold up, so make sure we have the necessary paper trail.

I'm leaving the numbers open for you to fill in, because I want the most accurate representation at the time of filming. Also, pick a nice wholesome name that fits our actress.

Script:

You're confident because your cause is just, yet a little nervous because you're not used to speaking in front of a camera. It's important that you maintain eye contact with the camera.

"Hello, I'm [nice NAME here] and I want to talk to you for a moment.

America is changing. We are the land of the free, but those days are disappearing fast. Government and businesses seek to own and control us. They force us to pay for insurance that we neither need, nor want. They take homes from people who have committed no other crime than to trust their bank.

To date, [NUMBER] people are unemployed, homeless, or at risk of repossession. Our government claims there are no funds to help these people, yet it spends [NUMBER] dollars on private defense contractors, oil companies, and other businesses. It almost seems like it doesn't want to help; that it's driving the middle class towards bankruptcy and forfeiture. I can't help but wonder why that is."

Pause for a moment. Everyone knows someone who has lost their job or home. So give the viewers a moment to remember that.

"While more and more people are losing their homes, the government is making it illegal to be homeless. [NAMES OF STATES] have already passed laws against sleeping in your car, followed by laws against vagrancy. The police arrest people who break these laws, and then threaten them with prison time.

These prisons, often with congressional representatives on their board of directors, force their population to work. They charge money for simple amenities and focus more on having a prisoner run up a bill than rehabilitating her. They are creating a cycle in which inmates are left in debt, with no hope of employment or prospects to a house. Some of these people are criminals, yes. Others are people like you and I. A mother caught stealing to feed her children. A veteran with no income and no home. Arrested once for a crime not even worthy of the name, they are sent into a system that ensures their perpetual return. They, essentially, become part of a class of government-endorsed slaves."

Emotional face. Someone you care about was sent to jail in this fashion and talking about it almost makes you cry, but you don't want to play on the audience's sympathy so you're trying to hold it together.

"What can we do to stop this? We can be more kind. The next time you see a homeless person, or someone shoplifting food, don't condemn them. Instead, consider what might have brought them here. I'm calling on the police especially. You have sworn an oath to serve and protect the people, yet do the orders you are given really support that? If the government seems actively harmful to its citizens, on which side will you stand? We can still come together and give our great nation back to the people. But we need to do it now.

Thank you for listening."

Bad Blood in Saint Petersburg

Mikhail:
You're trying to separate the police from the city council. Not bad. Lemme think on my counter.

Sarah:
While you finish thinking (and I hope you don't mind me not waiting for that), I wanted to share a letter from an associate of mine in St. Petersburg. She is eschewing traditional forms of power and instead calling on the masses to see her through.
[st-petersburg.pdf](#)

Mikhail:
You mean she's manipulating the masses. Also, I love how she never even mentions the Secret; she's so consumed with regaining control. We need to be on top to focus.

Sarah:
Perhaps we've come to rely on being in power so much, that it terrifies us when we lose it. In that case, it's not a tool - it's a crutch.

Dear S.,

I blame the Tsar, really. Peter the Great built this city to showcase how enlightened he was, while picking up new trade from the West. Pragmatic. Opportunistic. It still shows. Saint Petersburg goes through a new name every time the regime changes. Keep up or get left behind. We're like those little suckerfish, parasites that go wherever sharks and the tides take us. Opportunists surround me. I am one myself.

Almost every covenant has had a turn at the wheel in Saint Petersburg. We all roll in and out on the tide of whomever is in power. Saint Petersburg has been good to the Invictus traditionally, but these nights the Lancea et Sanctum is the bigger fish and their control is ironclad.

The Spear holds sway over the church, no surprises there, as well as some of the more notable hate groups - you know - the ones who leave a trail of blood all over YouTube. There is no action too insane or degrading to get some likes. The Sanctified lack pull with the Organizatsiya though, so that's where we come in.

The Sanctified dictate policy and we carry it out. Sure, we pretend to be Invictus, Dragons, or Cronos, but we're all Sanctified by proxy. Leeches waiting for the tide to turn. Those who don't comply, find themselves devoured by a swarm of locusts (or whatever the biblical punishment of the week is). No exceptions. We are all God's monsters here.

I report to Bishop Borodin and when he tells me to jump, I make sure I get all the details right - when, how high, how often - and then I do it. They make me carry my predecessor's knucklebone in my pocket to remind me of the price of failure. I run a human trafficking ring. It's a streamlined business: snatch women

off the street, pump them so full of crack that they stop being human, then sell them to the highest bidder. Rinse and repeat. I organize debt collection for the Organizatsiya and make a point of letting men pay their debt 'in natura' - you'd be surprised how many of them offer their girlfriend or kids for this. One time, I blew an entire train off the tracks to assassinate a single politician. Mind you, I could have taken him out without anyone noticing, but the collateral damage was part of the exercise. What the Spear wants, the Spear gets.

So that's what I do. I'm the top Invictus in this city and I serve as fucking go-to gal for the Sanctified. The total package when it comes to louche deals, extortion, and murder - and I'm putting it to someone else's use.

Not for much longer though. I've been busy with my own plans, too.

When the Spear calls me, I put on a good show and carry out most orders perfectly. But some things fall through the cracks. Small things that I can get away with. Nothing bad enough to get devoured by locusts (cause that's a bad way to go), but enough to add up. A single drop of water is nothing, but combined they form an ocean. I've been preparing an ocean of trouble for the Sanctified.

My latest project, and the one I hope will push the Spear overboard, is the Carthian Movement. See, the Carthians like to pretend that they built Soviet Russia, even though they really didn't. The local Carthians may style themselves socialists, but not all socialists are Carthians. It fills them with righteous anger that the Lancea et Sanctum stole Russia from them. Correction: it fills them with more righteous anger, since that's their go-to mode anyway. Point being - the Carthians are always making a nuisance of themselves and the Spear then sends me to get rid of them.

I think the Bishop would like me to crucify trespassers, but, really, do I look like a carpenter? So I string the Carthians upside down and let their guts slither onto the pavement until the sun catches them. Strictly as a deterrent on orders of the Sanctified, of course. But I feign sympathy with a few and I let those go. It's all very under the table. I tell them I'm just doing my

job, I have to or they'll kill me (which is true, ironically), but I don't want to. I can prove it, too - I keep exact records of the orders I'm given. Who, what, and where to the T. I let just enough rebels off the hook to spread the story of Sanctified-ordered atrocities and to come back. Again, and again, and again. The Carthians are like sand getting everywhere you don't want it to and even the patience of saints (and monsters) is wearing thin.

I've been doing this for years now, nearly a decade, and I've got both sides seeing red with built-up rage. The Sanctified need me, the Carthians trust me - and I make sure to counsel action. I've already sent Bishop Barodin a report recommending a full crackdown, lest he risks losing the city to a never-ending trickle of Carthians. Meanwhile the Carthians, sick and tired of losing members, are gearing up for war too. Both are so eager to tear into each other that they don't even notice me lurking underneath. When the waters clear, the Spear and the Carthians will have devastated each other, and the Invictus in Saint Petersburg will rise again under my leadership. Then I will show everyone how a real boss runs her city.

- From AK with love

From: Consultant

To: Lassiter Lobby Group

Subject: Responders

While I have nothing but respect for our boys in blue, I fear that we are overtaxing our police forces. After all, the work is hard, the hours long and the pay low. My suggestion would be to funnel some of their workload onto private contractors. The concept of private enforcers has been proven abroad, despite a few minor scandals, and I am sure we can get our city to welcome the extra help. I have outlined a schedule for which council members to contact and when, and am sure we can draw up and pass a bill within the very near future.

SECURE 

Mikhail:
 memo.pdf

Sarah:


Really? Your counter is to enlist private forces? That will never work. We're not talking about killing turbans in some far-away terrorist country. We're talking about American citizens. Your bill will never pass. Also, the Lassiter Group? Way to overreach, little brother. They will chew you up and spit you out - even our sire doesn't know who has their fingers in *that* particular pie.

Mikhail:

Please. I can handle the Lassiters. Their assets were already in place and I consulted for them in the past, so why not make use of that? It's only practical. Efficient. As for the private security forces - American citizens go to prison and those have been handed over to private contractors, too. All I need to do is utter the magic words "reduce costs" and the council will be falling all over itself to sign.

Mikhail:

I am wondering though, where your video girl is? I've sent some people to debunk her, but she's untraceable. My commendations on your clean up there.

SECURE 

Sarah:

Can I tell you something freaky? I had a weird dream last day. I was in a round hall filled with some ten inches of water. Like a sewer, only cleaner. The hall was twice as high as I was and there were smaller halls opening into it about five feet from the floor.

Sarah:


They were all circular, too.

I could see light at the end of the hall and someone standing there, waiting for me. So I began walking to the exit, slogging through the water, and suddenly more water comes out of the side halls. Except it's not water, it's words and images. And I realize I'm not supposed to see them so I avert my eyes and start running. That's when the dream ended.

Mikhail:
You're weird.

Sarah:

Thank you, Mr. Sensitive.

SECURE 

Sarah:

Lookie what I found on the grapevine. It arrived as a bit of a jumble of messages and attachments, but I think I ordered it correctly. It's very interesting. What happens when all needs are met – is there such a thing as power fulfilled? Change is the only way forward.

 [carmilla.pdf](#)

Mikhail:

Impressive find. I am almost envious. However, I think you're drawing the wrong conclusion. This is not what happens when desire is met – this is what happens when we stretch ourselves too thin. The First Estate exists as a hierarchy, as much as you dream about it not being so, but it does have checks and balances. We monitor each other as much, possibly more, as we do the other covenants. There was no such equilibrium in Dublin and that is what triggered this situation.

Sarah:

Absolute power corrupts absolutely? Never thought I'd hear you admit that. I thought there was no such thing as too much power. Mikhail: Power is how we move our pawns forward on the board, but that is not the goal of the game – keeping the secret is. Princess Carmilla lost track of that.

The Trouble With Carmilla

The first time I saw her was at the Gate Theatre. She, light as air, glided down the corridor in a gown made of gossamer and silk. The fabric shone and shimmered as she moved, yet did not reflect the light as artfully as she herself did. Her eyes were pools of darkness, withholding the light of moon and stars, but her golden hair was more radiant than the sun. She spoke to me then, in the low alto voice of angels, and whispered secrets in my ear.

The first time I saw her was at The Bleeding Horse on Duke Street. She laughed and her dark hair shook about her slender shoulders like molten chocolate. Our eyes locked; mine blue as sky, hers dark ashen, and I saw only her as she beckoned me. I went to her, willingly and already utterly devoted to this woman who was more radiant than any I've ever seen. She spoke dark and true secrets to me.

The first time I saw her was in my bedroom. I felt something press down on my sleeping form and pierce my breast with needles. I woke then and saw her, dark eyes rising up to meet mine, and pain turned to ecstasy. I pulled her to me and the drapes billowed around us as even the wind conspired to push her sweet perfection into my own body. I surrendered to her, accepting the secrets that she bestowed upon me even as she already rose.

Lord Nathan,

I was making my rounds through South Inner City (and part of North since Edward asked for personal time) and found these snippets of literature. They were in several places, mostly alleys behind pubs and bookstores, but a few were inside. One was in red sharpie on a mirror, of all things. Someone is clearly feeling the need to express herself (or himself, but my finely honed instincts are picking up on a female vibe).

The handwriting on all of them matches and these musings strike me as a little elaborate for bathroom graffiti. Perhaps a mortal with literary inspiration and an obsession with a certain muse we both know? The colour of her hair changes from blonde to dark, but the eyes remain the same. I feel I should mention, though I suspect you know this, that The Bleeding Horse was one of Le Fanu's hangouts, so the pattern repeats there, too. If the "she" in these notes is indeed Her Royal Highness, one might wonder what she is up to. Either way, I leave it in your good hands.

Sincerest regards,

Derek.

I think of her constantly. Everywhere she goes, there she is. Surely, she cannot merely exist in my imagination. How could I, a lowly mortal, dream a goddess of such incarnate perfection as her? She speaks to me still, whispered words of darkness and blood that I only remember in the twilight between sleeping and waking. How I wish to know her name! To hear it tumble from her lips akin to the word god spoke at the dawn of creation. My beautiful angel.

My angel
visited me again. She was full of dark wrath,
gripping my wrist until I cried. Then she
kissed the pain, piercing the skin with
needles until I was in the throes of
passion. I know that she is not
angry with me. I see it in her
eyes, dark and beautiful, and I
feel it in her touch. I am her solace.
She comes to me to make her world go
away, just as she does mine. If we could only
remain locked together forever and shut
the world out.

Lord Nathan,

Why is the mortal scribbling this stuff in alleyways
and on bathroom stalls? It seems to belong in a diary.
Or in the vampire erotica section of Eason's. Christ.
I suppose that when the heart is full, the pen runneth
over. Or something like that.

I think "she" must be her. Who else do we know to
inspire such madness?

Last time Her Royal Highness was infatuated with
an aspiring writer, it ended with a novel that left us all
exposed. So what do you want to do? Can we kick
this higher up the ladder? Of course, there is no higher
up the ladder in Dublin. Belfast perhaps? It would
be high treason to go behind the Princess' back, but
surely, there are extenuating circumstances if our All
Night Society might be at risk. Your call, as always.

Sincerest regards,

Derek.

She kissed my wrist
again. Tenderly, softly.
She remembered! She
spoke her secrets and
this time I remembered.
She told me that she is no
angel. She spoke of bodies
in her wake, once beautiful
people now discarded as
empty husks. I begged
her to use me so. Use all
of the sweet life that courses
through me, for without
her there is nothing
to live for. She refused.
She kissed me and
said that she felt it
too, the tie that binds
us. She said I
was special.
I care naught
for being special;
I care
only for
being
hers!

FROM: Earl Nathan
TO: Baron Catherine
Dearest Catherine,

I hope this letter finds you well and in good standing. I am very pleased with my position in Dublin, which is both a great responsibility and a great honour. All of us are entrusted by our own nature and the greater society we serve to keep the First Tradition, but it falls to me to pick up where others might be lax. It matters not if they are neonate, Duke, or King; it is my great duty to make sure *all* of them maintain the Masquerade. This is a most taxing, but also rewarding responsibility.

In these times, when I am surrounded by secrets on all sides, I find myself thinking of you and the time we spent in London. You were my sister and staunchest friend, and so much better at keeping a confidence than I will ever be. I almost dare not ask, but would you be my confidante again? Sometimes even a servant of silence has a heavy heart and I do not know where else to turn. Please Catherine, assure me that you are my sister still.

Your loving brother,
Nathan.

FROM: Baron Catherine
TO: Earl Nathan
Dearest Nathan,

I am quite well. The nature of Belfast agrees with me and I feel like a woman reborn. Their Royal Highnesses the King and Queen are very wise and benevolent. I have attracted the attention of his Grace the Duke of North Belfast. He is a kind and gentle man whom I have already come to trust and adore.

Of course I am still your sister! How silly are you for asking. I, too, remember staying up until sunrise and sharing our secrets (though I dare say Father found out about them in the end). Distance has come between us, with you in Dublin and me in Belfast, but our minds are still one. Therefore, I declare that nothing has changed! If anything is troubling you, please, tell me and I will do what I can to help.

Your loving sister,
Catherine.

FROM: Earl Nathan
TO: Baron Catherine
Dearest Catherine,

I am indeed troubled, but there is nothing I cannot face with you by my side. My most beloved Princess of Dublin, against whom I only speak out with great reluctance, has recently come to the attention of a mortal. An author who, rightly enamoured with Her Royal Highness, has tried to capture Her Royal Highness' perfection in writing. One of my agents found these writings and expressed a concern with their nature in relation to the First Tradition. I include a scan for your perusal. If you could let your wisdom shine on these artistic musings then I would be forever in your debt.

Your loving brother,
Nathan.

FROM: Baron Catherine
TO: Earl Nathan
Dearest Nathan,

I cannot begin to express how glad I am that we still speak true with each other. Do you remember that time I inadvertently drained the dancer and you helped me hide her corpse? Father was so angry when he found out, but I still cherish the memory of the secret we shared those nights (few as they were before we were discovered – although looking back I can see the humour in it).

Of course, we must never question those who are rightly elevated above us by their wisdom, but I understand the beginnings of your agent's concerns. Far from me be it to presume any insight on the Princess of Dublin, but I shall beg my own lord, the Duke, to shine his light on the matter. He is a man not unlike you, steel tempered with gentility, and I know that you would like him. Do not worry about him keeping our confidence, for I am quite assured that he will. You know I have my ways.

Rest a little easier now.

Your beloved sister,
Catherine.

FROM: Baron Catherine

TO: Earl Nathan

Dearest Nathan,

I cannot begin to express how glad I am that we still speak true with each other. Do you remember that time I inadvertently drained the dancer and you helped me hide her corpse? Father was so angry when he found out, but I still cherish the memory of the secret we shared those nights (few as they were before we were discovered – although looking back I can see the humour in it).

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Rest a little easier now.

Your beloved sister,

Catherine.

FROM: Baron Catherine

TO: Duke Anthony

Dear Duke,

Dearest Anthony,

I write to thank you again for the lovely tour of Belfast Castle. I remain impressed by your close connection to history and am honoured that you would extend the courtesy of a personal tour to me. I will cherish and remember the beauty of that evening forever.

If I may press upon your courtesy again, there is a matter that weighs heavily upon my heart and which, I hope, you might alleviate. My brother Nathan who, as you surely know, is an Earl at the court of Her Royal Highness the Princess of Dublin, has found himself with a delicate matter on his hands. Our bond is forged in blood and fire so his troubles remain mine, yet I cannot presume to have the wisdom to aid him. Perhaps, if it pleases your Grace, you would be willing to let your light shine on this matter?

I remain your humble servant,

Catherine,

Baroness of Regent's Nightclub, North Belfast.

From: Duke Anthony

To: Baron Catherine

Dear Baroness,

Your note brings me nothing but pleasure, as did your company on the evening of which you speak. The flowers of Belfast Castle pale in comparison to you and it has been a long time since I found myself able to share my thoughts as I did with you. Perhaps you would join me for dinner some time so we can talk more. Some nights I fear that I was too bold, too open, but then I remember your sweet face and know that – surely – I can trust you implicitly.

As to the Earl: if you love your brother, then I must love him too. Please, share this burden with me and remain assured of my affection and discretion. As you told me that evening: friends must share their confidences.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony

Duke of North Belfast.

FROM: Baron Catherine

TO: Duke Anthony

Dear Duke,

Dearest Anthony,

To know that my brother and I do not stand alone lifts my spirit. I know that I could not wish for a stauncher supporter than you. You are clever to cite myself back to me and I agree: secrets can be kept amongst friends.

I will not speak directly of the concerns that trouble my brother, for I fear something might be lost in translation. Instead, I will send you what he sent me. They are writings by, presumably, a mortal and might threaten to uncover that which must remain hidden.

I let you decide how to proceed next, for I trust your judgement without question. I bare my heart to you and, standing exposed, hope you continue to think well of me.

Your humble servant.

Catherine,

Baron of Regent's Nightclub, North Belfast.

From: Duke Anthony

To: Belfast Sovereigns

Dear Your Majesties,

My most noble King,

My most beloved Queen,

It is with heavy heart that I inform You of concerns raised by the court of Her Royal Highness The Princess of Dublin. I would not normally place such troubles at Your feet, nor feign to speak any ill of the Princess of Dublin, but duty compels me.

I dare not say who imparted this information to me, but I can avow that all involved are of great dignitas. I trust their sincerity in this matter, for they adore the Princess as we all do.

If it pleases Your Majesty, You find the documents that caused these concerns attached, and upon which Your devoted servant dare not pass judgement.

I am honoured to remain Your Royal Highnesses' most humble and obedient servant,

Sir Anthony,

Duke of Belfast.

Lord Nathan,

I've increased eyes in Inner City as you suggested and one of them came across this masterpiece. There is no name attached to it of either painter or subject, but the resemblance is striking. This obsession is getting too big to ignore.

The good news though is that I think I'm closing in on our artiste. I've tracked her to Trinity's "Languages, Literatures, and Cultural Studies" and am waiting for a name. Between the distinctive writing style and her talent for painting, I hope to find her soon. I realize that the author and the painter could be two different people, but that isn't the vibe I'm getting. If you should like me to widen the net nonetheless, please let me know. For now though, I think we'll find her soon so we can hopefully worry less.

Sincerest regards,

Derek



Forget about worrying less.

Forget about worrying less.
Worry more.. I found our author, who is indeed also our painter.

Her name is Aislin Childe and she is an aspiring writer studying in London. I promise too, if she can drop the overly archaic and flowery language - those are her professor's words, not mine. The professor was kind enough to give me Childe's dorm number and here is where it gets complicated. Childe's door is marked with the Princess' lily mark, meaning we can't touch her.

Looks like the obsession might go both ways.

I let myself in (no laws against that, right) and found the girl's diary as well as several sketches of our Princess. Childes makes mention of notes written to her by the Princess, but I couldn't find any in the room. Either she's imagining some things, or she carries the notes on her.

I include photos of the diary. Please tell me Belfast is taking this seriously.

Sincerest regards,

Derek.

She came to me in truth this time! I was at my desk attempting to write (though I admit I kept drawing her face!) when she tapped me on the shoulder, light as sunlight falling on a flower. The sensation is odd to describe, but I knew it was SHE the moment she touched me. I didn't even start, as one would expect to do when approached alone in her room at night. I merely turned and, seeing her, fell at her feet. She knelt with me then and, gathering me up in her arms, carried me to my bed as if I were no more than a child. There, she caressed and kissed me until my body cried out for sweet release.

After our union, I felt myself slip into a deep slumber and I grasped her hand and begged her to remain with me. She said she could not and I very nearly burst into tears, but her eyes narrowed and I knew I must be strong. My angel smiled then, dark wrath disappearing as night before the day, and when I **AWOKE**, everything was different.

She left a note on my pillow! A real, tangible note written on paper that still scents of her when I press it to me. Her words are radiant like the sun and ephemeral like the wind.

"How I have longed to meet one such as you. Your passion and beauty entrance me as surely as you believe yourself entranced by me. You are more the seductress here and I your devoted slave. My heart beats only to echo yours. I am yours if only you will be mine."

Of COURSE, I am hers! She signed it with her name. She is real and I remember her now, as clearly as the day. Carallim

I nearly slept until evening after my angel visited. The loss of a single day does not matter to me though, for without her, time passes darker than any night. I also admit that our exercise left me fair exhausted.

I woke in time for dinner and then waited eagerly for her, but she did not come. I tried to finish my writing assignment, but a terrible panic threatened to overwhelm me as I considered that she might have abandoned me. So I sat in the dark, clutching the note that my beautiful Carallim left, and watched the seconds tick away. I have neither finished my work, nor eaten since.

She has promised to return. I cling to that promise.

She must return or SURELY, I will die!

She came to me! I knew my angel, my most beautiful Carallim, would not desert me. This time she sat on the bed next to me and stroked my hair as she spoke. I admit that I did not fully understand the depth of her words, though the passion in her sweet voice was clear and true.

She spoke of being a demon, as if one as lovely as her could ever be. She spoke of eternal nights spent in darkness. She said that her own base nature forces her into hiding, but that I have drawn her out. I pressed her on that, as gently as a mortal dares press a goddess, and she admitted that my writing, which a friend referred to her, reminded her of a fondness. Can you imagine! My broken scribbles impress one such as her! The thought is so ludicrous, yet so wonderful, that it lifts my spirit to the highest heaven.

She left another letter when I slept. I do not understand all of it, but here is a part:

"Beloved, I look upon you as you sleep and feel passion stir in my cold, dead heart. I cannot begin to express the dread I felt before I met you. Games of blood matter naught when all needs are met, for a heart without desire is a hollow one indeed. I know this must seem odd to one as full of life and promise as yourself, but one NIGHT I shall explain all.

I long to be with you wholly and completely. Duty is a heavy burden of which I only wish to release myself now. How hollow the fancies of the night are, compared to your radiance and love. Passion consumes me like fire and I long to embrace it. Am I that brave? To embrace the fire, BURNING away obligation and secrecy alike? I shall pray for that strength so we might be together."

Her suffering, though I do not fully understand the cause, is as great to me as my own. If only I could be her strength, I would burn the entire world to be with her.

Local fire kills three

A fire killed three and destroyed the upper floor of The Bleeding Horse Pub on Camden Street last night. Police haven't released the names of the victims, but have notified their families. Neither the police nor the fire department were available for comment on the cause of the fire. The Bleeding Horse was closed at the time of the fire and management does not know why anyone was at the premises. They have extended their condolences to the families of the three victims. Featured in novels such as Sheridan le Fanu's *Cock and Anchor* (1845) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), The Bleeding Horse is one of Dublin's great historical landmarks.

A7 Business

Lord Nathan,

I'm sure you can see why this news article drew my attention. I spoke to an old friend at the police and it appears this case isn't at all clear-cut. Coroner says the victims didn't die from smoke inhalation or burns, but from massive blood loss even though they have no major wounds. How many things do you know that cause that? My contact says the fire was lit, too.

Either this is the sloppiest clean up job I've ever seen, or someone used the fire as a beacon of sorts. I'm worried that this was intended for us to see. This isn't like leaving a trail of bodies and then pardoning herself for the indiscretion. This is letting us know that she can and will endanger the Masquerade if she pleases. I realize the ball is in your court and I apologize for being pushy, but I hope our relationship will allow me to express my opinion.

Belfast needs to act.

Sincerest regards,

Derek.

FROM: Baron Catherine

TO: Earl Nathan

Dearest Nathan,

Rest assured that I am passing everything you send on to the Duke of North Belfast. I have it on good authority that he has already informed Their Royal Highnesses the King and Queen of the situation too.

No one here is taking this lightly, but we must consider the delicate nature of the situation. The Princess is very powerful and she keeps all of Dublin's secrets. If anything were to befall her, those secrets might be exposed. There is some worry in Belfast that the fall-out might be as bad as the problem. Things would be easier if the Duke of Dublin were on our side. Is there any way you can approach him?

Remain steadfast,

You sister,

Catherine.

Lord Nathan,

I've put surveillance on Childes like you ordered. I've been keeping some watches myself and I can tell when the Princess is with her. I never see her enter or leave, but I can feel her presence. It's like strong wine that makes your head swim (or would have, before). I'm not sure if she's doing it on purpose to let me know that she knows I'm watching, or if this Childes girl is really getting to her. Maybe removing Childes removes the problem.

I know Belfast wants to wait, but say the word and I'm ready. Girl looks terrible by the way; she must have lost at least a stone since the Princess began visiting. Maybe we can sit back and watch the problem solve itself. Whatever happens though, it has to be quick.

I could not find the transcript of the Princess' words Childes refers to.

Sincerest regards,

Derek.

She came again, at night - always at night - and laid with me. Not in the bed this time. I never see how she enters, but she was on the floor and pulled me down to her. She mounted me as a lion does a stag and I surrendered to her. She was ferocious, primal even, and I will surely bear the marks for nights to come. If she were any other, the directness of her need would repel me, but with her, it only enhances the passion. She desires me as much as I desire her.

When her needs were met, she pressed me to her chest and caressed my hair as one does a child. She spoke of fire and death, and she trembled under me as she recalled her experiences. Her words confuse me. She tells me of a society of demons, hidden under the veneer of the world, while preying on humanity. Is she talking about a secret underground? Her words seem couched in metaphor, yet she delivers them with complete sincerity as if I should take them literally.

She made me sit at my desk to write down her words, claiming that she chose me for this talent. She wants me to expose these hidden demons to the light in which they cannot survive. Without them, she says, she could start anew. She didn't speak of us being together, but I know her heart beats as true as mine. I am the rock upon which she will build her new life.

FROM: Earl Nathan

TO: Baron Catherine

Dearest Catherine,

It required considerable pull on my part, but I spoke privately with His Grace the Duke of Dublin. He adopts an aloof air and refuses to speak ill of Her Royal Highness the Princess, but I suspect he sees the precariousness of our situation. If he had assurances from the King and Queen of Belfast that They would respect and support a transition of power in Dublin, I think I could persuade him to embrace our side.

The situation is escalating. We must act quickly or the secret will be lost.

Your brother,

Nathan.

FROM: Baron Catherine

TO: Duke Anthony

Dear Duke,

Dearest Anthony,

My brother, whom I consider with the highest regards, has spoken to Duke Mathieu of Dublin as you suggested. He believes the Duke could be persuaded if His and Her Royal Highnesses support what fate is tragically forcing us to do. If it might please you to speak to Our Majesties again?

Your humble servant,

Catherine

Baron of Regent's Nightclub, North Belfast.



We have taken into Our Royal Consideration the extensive and valuable services rendered by Her Royal Highness the Princess of Dublin. We must also consider the greater value represented by the All Night Society and the First Tradition. We believe We are the gatekeepers of silence and, by extension, the chosen guardians of all Our kind. While We remain imminently devoted to the Princess Carmilla, We must not let such fondness cloud Our judgement.

We have therefore thought fit, with the Advice of Our Privy Council, to issue this Our Royal Proclamation, to hereby publish and declare to all Our loving Subjects, that We have, with the Advice of Our Said Privy Council, decided the following:

First - The Princess Carmilla must hereby and forever more abide by the First Tradition of Our kind, which is also known as the Masquerade or The Tradition of Silence.

Second - We believe His Grace Mathieu, the Duke of Dublin, to be a most wise and honourable man, not subject to the whims of lesser creatures, as well as Our loyal friend.

Third - Should the Princess Carmilla not abide by the first of Our proclamations as here above, We place Our faith and friendship in Duke Mathieu to restore order to Dublin where it is just and reasonable.

We do declare this to be Our Royal Will and Pleasure. Given at Our Court in the one-hundred-and-twelfth Year of Our Reign.
GOD SAVE THE KING AND QUEEN.

King Edward

Queen Anne

FROM: Earl Nathan

TO: Baron Catherine

My dearest Catherine,

You are the eternal light of my life. My star in the dark night by which I unerringly find my way to safer shores. Duke Mathieu has agreed to step in. He is yet hesitant to act against the Princess, and let it be known that I am too, but he will insist that she acknowledge and respect the proclamation issued by Their Royal Highnesses the King and Queen of Belfast.

Duke Mathieu has also given me carte blanche to handle the Childes girl despite the Princess' proprietary mark upon her. I hope to resolve the situation peacefully, for you know me not to be needlessly cruel, but my options remain to be seen. Still, I am optimistic that we can resolve this as long as Dublin and Belfast stand together.

I kiss your hand in gratitude,

Your brother,

Nathan.

Lord Nathan,

I went to pick up the Childes girl on your order and found her gone. All her belongings are accounted for, including the diary, but the place has an abandoned air. I called her professor and he hasn't seen her, although he admits she hasn't attended class in days. Guess she was too busy pining after the Princess.

I did an extensive search of the place, but came up empty. The passion and confusion are so thick that they melted into the walls and floorboards, but I found nothing that explains where Childes has gone.


Not sure what to do next. Did this just blow over, or are we left holding a ticking bomb?

I include her last diary excerpt.

Sincerest regards,

Derek.

I slept through the day again and when I woke, she was there.. She is my sun now. I sleep when she leaves and wake when she enters. She kissed my breasts and this time I nearly fainted with passion. I asked her to tell me more about her life and the demons that trouble her. She refused, but I, not reading her mood as I should have and seeking to alleviate her burden, pressed her to tell me. I could see her face change as wrath overcame her, but it was too late to change what I had done. Quick as lightning, she hit me. The blow cracked my lip, but seeing my pain only reminded her of our love. She kissed away the blood and pressed me close to her heart. I begged forgiveness as she held me. She caressed my hair as she whispered sweet nothings in my ear.

SECURE 

Mikhail:

Can I ask you something? Do you really think the First Estate can survive without the elite? We can't possibly control seven billion people, or even the three million in the San Diego metro area, but we *can* control their leaders. I'll grant you points for ideology, but practically speaking??

Sarah:

You're thinking in old world terms, when the pyramid worked top-down. Things are different now. The Internet is the great equalizer – it's shaping the world from bottom to top. It'll be a while before we get there and I will grant you that the elite is pretty entrenched, but it can't remain so forever. Every move has a counter move. Even that endgame banking memo couldn't remain secret. And yes, not many people believe it's true. But *enough* do and eventually the scales will tip.

Sarah:

We can direct the populace through mass communication. Your people are already doing it, but their focus is wrong. They're pushing for control and people are *going to push back*. My proposal is more organic. Find out what the people want and use *that* to hide. Take privacy for example. The populace was only too happy to give that up after 9/11, but they're beginning to reconsider. If we expedite that sentiment, we could live in a less closely monitored world. This is how we keep the secret.

Mikhail:

I remain unconvinced. Most people use your "great equalizer" to look at pictures of cats. Even those who would be activists, do no more than sign online petitions. Meanwhile the elite does what it pleases. Also, let us assume that there is an uprising – my side has the ear of the city council, the Naval Base, and (despite your efforts) the police. They are and will remain untouchable.

Sarah:

That's what Marie Antoinette and Nicholas II thought. Those police officers and marines? They have *families*. Blood is thicker than law. We cannot keep hiding amongst the elite, because they *will* fall.

I was already half asleep when she began to talk. As angry as my earlier insistence had made her, she volunteered the information now. She said she had begun the great pogrom of her life and laughed as if it were a game. I laughed with her. She looked at me curiously then and fell in a brooding melancholy. She said she might reconsider burning everything; that maybe adding me to her life would be enough. She said that "they" would pursue us if she exposed them. I still don't know what she means, but I sense that she will ask me to go with her tonight. I will say yes

SDCU
SAN DIEGO CITIZENS UNION

Funds Approved

From: San Diego Citizens Union

To: S.

Response to the video is good. People like the girl. We're keeping her isolated for now – we might want to use her again later.

We've also began militia training per your suggestion. The fringe groups already know how to use guns and stay off the grid, and the others are picking up quickly. I'm hesitant to say that the hacking group needs improving. A few of them are very skilled, but many of our people are careful not to leave an electronic trail so they've been staying away from the Internet entirely. We cannot hope to win this without an online force, however, so we're working on it. Perhaps with additional funds we could hire professionals to do some of the work and training. I have the contacts, but they don't come cheap.

We're also making sure to keep Julian's documents and Piketty's theory in the metro media. It's a fine line between being over-represented and forgotten, but I think we're finding the right balance. The distribution of wealth is becoming an increasing issue and it's making people angry – as we hoped. We have several reporters in our circle and they'll keep pushing the angle.

Mikhail:
Funny coincidence? The testament of Sophie Charlotte just surfaced. From what I can tell, she anchored a digital video and transcript in a timed dropbox. With no passcode entered in the last 24 hours, copies have been spreading to other members of our organization. An anonymous source forwarded a copy to me.

Sarah:
Yeah, I got one, too. Coincidence my cute little ass. This is way too close to what I've been saying. Sophie Charlotte is, what, 300 years old? She used to be the Queen of Prussia for heaven's sake, but since the Kaiser was killed, she has been passed over for positions of power every single time. Her own inability to move beyond an outdated feudal system was holding her back. But look at her now. She is fanning the flames of revolution, baby, and the downtrodden masses will carry her to victory.

Mikhail:
If she doesn't burn down Berlin first. She's playing a dangerous game.

Sarah:
That's the only game in town.

The Struggle of Sophia Charlotte

STATUS OF VIDEO: Authenticated. Subject Sophie Charlotte von Hannover also authenticated.

STATUS OF TRANSCRIPT: Completed and found below.

STATUS OF ATTACHED DOCUMENTS: Authenticated.

My name is Sophie Charlotte von Hannover and this is my testimony. For the past fourteen years, the Kindred of Berlin have been under attack by an unknown entity. What began as a few disappearing or dead neonates has since spread to decimate our population. The Markgraf cannot protect us, nor can his secret police. In an effort to stave off our extinction, the Markgraf has turned to manipulating mortal hunters and us. We feed on lies while the Markgraf betrays us, all in a desperate bid to keep power. *Es reicht.*

The attack began slowly, with neonates who possibly just ran off. Now, however, it takes neonate, ancilla, and elder alike. The tide seemed to turn when the Markgraf established his Watchful Eyes in 2009, but they too fell; wiped out on their one-year anniversary no less. Then in 2011, the Markgraf announced his plan to draw hunters to Berlin, so they might root out the threat for us. He told us this openly. He didn't tell us everything.

Embrace rates in Berlin are high, as we need new vampires to replace the fallen. We know this. What we did not know, was that we also needed new fodder to feed to the hunters. The Markgraf has thrown our *childer* to them like bones to keep a hunting dog happy. This is as appalling as it is amoral and unwise. The neonates are already riled up and should they ever find out, they could turn on their elders and none of us would be left to disappear.

I discovered the Markgraf's ploy when my own beloved Leda disappeared. I never had a girl; my two mortal children and every Kindred I Embraced thereafter were men. Leda, however, drew my attention. She was educated, sophisticated, and determined. I saw in her, perhaps, something of my mortal days. Her talent for music was unsurpassed and she brightened my nights. One night, however, she simply disappeared from her haven.

Following Leda's trail was easier than I had anticipated, as was uncovering the Markgraf's complicity. Sometimes I forget that I am, as Johan would put it, one of the *old guard* and that my reach extends far. I reached for Leda's killers and found the Markgraf instead, holding the hunter's leash like a puppet master. I doubt he led them to Leda directly, but she was a social creature; it is entirely possible that the Markgraf set the hunters on her allies and that she was caught up in their net.

So where does that leave me?

1 – Do nothing. Perhaps the Markgraf will save Berlin yet. But at what cost? Bad enough that *childer* are merely chosen to fill the holes in our ranks, rather than for their own talents. To use them as bait for hunters is as morally reprehensible as it is foolish; either group could easily spin out of control and the Markgraf's plan will backfire.

2 – Confront the Markgraf. I am old and powerful. Even more so, I suspect, than the Markgraf. However, he must surely have foreseen that someone would find out, and he will have prepared for a confrontation.

3 – Let my superiors handle it. Sophia Goldstein is the Invictus electorate of Berlin, but she seems eager to let the Markgraf make all the decisions. It's almost pathetic to see an Invictus hand the reins of power over to a Dragon so completely. Under different circumstances, I might have fallen back on my clan contacts, but if I said Clan Ventrue has been halved since the attacks started, I might be overly optimistic. I fear that to let someone else handle it equals to doing nothing.

4 – Stand up against the Markgraf. The neonates carry the promise of continuance, yet both the attacks and the hunters are

killing them left and right. If I shared this information with them, they would at least be safer. I fear their anger, however, for surely they would march on the Shadow Palace, the Markgraf's haven, and burn it to the ground. Would they stop there? If I seek to protect the childer, I must also be mindful of protecting the elders of Berlin. I say this with great reluctance, but perhaps if I reach out to Johan, the *de facto* neonate leader, I could steer Berlin to calmer waters.

I look at the hand I've been dealt and, no matter how much I wish things were different, I must do what is right. I am meeting Johan later tonight and together we will lift Berlin up. I include my proof against the Markgraf with this video and hope future generations and God judge me kindly. Johan and I will put our house in order and then we will find and stop the source of the attacks. We must. It is our duty.

Riots Continue

Berlin, 23 May

Fire spreads through Berlin's streets for the fourth night in a row as riots continue. The city of Berlin, home to a strong underground movement as well as high unemployment rates, is no stranger to protests. These riots, however, seem particularly volatile, as anarchists set fire to government buildings on the first night of protests. Armed fascist groups met them on the second night and clashes between the two groups have become increasingly violent since.

Berlin's government has brought in military police to quell the riots, with seemingly no effect to date. It is as of yet unclear what protesters want, as they have issued no demands and there seems to be no greater purpose to the buildings they attack. "*Es reich*" (it's enough) appears to be their rallying cry, but they have not been available to comment on *what* is enough.



From: Consultant

To: Lassiter Lobby Group

Subject: Change the conversation

"The richest 1 percent in the United States now owns more wealth than the bottom 90 percent."

"Income for the bottom 90% of American families fell between 2010 and 2013, about 6% for the 40th-60th percentiles and 7% for the 20th-40th percentiles. Incomes in the top decile rose 2%."

"The average employee needs to work more than a month to earn what his CEO earns in one hour."

Did you know that? I knew that. And thanks to Piketty and his ilk, soon *everyone* will know that.

I commend you on debunking conspiracy theories on mainstream websites. Wikipedia is very clean and full of reasonableness – though I found both quotes directly from there. You have also done a fair job on the conspiracy sites; co-opting them to make their content *beyond* ridiculous. Endgame memos, GMO's to induce sterility in the poor, chem trails to control emotions, mind-control chips – you've made it impossible for *anyone* to separate fact from fiction.

However, you are dropping the ball on the economic theorists. Too many are stepping forward with "hard data" that shows that everyone's income

SECURE



Sarah:

So what about you? Do you really believe the elite are the way to go? They're terrified of losing power (and they should be, considering how massively outnumbered they are). Thanks to them, there's a camera on every street corner. Soon, biometric scanners will be everywhere. Tell me: how we will remain hidden?

Mikhail:

You're laboring under the misconception that we'd have no say in those developments. Imagine a place where cameras automatically delete blurry pictures. Or where biometric scanners do not pick up on body temperature or heartbeat. What we need to do, is control the curve. Your position is one of fear. You're wondering "what if humanity, with all its toys, turns on us." That's why you want society to fall apart and devolve. Mine is a position of strength. I plan to control those toys.

Sarah:

No, yours is a position of insane risk. Maybe we could control from the top down. But even if no one in the city's IT department notices that the surveillance equipment is a little wonky – and that's a pretty big if – it's still not a model that will carry us into the future. Power is about letting go of the reins and still having the horse go where you want it. Sometimes a gentler touch is better.

goes down – except for the top earners. People no longer care you're providing jobs; they believe you're hoarding and, unfortunately, you have no real defense for that. You need to change the tide of public opinion, and I'm going to help you do that in San Diego.

You might wonder, why San Diego? Simple. Liberals outnumber conservatives 7 to 6 here, though I'll grant they're over-represented in the city government. This makes your job hard, but not impossible. It's easy to win on home territory, but San Diego could provide you with a model to tackle the blue cities.

To get down to business – I'm sure one of the companies in your San Diego portfolio is in dire straits. Preferably a good old-fashioned household name; a mom 'n pop store that grew into a local chain. Sell it to one of the Asian groups. Make sure jobs are lost. That should bring the focus back on *jobs*. Change the conversation.

Sarah:
I had that dream again. This time I got closer to the exit. I think Mr. S. was standing there. He was holding something, a metal object, but I couldn't see it clearly.

Mikhail:
You're dreaming about our sire? That might be Stockholm syndrome, you know.

Sarah:
Sigh. I'm trying to share here. But never mind then.

Mikhail:
Come on, Sarah. I'm just kidding!

Mikhail:
Sarah?

Mikhail:
Oh fine then. I apologize.

Sarah:
You're forgiven. This time.

Sarah:

I've been doing some more digging and I found your New World Order. *Total control*. Not sure I'd consider it a shining example of our covenant, though. From what I can tell, the entire place is rotting away – kine and Kindred alike. But hey, the elite are on top and the masses are kept in line with bread and games. Or, at least, drugs and nihilism. *Great job*.

Mikhail:

The two Kindred this investigator describes seem to have been at the bottom of the hierarchy. Those of merit probably receive better treatment. And, yes, *this is my ideal society*. The First Estate controls the city and I can guarantee you the mortals are too dazed to even notice the Kindred in their midst. *That* is our purpose, to develop a model of society where the secret is easily kept. Unless you're losing focus of that?


Sarah:

I'm not losing focus. I just don't think it's necessary to destroy an entire population just to keep the secret. There are other, gentler ways.

Mikhail:

There you go using that word again. This isn't about being gentle. It's about being effective.

Facility 52

From: 

To: Sarah's Game

Kamchatka Krai, at the furthest east tip of Russia, has always been ours. We do things a certain way here. We control the horizontal and the vertical, and people obey. When the Russians opened the region to civilians in 1989 though, other covenants inevitably came in too. Sometimes they clash with us. Recently, the Carthian enforcer of a no-name town noticed a slow trickle of disappearing Kindred in the city surrounding facility 52. He sent someone to investigate. We took care of it.

From: Kai

To: Madeline

Arrived later than I expected, at 02:11, since the road was horrible. No mobile reception or Wi-Fi, something about ore in the ground, but found a motel with Internet. Will be in touch tomorrow.

211 is the code for intercepted communication. Someone is monitoring emails. Explains why emails are going to the Madeline proxy rather than Operations directly.



From: Kai

To: Madeline

Found a place to stay and walked around town a bit. Tried my cell at several locations, but there's no reception anywhere. The owner of the motel explained that it has something to do with metal ore in the ground and surrounding mountains. Apparently, this ore drew in the Soviets. Mining is pretty much dead now. As is the rest of the town, but more about that later. Going back to the ore — everyone here relies on landlines and cable. Weirdest thing I've ever heard, but I'm sure they know what they're talking about.

The town itself is pretty much standing on the edge of the abyss. Soviet funds kept it alive until 1991, when the USSR crumbled. I think technically it's still part of Russia, but that's only because it hasn't bothered to revolt. There isn't anything worth fighting for here unless you're interested in Krokodil. Everyone I've seen has the signs — scaly skin that rots in patches to expose flesh, muscle, and bone. If the zombie plague ever hits, it started here.

Attached a pic of some interesting graffiti. I know you like that sort of thing. Be in touch.

Checked the picture and found no encrypted data. Later pictures did carry messages and I've decoded those. Someone is working to cut this place off from the world. Interference from ore, indeed.

From: Kai

To: Madeline

Saw a woman on the street. Her left cheek had rotted away and I could see straight into her blackened, toothless mouth. Her tongue was half-gone too, but she could speak well enough to offer me a blowjob. I refused. Walked a bit around the old harbor and found nothing but rats. A lot of rats – I suppose the locals ate all the cats. No dogs either. Did see a gorgeous harbor building, probably erected to welcome high placed visitors from the mother state. The facade still stands, but going round back it eroded so much that it's falling into the water. Rotting like everything else.

Found a high-rise with some squatters too. Mostly singles, some pairs. Saw one family with kids – they offered to sell me their baby. Oldest child, a boy of around seven, was already showing the first signs of Krokodil. I put them all out of their misery. The baby too, though it pained my heart. There is nothing good for her here.

Decoded Message:

Finally found two of our kind. Or more accurately, they found me. They introduced themselves as Mary and John, which are no doubt fake names. They agreed to tell me about the city, though it's clear they don't trust me yet. Apparently, when the Russians abandoned this place, the Invictus moved into the vacuum. They control the city and its only source of revenue, which according to John is the drug industry. No one leaves without their say so, neither Kindred nor kine. They keep the latter in check with Krokodil, that much is obvious, but Mary and John were coy about how they compel Kindred to stay. Whatever it is that closes the ranks against dissidents, it's big. Mary says the Invictus make all newcomers an offer that they cannot refuse. I asked her for proof and she will get me a list of names if I promise to take them with me when I leave.

From: Kai

To: Madeline

Decay is all around me. This entire place — the city, its people — is standing on the cusp of death. It should have fallen to oblivion already, but still clings to life. Not out of desperation, mind you, but out of habit. Wake up, breathe, do Krokodil, sleep. It's an endless cycle for these people. It's almost mesmerizing.

Decoded Message:

Mary and John smuggled me into the lab. Nothing to look at from the outside, just another rusted shell, but inside it's all gleaming hallways, metal, and chrome. Saw another Kindred, though John was careful to distract him while Mary snuck me in. Guy never saw me, but looked at John like he was lunch. I don't think they take the third tradition too serious here. When he spoke, I could see black teeth rotting in his mouth. I pressed Mary about it later and she admitted that most Kindred suffer from 1st stage Krokodil symptoms. She herself has a patch on her arm. I made her show me but she swears she never touched the stuff. Could it be carried through mortal blood? What they cook up in the lab is no Krokodil though. I saw vials of XTC, Cocaine, Heroin, Molly and stuff that doesn't even have a name yet. It looks like they expect all Kindred to work for the company: wake up, feed, create drugs, sleep.

From: Kai
To: Madeline

Took another graffiti picture for your collection. Saw this one building, another high-rise full of squatters, covered in the most beautiful graffiti of decaying flowers. I have no idea how they managed to spray the entire side of a twelve-story building, but there you go.

Decoded Message:

Mary got me the list she promised. The names on it are real all lost Kindred accounted for. So are she and John being truthful? I could push to meet the Invictus and hear their side of things. After seeing how that Kindred at the lab looked at John though, I have a good idea what "the offer I can't refuse" is. Decided not to press my luck. Leaving.

Last email was two nights ago. We must assume the Invictus found Kai and are pushing him for information. Request advice on further action.


SDCU
SAN DIEGO CITIZENS UNION

From: San Diego Citizens Union

To: S.

We have people inside San Diego's key companies and our hackers have done a small run stealing a token amount from each. By converting the money from one e-currency to another while using encryption, they claim to be untraceable. Once we go big, the local *Fortune 500* will be the *Fortune 000*. That should put a dent in their ability to buy the city.

On a side note, we are now the proud owners of half a million in bitcoins. I hope you have a lot of online purchases planned. I'm kidding. Shall we funnel the money back into our operation?

SECURE 

Sarah:

I had another dream. This one was worse. I'll tell you if you promise not to be a twat for once.

Mikhail:
Promise.

Sarah:

This time I knew it was a dream, so I was calmer now. I stopped running to feel the walls and taste the water. I examined the side channels and the water coming out of them, too. The channels were big enough to crawl into, but I didn't want to. I knew that if I did, I'd get lost. They were like a rat's maze and I didn't want to be a rat. They still had words and images tumbling out of them and I saw things like "Sophia Charlotte" and the pictures from Kamchatka Krai. I was thirsty, so I began to drink (yeah, I think I stopped being lucid at that point) but something became lodged in my throat. I coughed it up and it was a picture of a dark cavern filled with white trees. I knew I wasn't supposed to drink that, so I started running to the exit again. Mr. S. was there and I was so relieved to see him, that I didn't see the object in his hand, but then the light caught on it and it was a huge sword. I tried to come to a halt, to ask what movie he was auditioning for, but he just ran me through. I fell backwards into the water and the blood from my chest swam up so I couldn't see. The water carried me back into the tunnel, and I bumped into someone. It was you. I mean, I couldn't see you, but in my dream, I knew it was you. You were there with me and we were both dead.

Mikhail:
Wow. You have some weird dreams.
And issues.

Mikhail:
Sorry!

Mikhail:
That just came out wrong.

Mikhail:
We're under a lot of pressure right now. It's not every night that you're asked to run a sim on the future of your covenant. People have expectations. Of course, we're both nervous. But no one is going to kill you. We've been at our sim for three years now and we've gotten nothing but good reviews. You're bright. Almost as bright as I am. When we're done, we'll both be on the fast track. You'll see.



From: Lassiter Lobby Group

To: Consultant

Subject: The next step

Thank you, again, for your excellent advice. We agree on your point about San Diego as one of our proving grounds. With jobs lost to the Chinese, citizens are writing the mayor to further enhance tax exemptions for businesses. Meanwhile, we're working to prevent re-regulation of San Diego banks. If we can trigger another crisis, even on a local level, we'll be able to pick up houses, assets, and companies on the cheap. We need a good spin to sell it, though. We don't want to come out looking like the bad guys again.

We also want to be kinder this time – the last crisis drove people out on the streets and while it made us money, it didn't really give us a solid handle on anyone. It was also far too big. No more nationwide moves which is another reason we're glad for your assistance locally. We're thinking a work program combined with food stamps and an incentive program for behavior. There really should be no excuse for anyone on welfare spending money on frivolous things. Our goal is *total* control concerning habitat, work, free time, and consumption – even if it won't be until our grandchildren's children that they reap the benefits.

Your advice has been excellent and we'd like to keep you on retainer. Are you on board?

SECURE

Sarah:
Fair warning. My peeps are ready to collapse the local economy.

Mikhail:
Funny. I was about to say the same thing.

Sarah:
Think we should contact Control?

Mikhail:
Well, the handbook is a little vague on what constitutes 'irreversible action', but I would wager that collapsing the economy counts.

Sarah:
Let's draw up reports then, Mr. Funny Guy. I'll proof yours if you proof mine.

SECURE

Mikhail:
Sarah? You there? I think I might be in trouble.

Mikhail:
I found something in one of my PO Boxes. I can't track the source. I've scanned it and am sending it now.
 rome.pdf

Mikhail:
I DON'T THINK I'M SUPPOSED TO HAVE THIS.

Sarah:
Fuck you. Seriously. Fuck you. Why the hell would you share that with me? You're going to get us both killed. Worst. Friend. Ever.

Mikhail:
Problems love company. I've been listening to you about your nightmares. Now, stop complaining and help me here?

Sarah:
Misery loves company and it's still a dick move.

Sarah:
Okay.

Sarah:
Did you send me the entire thing? I'll bury it on darknet and add a timer in case anyone tries to grab us. Meanwhile you burn the original. I'm sending you a cleaner program – run it to delete any trace of this thing from your system. Then we will never talk of it again.

When in Rome

One of my earliest memories is walking through the house to turn on all the lights, and the familiar scent of my mother as she gathers me up and takes me back to bed. I insist she leaves the lights on. I hate the dark, always have.

The first time I saw her was in the dark too. Well, it was daytime, but I was in a coffin so it was dark to me. I'd just traveled to Rome. With security checks, you can't trust any flight to arrive on schedule and Italians are notoriously tardy in everything, so traveling like a normal person was out. Don't want to risk being caught by the sun. Luckily, my sire is part of a traffic network and he set me up. All I needed to do was climb in a coffin and they'd ship me first-class cargo. Creepy as hell, but apparently it's the way to travel for those with our condition. Sasha even gave me tips on what to do during the hours I'd be awake. "Bring an e-reader or MP3 player," she said, "but make sure you've downloaded everything 'cause you won't have access to your cloud." That made me laugh - no access to the cloud while in the clouds - but she just stared and I realized she wasn't joking. It was the first time she'd made an effort to be nice, too (she didn't appreciate her/our sire embracing another Kindred). Way to be awkward, Beatrice.

So I was in my coffin, asleep. I think I was dreaming, too. My sire claims that Kindred rarely dream, but I wake up every night with the sensation of dreams slipping from my memory. I'm standing at the edge of a cliff and hear the far-away beating of wings. The sound comes closer as the wind picks up. I struggle against the gale, hair and clothes already all whipping forward, and am blown right off the cliff. Yellow fire emerges beneath me and my flesh begins to melt as I fall closer. Strips of face flake off and turn to ash as I fall into the fire. I woke up. I could smell death and stagnation in my little box. I wanted to scream, but I didn't. Something was in there with me. I could feel it, just like I could feel my sire when he stalked me. Like I was very small and insignificant, and the best I could do was be still and hope that it didn't think me interesting.

That's when I saw it - her. At first, I thought it was the yellow fire from my dream, but there were two of them. Tiny points in the dark. They came closer and I knew they were eyes. I did scream then and I wanted to thrash and throw it off me, but I couldn't move my limbs. I couldn't do anything but scream as the eyes leaned in and I saw an ashen face behind them and then - Then I passed out. Oh gods. Sasha would laugh so hard if she knew my fight-or-flight response equals passing out. But I did.

When I woke again, the eyes were gone and the night crew was opening my coffin. I didn't tell them anything. They work for my sire and I knew they'd report back to him if I asked about anyone being in the coffin with me. This is the first time I've been away from him since he turned me and I need this. I need to be on my own for a while. No way was I going back after just arriving. Besides, the eyes were probably part of the dream. That's what I told myself.

That night, my first as Kindred in a new city, passed partially with me writing my sire to thank him for bartering passage on my behalf, and thanking the Prince of Rome for his hospitality. The first thing my sire taught me is to always be polite. It seemed that everyone knew that I'd come to Rome to study the early nights of our covenant. I endured introductions to half a dozen Kindred, all claiming to be close friends of my sire and offering to help me in my endeavor. The first thing Sasha taught me is that Kindred don't have friends. Nevertheless, I made sure to remember all their names and thank them.

Three Kindred stood out: Edda, who claimed to be my sire's Aunt and has lived in Rome all her life; Gennaro, who is an archeologist and offered to proof my thesis; and lastly Giulia, who was the only child in the group and therefore most like me.

I spent the night in a small basement under a clock tower. It was marked with the six orbs of the Medici crest, but that was hardly surprising – the Medicis owned half the buildings in Italy at one point or another. Still, it was nice to sleep close to a tangible part of history. I used to love the way old buildings feel, as if history is just pouring out of the stone. Edda, who controls the tower, saw me off for the night. She kept asking if I needed anything before I “turned in.” I swear Kindred must be bipolar or something. One moment they're yelling at you to stop being a pussy and kill the guy (my sire really did that), the next they're coddling you as if you're a toddler. It's freaky. I made sure to bar the door after she left.

From: Lady Edda

To: Lord Francesco

Dear Francesco,

A quick note before morning comes.

Beatrice arrived safely. She is a darling girl, very well behaved and clearly educated. I could see some of the weariness you spoke of, but I'm sure that will pass. A lot has happened in her life since she met you, after all. You mentioned she majored in European History and she seemed to liven up quite a bit when she spoke to Professor Gennaro. I'm certain we'll have a grand time here in Rome.

The transporters also performed admirably. I've paid the second half of their fee. They charged extra to replace the lid, as they claim Beatrice left claw marks on it. Maybe she had a small bout of claustrophobia, or they're simply trying to get a little on the top. Either way, the increase wasn't much so I just went ahead and paid that, too. I've included the nota so you can reimburse me at your convenience; there is no rush, but I know how much you hate outstanding debts.

I look forward to spending time with my grandniece.

Sincere regards,

Edda.

Transcript of audio recording, recovered from Beatrice's phone.

Beatrice: This is Beatrice [blanked out] recording. I'm talking to Lady Edda [blanked out] who graciously agreed to tell me about the early nights of the Invictus.

Lady Edda: Oh dear, are you recording this on your phone? How utterly interesting. I never cease to be amazed by technology! [Brief silence, followed by Edda laughing.] I'm just kidding, darling. Of course I know how it works. It's good to stay up to date with technology as the centuries pass by, as you'll discover for yourself in due time. Shall we then?

Beatrice: Uhm. Yes. First, thank you for agreeing to talk to me. I know you must be very busy. And thank you again for arranging accommodations for me.

Lady Edda: You're very welcome, dear.

Beatrice: I wanted to start at the early days, err, nights. Sorry about that.

Lady Edda: Don't worry about it, dear. It's something you need to unlearn because it shows your age, but many childer still misspeak. Just pay more attention to it and do better.

Beatrice: Yes, I will. The early *nights*. My sire spoke about the Camarilla in ancient Rome. Could you tell me more about that?

Lady Edda: Ah, the Camarilla. Hallmark of the great. Legend of Kindred. The Camarilla was birthed in Rome and spread with that great empire. It covered, essentially, every great nation this continent has ever seen and Rome lay at the heart of it. Youngsters tonight think that the world is small. Perhaps it is. We have *vichan*, *InBoard*, and other ways of communicating with Kindred all around the globe. Yet if you travel from Rome

to Berlin, you'll find politics are very different there. The world may be smaller, but it's not *united*. Not so in ancient Rome – the same laws, the same rules, governed all Night's Society. Can you even begin to comprehend how magnificent it was?

Beatrice: Yes, I –

Lady Edda: No, I don't think you can. It's like trying to imagine what the sun looks like. We have pictures that show us, but nothing could ever mimic seeing it up close with your own eyes. The Camarilla was like the sun. It changed and enlightened everything it touched. It was perfection.

Beatrice: But it fell.

Lady Edda: Yes, it fell with Rome. Or maybe Rome fell with the Camarilla. It's hard to say which was cause and which effect. You look surprised at that. Don't you think we could cause the downfall of a human regime? We could, and none of the covenants tonight is as powerful as the Camarilla was. It's very possible that the demise of the Camarilla came first and that Rome, no longer supported by its unseen masters, fell as a result.

Beatrice: Do we know which it was?

Lady Edda: No. There is a lot of speculation, but no proof either way. Reports of that time are sketchy at best. However, we do know some things. The Camarilla was governed by the *Dead Julii*. Though I suppose they were just the Julii then. The Julii –

Beatrice: What was that?

Lady Edda: What was what, dear?

Beatrice: That sound.

Lady Edda: *That sound*. You know, dear, there are many sounds in Rome. It's a very busy city, after all, so unless you can specify...

Beatrice: I – No, I'm sorry. I must have imagined it.

Lady Edda: *Imagined it*. It's really quite impolite to interrupt your Elders, but I'll let it slide this one time. Would you like me to continue?

Beatrice: Yes, ma'am, please. And I apologize for interrupting you.

Lady Edda: Hm. *As I was saying*, the Julii governed the Camarilla. In fact, the two were so closely intertwined that you might say the Julii *were* the Camarilla. When the Julii came to their demise, they took the Camarilla with them.

Beatrice: What happened to the Ju- [brief pause] Julii?

Lady Edda: Again, no one really knows. We suspect that they, like Rome itself, simply accumulated too many enemies. These things happen when you're at the top.

Beatrice: But surely, there are theories.

Lady Edda: Yes, there are theories, but I am not one for idle speculation. I am not a gossip magazine.

Beatrice: Yes, of course. I never meant to imply that – [pause]. I apologize.

Lady Edda: Apology accepted, dear.

Beatrice: Thank you. Uhm. What happened to the Camarilla? My sire implied –

Lady Edda: That we are its heirs? Well, he's right. When the greater Camarilla fell, a small remnant of it survived. Two small remnants possibly, if the Lancea et Sanctum is to be believed. But where the Spear concerns itself with the spiritual well-being of Kindred, we tend to more important matters. The Camarilla had a great many laws and customs, many of them superfluous, but three are absolutely essential to the survival of our kind. Can you tell me which those are?

Beatrice: The Traditions. The first: We must not reveal ourselves to mortals. The second: A sire is responsible for his childer. The third: We may not drink the heart's blood of another Kindred.

Lady Edda: Very good! Yes, those are indeed the Traditions maintained in any civilised domain. We leave the second and third Tradition to local Princes, who admittedly often come from our ranks, and guard the First Tradition ourselves. Worldwide. This is our duty: to maintain the Masquerade and guard the silence.

Beatrice: The silence of...

Lady Edda: The silence of our kind. To make sure no word slips to the mortals. To remain forever hidden.

Beatrice: And we inherited this duty directly from the Camarilla?

Lady Edda: Precisely. Records of our covenant show our founding immediately after the Camarilla fell, although we transformed along with the time. From Senex to vassals and Princes. Regardless of trappings, we are they. The Camarilla that survived. *Invictus*.

Beatrice: Wow. I mean – that's amazing.

Lady Edda: Yes, it is dear. Well, that's enough talk for one night. I suspect you'll want to see the city. Let's turn off this recording and you can be on your way.

Beatrice: Yes, of course. Thank you again for your time ma'am. I really appreciate it.

Edda was first on my list of interviewees. Partly because I suspect that she'd be offended if I interviewed anyone else first and partly because my sire said she was very knowledgeable. I don't think I made the best impression, but she seemed willing to accept my apologies. She encouraged me to see Rome after the interview. I've been here before, but it's different now. For one, everything closes at night. Edda told me to name-drop her to the guards and they'd let me in. I asked her how she stopped everyone from abusing that and she merely smiled. Guess that tells me all I need to know.

I didn't take her up on her offer though. I planned to, initially, but things changed the moment I hit the city proper. The thing is, history is everywhere in Rome. It was the largest city of the Western world long before they invented bulldozers, so nothing was torn down. Buildings that fell into disuse were simply covered in earth and built atop of. Entire city blocks and streets exist under modern day buildings; you can't throw a shovel here without hitting an ancient ruin. Some of these ruins are accessible right off the street or from regular building basements. It requires a bit of climbing and trespassing, but it's doable. So I did. I think this might be the only illegal thing I've ever done in my life and it felt great. I mean, what do I care? A fall could break my bones, but they'll heal. I might end up in the wrong place at the wrong time and - what? Get myself killed? Been there. For the first time ever, I felt like I could do whatever I wanted.

I broke into half a dozen places that night. It's much easier than you'd think - at one dig site all I needed to do was scale the fence. I think they expect proper morals and common sense to keep people out. Right. I didn't stay anywhere for long; the thrill of getting in was more fun than actually being there. Until I came to the auditorium of Maecenas. The building sits right off the Piazza Vittorio and history was made there. Every Roman politician and philosopher has been to the auditorium, from the era of Augustus right through to Nero. I was about to leave, but then I felt it. For the first time since my embrace. History seeping out of the stones. I closed my eyes and inhaled. I could hear the voices of writers and poets as they argued. It was exhilarating. Kneeling down, I examined the stones closely, pressing my ears to them in an effort to hear more.

Finally, I opened my eyes and saw small bird motifs scattered over the steps. Owls mostly, but some ravens too. I could understand the owls; as representations of knowledge, the owls fit in a place like this. The ravens seemed out of place, so I bent closer to look at them. That's when she came back. I smelled her first - the scent of old death. A small breeze passed my cheek, blowing a lock of my hair forward. I knew it wasn't the wind. It was she. I closed my eyes again, too terrified to acknowledge her. I hated her, too. For the first time since my sire took me, I felt like myself again. I knew what I was doing; I was in my element. Until she showed up and reminded me what a little bird I am. I started crying from terror and frustration. I heard the clacking sound of claws on bare stone as she came towards me and that, more than anything, snapped me out of it. I bolted, faster than any human being should be. I didn't look, didn't see her - I just ran until the auditorium and her scent were far behind me.

Edda was waiting for me when I got home. She asked if there was anything I wanted to share with her. I hesitated, not sure where to start, and that saved me. She didn't know about my encounter, or about my Masquerade-breaking flight. She merely scolded me about

breaking into dig sites rather than using her contacts to get in the proper way. I apologized again and we left it at that.

I overslept the night after that. It's hard to explain, but I just couldn't open my eyes. I dreamt that I was standing on a cliff again and birds knocked me off. I hate nightmares – the only good thing about them is waking up. I had a voicemail from Giulia waiting when I finally rose. She wanted to "hang out". I wonder if Edda asked her to keep an eye on me. Either way, I accepted. I didn't much feel like being alone. Turned out she's as crazy as I am.

The first part of the night was fine. Giulia showed me the best places to hunt in Rome and we snuck into a late-night film. It was fun – if we'd been snacking on tacos instead of people, it would have been like a regular girls' night out. She smells nice, too. Then we were walking back across the Piazza Navona and she started talking about how she can hear "them." And I, like some kind of idiot, asked "Who's they?" and she said "the owls." I laughed. She wasn't joking and it wasn't funny, but I thought maybe if I pretend she's joking, she'll stop. She didn't stop. She told me that owls crawl inside her during the day and that they tell her secrets. She was still talking about them, how they've been around since the first Roman Kings and how one of them still sleeps under the [blanked out], when we got back to our drop-off point. Then she turned to me and said, "I know you can hear them too. You shouldn't ignore them – it makes them angry." and she left. I finally met a girl I like and she talks to birds. So I stood there thinking "could my life get any worse?" Turns out, it could.

Transcript of audio recording, recovered from Beatrice's phone.

Beatrice: This is Beatrice [blanked out] talking to Professor Gennaro. Thank you, Professor, for agreeing to this interview.

Gennaro: Well, technically I didn't agree to an interview. I agreed to look over your thesis. Which you then cleverly turned into an extra interview.

Beatrice: Uhm. I apologize.

Professor Gennaro: Oh, don't apologize. We both know you're not really sorry. And I am not either – I like clever girls.

Beatrice: Thank you?

Professor Gennaro: You are welcome. Now, let's start this interview. Tell me what you've learned so far?

Beatrice: That's not how an interview goes. I –

Professor Gennaro: It's how *this* interview goes. I'll let you know when we get to the part where you can ask me questions.

Beatrice: Yes, of course. Well, I spoke to Lady Edda about the Camarilla.

Professor Gennaro: Did she tell you how that covenant came to its end?

Beatrice: She said no one really knows and she didn't want to speculate.

Professor Gennaro: I see. Interesting. Tell me, what do you know of the Praetorian Guard?

Beatrice: The Praetorian Guard? Emperor Augustus formed the Guard to serve as bodyguards to the Roman Emperors. They eventually grew so corrupt that they controlled the emperors, rather than the other way around, and Constantine the Great disbanded it in 312 CE. But I'm not sure what that has to do with –

Professor Gennaro: When did Rome fall?

Beatrice: That depends on your view of things. The decline of its power became apparent with the sacks of Rome

in 410 and 455 CE. The final push for the Western part of the empire came in 476, when Romulus Augustus resigned as last emperor. The Eastern portion remained as Byzantium.

Professor Gennaro: Yes, so we have the end of the Praetorian Guard in 312 and the first signs of major trouble in 410.

Beatrice: Yes, I suppose.

Professor Gennaro: Less than a century is not a long time for a vampire carrying a grudge.

Beatrice: Wait, what? Are you saying the Praetorian Guard were Kindred who instigated the fall of the Empire as payback?

Professor Gennaro: I'm saying, look into it. That's all.

Beatrice: But –

Professor Gennaro: I think we've covered everything. Thank you so much for your time.

I'm terrified of my sire. I like Sasha. I'm here under the pretense of studying the early Invictus, but really, I'm here because I'll take any excuse to get away from the man who killed me. Gennaro thinks the Praetorian Guard collapsed the Empire. I like Giulia, but she talks to birds.

By now, I was more confused than when I came to Rome. So I did what any sane person would do: I took a personal day. Edda didn't seem too happy with that, but she didn't push the issue.

I should have known that my personal day would be as bad as the others.

I visited the Basilica of San Clemente. It's basically three churches built atop each other: the twelfth century Basilica, another basilica dating back to the fourth century and a pagan temple from the first century. The latter was dedicated to Mithras who is by far one of the most interesting and mysterious deities around. I did my senior thesis on him and I figured it couldn't hurt to take some time off from my Invictus study to pursue a personal interest. Plus, the Basilica is open to the public (during the day) so I didn't have to feel bad about entering at night. I even made a point of name-dropping Edda to the guards, who indeed let me enter, because I knew that would make her happy.

I had already decided I wasn't going to do anything else that night, so I took my time visiting both basilicas. It felt like walking back in time with every step I took. I spent hours poring over every detail, every stone. I could hear the mosaics and frescoes sing to me of devotion in ages past. I've never experienced anything like it - it was amazing. I was still feeling the buzz when I finally entered the mithraeum. I felt the fiery heat coming off the bust of Sol and I heard the wailing of the bull as Mithras slew it. I approached the stone at the center and I licked the neck of the bull. I could taste the blood - it was ancient, salty, and better than anything I've ever tasted. Lords. Looking back, I must have been high.

I explored several of the adjoining chambers and then I heard the flapping of wings. At first, I looked around, hoping that some pigeon had come in with me. There was no pigeon. The sound was coming from behind the wall. I honestly don't know what prompted me, but I went back to find the biggest rock I could carry and then proceeded to bash the wall. Maybe I was still high. Maybe I was just tired of playing games. I wanted those damn birds to just go ahead and try it. There were no birds. But there was another cavern. It was dark; unlike the tourist-friendly mithraeum, there were no lights here. I felt civilization slipping away as I entered the roughly hewn cave.

The cave held some of the same motifs as the mithraeum, but it seemed dedicated to a female deity. Isis perhaps. Or maybe Lilith. I saw owls carved on the walls, so I think maybe Lilith. The stones were still singing to me like a chorus falling over itself to tell me what it had witnessed. The song filled me with understanding and I knew then. I knew what the Praetoriani did. How they betrayed the Camarilla, a covenant to which they had sworn allegiance. I could see them, huddling like leeches in the dark underground to strike bargains with a demon goddess. Lilith, brought to Rome by the same soldiers that brought Mithras. However, where he embodies courage and loyalty, she and her owls bring only darkness. I thought I knew. There was nothing noble about the Invictus. We were not the proud heirs to a great empire; we were usurpers who stole the throne through pacts with demons.

I don't remember how I got back to my room that night. I just remember dreaming of owls – their yellow eyes judging me everywhere I went.

From: Lady Edda

To: Lord Francesco

Dear Francesco,

I'm afraid I have troubling news. I am trying to guide Beatrice back towards her drive as we discussed. It seemed to be going very well – she spoke to Professor Gennaro and myself, and I allowed her to enjoy an evening on her own. Rather than be grateful though, she is becoming recalcitrant. She broke down a wall in the mithraeum underneath the Basilica of San Clemente, though she denied it when asked. I checked her room while she was out and she had drawn owls all over the walls.

I will try to remain gentle, but if this keeps up, I'm going to have to send her back home.

Sincere regards,

Edda.

I think I slept straight through the next night. All I did was dream of owls. Stupid owls pushing me off cliffs into a baleful, yellow fire. I think Edda knocked at some point, but she didn't come in. I guess she couldn't without breaking down the door, as I had barred it again. I kept thinking about what happened in the mithraeum. Did I dream it? I've always been sensitive. I pick up on things other people don't. But this was just insane. Was I losing my mind? I'd certainly been under enough stress.

That's when I remembered what Giulia said, that one of them is still sleeping under Rome.

My mother was a very brave person. Or maybe she was just foolhardy. "In for a penny, in for a pound," she used to say. I was never like that. I was quiet, cautious, withdrawn. Being embraced didn't help me there either. But I decided to be like my mom that night. Be brave. Or foolhardy. I was going to visit one of the owl people and make them tell me about the Camarilla, the Praetoriani and the Invictus.

Oh gods, I hate the dark.

Giulia's instructions weren't very specific, but I knew exactly where to go. The stones told me. I slithered down into the underworld through slime-encrusted, too-narrow openings going ever down. Every step took me further away from my world. I believed what the stones had told me about the Praetorian's betrayal and I didn't care about going back. My sire had killed me and then he had lied to me. It never occurred to me that the stones might be lying, too.

I came to an underground grove. I don't know how far I had descended, but I think this place has always been underground. Surrounding me were misshapen, petrified trees, stunted trunks reflecting like ash in the light of my phone. A dark liquid pooled around the roots like coagulated blood. I didn't see any owls, but I knew they were there. They alighted every time I shone my light on a tree, only to land again behind me. The sound of wings filled the chamber, echoing against the walls and threatening to overwhelm all other sound.

The owls' story was everywhere I looked: carved into the floor, the walls, the tree bark — everywhere — like some twisted victory dance. I saw Rome, burning, as large owls dove down and killed its populace. Symbolic representations, no doubt, but symbolism can speak clearer than words. The oldest carvings showed great emperors drinking the blood of people. There were images of the emperors and owls together, but these were bashed in and all I could see was a limb here, a wing there. Next came scenes of the emperors waging war on the owls, or maybe the owls waging war on the emperors, and the emperors did what the emperors of Rome have always done — they dragged their people down with them. The last scenes showed the guard in full regalia, stepping behind the emperors and slitting their throats. Cowardly. Treacherous. Necessary. Is this what really happened with the Camarilla and the Praetoriani? Had the latter stepped in to save what they could save, by any means? I want to believe that. We have certainly kept the silence. No owl wings to be heard anywhere except here.

It's getting darker. My phone battery is nearly dead. I can barely see what I'm writing. Not that it matters — no one is ever going to read this. The sound of wings is overwhelming now. They are waiting for me. I don't know what to do. I can't leave — the way out is too steep. I think she is here, too. I can smell her. She's hiding in the dark. She doesn't like to be seen. Yellow eyes.

I'm going to take her picture. She doesn't like the light. Maybe she'll go away. In for a penny, in for a pound.

From: Lady Edda

To: Lord Francesco

Dear Francesco,

My people have searched for Beatrice, but cannot find anything. There has been no trace of her since we spoke (briefly) on the phone.

I'll continue the search for Beatrice. I am sorry for the loss of your child.

My condolences,

Edda.

From: Edda

To: KoS

We tracked the GPS of Beatrice's phone. No sign of her, but we did find the phone, obviously, and her diary. I've included both items. Please take care of them.

From: Control

To: Future Panel

Re: Team 1

Mikhail and Sarah reported that they are ready for their endgame. Prognoses show a 62% chance that Mikhail would win if they clashed now. Interestingly enough, the numbers change in Sarah's favor as time passes (though she never makes it quite beyond the tipping point) until five years from now, when Mikhail's victory becomes much more decisive. Therefore, it would seem that the natural society, for this generation at least, remains as it was.

Mikhail has several technological ideas that should work in our favor, and Sarah has found ways for us to hide should the mortal status quo change.

We have declined their request to run the full course of their simulation, as we feel their actions might make ripples in the economy that would not benefit us. There was some reluctance on their part, understandable after nearly four years of work, but they are dismantling their assets as we speak.

Both will be accepting job interviews soon and I'm sure they'll have a bright future in the First Estate.

I have compiled all their information in a single package, which I am sending out now.

GSN

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BREAKING NEWS

Armed Militants Kill Twelve



Armed militants forced their way into the San Diego office of the Lassiter Lobby Group, where they shot all twelve members of the local branch.

The militants carried automatic rifles and refused to surrender to the police upon exiting the building. Two militants have been taken to the hospital, the others were shot dead.

Experts speculate that the timing of the attack, at a shift in security and with the full branch in session, indicates an inside job. Police are neither willing to confirm nor deny this claim.

The Lassiter Lobby Group, a nationwide think tank with branches in every major city, is known for its pro-employee stance and eye on the wages and living conditions of workers. The national Lassiter Lobby Group will be issuing a statement on this tragedy soon.

NEWS UPDATE

Two militants previously taken into custody have died en route to the hospital. Police were able to extract the name of the militants' group, although they have yet to disclose it to the media.

BREAKING NEWS

Shoot-out at Militia Ranch



Police met with hostile fire at the San Diego Citizens Union's ranch. The SDCU received instant infamy for the San Diego Lassiter killings earlier today.

NEWS UPDATE

The cease-fire at the SDCU ranch ended in tragedy, as police reports finding all inhabitants of the ranch dead. Cause of death has not been officially determined yet, but sources claim members of the SDCU committed mass suicide.

From: Control
To: Future Panel Members
Re: Team 1

While Mikhail and Sarah seemed cooperative at first, it appears they have misled us.

Mikhail willingly surrendered his assets here, but our clean-up crew found that he had already made contact with the larger Lassiter Group. We presume he was planning to either go ahead with the simulation at a later date, or possibly even expand beyond San Diego.

Sarah likewise showed bad judgment, as the total body count for San Diego Citizens Union was thirty-one while the organization had over fifty confirmed members. We suspect she is holding back the hackers specifically.

In light of this, I am currently reviewing Mikhail and Sarah's future in the First Estate. I know many of you wished to offer a position to our pair and I have sympathy for their reluctance to discard their simulation, but we cannot ignore disloyalty.

From: Control
To: Oversight
Re: Team 1

We have set the stage for Mikhail and Sarah's rebellion. This should help explain their disappearance to the Panel. Both are currently in their sire's custody. Do I proceed with cancellation?

From: Oversight
To: Control
Re: Team 1

It is a pity. They showed such promise. I liked Sarah especially, even if her heart overrode her head. She was passionate and I appreciate that in a person. Their sire, likewise, is a great friend of mine and he will be disappointed to see them go. Unfortunately, Mikhail was compromised when he received the Beatrice file and Sarah when he shared it.

Which reminds me: did you find our leak? Our friends in Rome consider this a personal affront.

As for cancellation, make sure Sarah tells you how and where she hid the Beatrice file. Make sure you get all copies. I'll inform her sire when it's done. He requested the privilege of carrying out the cancellation himself and I am inclined to grant him that. Perhaps spending some last time with his childer will ease the pain, but do politely ask him for proof when it's done.

Lancea et Sanctum

The Confession of Prince Augusto Vidal of New Orleans

Forgive me, for I have sinned. It has been too long since my last confession. I hope you will forgive me for writing this down instead of speaking to you directly, but I find a certain clarity in the written word. Sin is so much easier to see when one takes time and care to express it. Vulgar tongues are quick to excuse sin. I am not willing to do that.

HUBRIS

First, I confess to the sin of hubris. Even after my Embrace, I have found comfort in the rituals and language of Catholicism. I know that my so-called Kindred call me "The Catholic" behind my back, as if by merely whispering the words they could not reach my ears. I do not flinch from the title, yet I am not willing to mock and subvert the faith of my human life as my brothers and sisters of the Monachal Creed do. In fact, let me show you the creeds of the Lancea et Sanctum:

The Monachal Creed: Traditionalists in Longinus, but not in faith. They emulate everything that the true Church has left behind, and mock everything holy about it.

The Westminster Creed: English politicians more focused on picking and choosing the word to benefit their ambitions. They pick and choose rites at their convenience.

The Tollison Creed: A cult of Pentecostal simpletons who restrict themselves so much that they have to roam in packs just to nourish themselves.

The Iblic Creed, the Dammitic Creed, the Byzantine Creed, the Exotheists. These stray so far from our beliefs that they are meaningless.

Look over our creeds, our divisions of faith within a union devoted to Longinus. Where does one find true devotion to the word of our Lord? Where can a man of true faith find a home?

I cannot find myself here. I bow my head and pray with the Monachal followers because it suits them as much as it benefits me, but in my heart, I have formed a new creed: The True Creed. For as much as Longinus has given us purpose for our Holy Damnation, he is not God. He should not replace God in our hearts. The Word of God has been handed down to us, and we need to incorporate that into our Requiems just as much as The Testament of Longinus and The Sanguineous Catechism.

As I confess to the sin of hubris, have my brothers and sisters in Longinus done better? Even with the divisions of faith that give a home to any who claim to be of the faithful, vampires hide behind scripture and verse to bring about their own ends. They wear the title of Archbishop as a gilded crown, rather than a call to service. Am I the only one who still knows humility before our Lord?

But this confession is not for them. It is for me. I am not my brother's keeper. Forgive me, for I have sinned.

SLOTH

Next, I confess to the sin of sloth. Since the nineteenth century, I have been in conflict with that loathsome Crone, Baron Cimitiere. He represents everything that is dangerous and disgusting about his heathen religion of voodoo. I am sure he was behind a number of the attempts against my life over the centuries, but he smiles sweetly and tells me "I am as innocent as an angel." Blasphemer! How dare he evoke the name of God's servants in his own defense? But his standing grew within the Crones, and I could not ignore him or the strength of his blood.

Then as the nineteenth century moved into the twentieth, there was Antoine Savoy. He cared little of matters of faith, and used the time I was distracted by the betrayal of my own childe to take over most of the French Quarter. His hands are in many pockets in that area, and I cannot ignore the fact that he holds the economic control over the city in his hands.

For years, the rivalry between us stood. Shamefully I, terrified as I was to preserve my own Requiem, I allowed power to slip through my fingers. Even as more and more Kindred came to the City of the Damned to make their home, I would not create another childe. I refused to allow my blood to betray me again, and the other Kindred noticed. I began to hear the whispers behind my back, plotting for the time when they believed I would inevitably fall into torpor. Some even schemed to bring that about faster.

In truth, I did feel tired. The grace of God was further from me than it had ever been. I felt the pull of torpor grow stronger and stronger, like gentle fingers pulling an invalid back into his bed. And it was tempting. Had I not earned rest? Did I not deserve peace after centuries of hard work and eternal devotion? Was I not ready for my reward?

Hurricane Katrina proved that it was not time.

Oh, precious few Kindred died in the hurricane itself, but plenty found the roofs of their havens torn off in the day, or their walls cracked and bleeding sunlight. Certainly, in my weaker moments I wished in secret to learn that Cimitiere or Savoy's ashes were floating on the water. But so many other Kindred died; Kindred with sires, broodmates, and childer in cities all over the nation. Those familial connections, those very ties of blood, caused chaos throughout America. Riots erupted in New York. An entire court went insane in Missouri. I've even heard tales from my legates of drowned victims standing up and attacking Kindred on the roads. Many of the surviving Kindred fled, leaving the court of New Orleans in tatters.

And all of it — all of it — because I had grown slothful. Forgive me, for I have sinned.

MURDER

Further, I must confess to the murder, and the temptation to perform more murder. Particularly against the Carthians.

Many of those who fled the terror of Katrina found themselves welcome in Houston, Texas. In my own indulgent sloth, I had lost track of my correspondence with the Invictus

Prince of that city, but since then I have learned that a group of militant Carthians and a traitorous college of Harpies overthrew her. They brought in a number of poor, disadvantaged Kindred, and after a few years sent them back to me full of Carthian propaganda. Never mind that while they were luxuriating in Houston I was rebuilding my city. The newly minted rabble ousted Savoy and I moved against Cimitiere. The reconstruction effort left me many tools to use, and I easily located all of Cimitiere's supporters. For a second time Kindred burned in their havens as bulldozers and jackhammers murdered my enemies.

But the Carthians, they are like cockroaches, crawling over everything. They fill in the cracks of my broken city, and demand an equal say in what I do. They claim that the Word of the Prince is not enough, that all must share the burden of rebuilding. They tell everyone that New Orleans is important, but that charity begins at home.

As if these carpetbaggers had ever done anything to make this their home.

There is a web of events. God sent Katrina — this I know as deeply and as truly as I know my own Clan. God was not punishing me, but showing me how important this city is. The deaths in that disaster affected Kindred all over America. Kindred in another state create conspiracies to steal my city from me. And now I learn that even other countries have been drawn into the conflict.

Attached to this confession is a file. I draw attention to the first document in the file. Someone in Saint Petersburg who owes me a very old favor sent it to me. I have already confessed to hubris, but this is absolute proof of the importance of my city in the web of the world and the Kindred. Understand how far the web shakes when the Carthians pluck upon its strands.



High Security Concern: English Language Only

Excellency Archbishop Cruz,

I have received a most disturbing report from my counterpart, the woman to whom I have only referred as "Deacon A" in these reports. As I am sure you are aware after diligently reading all my previous reports, "A" is a noteworthy member of the Invictus who acts as a troubleshooter for me from time to time. Her work has always been nothing but excellent, and she carries out my instructions to the letter. While I am reticent to use such a word as "trust" with one of the Damned, I value her word and her insight. I tell you this to give you context for what I have uncovered.

In short, the socialist Carthians are becoming increasingly dangerous, and I suspect it may be partially your fault.

As you have instructed, Your Excellency, I had "A" send very clear and distinct messages to the local Carthians. She was not able to crucify the Kindred as you wished, but that was due to a lack of materials and skill. She made up for it in enthusiasm, choosing instead to hang them upside down and cut their stomachs open, allowing their entrails to slither along the ground until the sun rose. I have enclosed a picture for your approval.

The Carthians have heard of these actions, and you are likely already aware of the pleasant noises they are making in Elysia about how terrified they are of the wrath of Archbishop Cruz. However, in private, it appears they are planning

open rebellion. I have heard whispers and vague plans of stockpiling weapons. No one openly speaks of overthrowing you, of course, because they all fear you so much, but for some time now, what they say between their words is more telling.

Recently, "A" has told me that one of the Carthians she educated whispered something to her before his death. Two words, Your Excellency: "New Orleans." It refers to a city in the United States — in Louisiana, according to Google. "A" was unable to determine what the reference means, but she fears they are getting support from that location.

I understand you have previously traded boons with Prince Vidal of New Orleans. You may wish to contact him and see what he can tell you. Under the assumption that you will not do this, as Your Excellency has always shown an incredible tendency to wait for as long as possible before taking decisive action, I have looked into the matter myself. "A" is not my only contact within the Invictus. It seems that there is another American city (in Texas) once ruled by an Invictus Prince, but has since been lost to the Carthians. These Carthians are sending waves of Kindred into New Orleans to act as missionaries, or perhaps disposable troops.

I decided to take the initiative and capture one of the local Carthians myself, instead of relying on "A." This one — Rusev, he calls himself — begged very prettily for his life before admitting that he only knew of New Orleans from what he learned from the Invictus. In case you have decided to merely skim this letter, Your Excellency, I remind you that "A" is the only Invictus in Saint Petersburg that both has contact with the Carthians and knows about New Orleans. I am sending the package with his ashes in a separate mailing, to do with as you wish.

Put simply, I believe that the Invictus are drawing us into a trap. I doubt that "A" is playing a game of her own — the past several years that we have worked together, I have not seen anything from her that resembles initiative or treachery — but she may have had information implanted in her mind. I suspect that by using the tension of the Carthians against Prince Vidal in New Orleans, the Invictus are hoping to foment a similar conflict here in Saint Petersburg. Then, once the trouble has weakened you and your position, they can step forward and claim Praxis of your city, increasing their foothold in Russia.

As you are my Archbishop, I seek your advice and counsel on how I should proceed. I assume that, if I do not hear from you in the next three days, that you do not consider the situation suitably dire. In such a case, I will take appropriate next measures under my own authority to preserve and solidify the stability of your reign. If I do hear from you in that time, I look forward to the inspiring and detailed words of wisdom and vision that you will bestow upon me.

Regardless, I will have another conversation with "A" and assess if she continues to be valuable to the Lancea et Sanctum. Yours in Longinus,

Vitya Borodin
Bishop of the Byzantine Creed
Saint Petersburg

RETIRE
BISHOP BORODIN

FEAR

I confess to the sin of fear. We no longer live in a world of isolated city-states. We live in one vast, wonderful, connected world. We are all God's children, even those who tremble in fear of His name and hide behind the claim that we are Damned. This is glorious, fantastic, and terrifying. Once, I could stretch out my hand and touch all the Kindred I commanded. Then, they grew in numbers, but I at least knew their names, faces, or heard of them. Now, the actions I take resonate not only in history, but also in countries I have never seen. I have but to speak the words and lives are set against one another thousands of miles away. The power at my hands is unimaginable, beyond that of any mere Prince.

And I am terrified of it, and of the fact that I must continue. Forgive me, for I have sinned.

I speak not out of pride, but from fact. Others have attacked the Lancea et Sanctum in an attempt to attack me. There are those who would otherwise be allies or even comrades who now attack each other with tooth and fist because of what has been done in New Orleans. What has been done in my city. There are those who live in fear the same way that I do. Not all of them are my enemies.

Nevertheless, some are attacked, and have taken strength from that danger. Some of my brothers and sisters have embraced the modernity of God's world and have found their own faith there. Like the creeds, I would not find a place there, but their passion and devotion to the teachings of Longinus are inspirational. And their inspiration brings them danger.

One of my thralls, a Mekhet who desires the taste of my blood enough to accept it but not enough to take it for herself, has recently given me proof of this. She was not able to spy on the plotting of the Carthians in Houston, but she was able to bring me similar conspiracy from another town, Galveston. You can smell their fear in every word and every line, fear of what the true faithful of Longinus are capable. I may be fearful of this new power, but brothers and sisters I have never met also bless me.

To: myrmidon

From: s.washburn

Subject: Re: SoL gang activity

- > So, when you get a chance, tell me what you find out about that gang calling
- > themselves SoL, since you've got pull in that scene. Need to know if they're
- > ours or a new bunch of players in Texas.

First off, I'm not your fucking secretary. If you want someone to wear a short skirt and service you under the desk, go somewhere else. I hear the Invictus go in for that bullshit.

Second, you grossly overestimate the pull I have here. The Spear has this place really locked down. You know as well as I do that the Church doesn't have every Bible-thumping town in the South under their sway, but Galveston is the stereotype in action. I think they keep Carthians around just so they have someone new to preach at.

That being said, it turns out SoL stands for "Soldiers of Longinus," and they're a bunch of Kindred extremists spun out from the human JCHC punk movement. Since punk genres sub-divide as soon as everyone in it outgrows the bar they hate, it's hard to keep track. But these JCHC fuckers are actually Christian punks, if you can believe that. They're even a little retro, with leather jackets and safety pins and their cute little mohawks, but their faith isn't on the side of the kind, benevolent Jesus, but more with the whip-carrying, table-flipping Christ.

A bunch of young Longinians took inspiration from these assholes and a bit from Malediction 7:1: "And I was still known as the Bastard to some, and others called me the Soldier, and to the Jews I was the Son of Satan, and I was pleased, for it meant that they feared me." Guess "Bastards of Longinus" wasn't catchy enough. Anyhow, they think that since Longinus gave no fucks, they should do the same. Underneath all the rambling and loud music, you can find a vague party line of "fuck the other covenants, but particularly the Invictus."

Oh yeah, they have a band, too. They also call it SoL, but they tell people it stands for "Shit Outta Luck." I downloaded one of their MP3s from downloadpunk.com. It's got a lot of old-school flavor mixed with some

Psychobilly and a little Oi! Nothing that violates the Masquerade, and it ain't exactly flying off the digital shelves, but it's a thing. I attached one of the files for you. Fucking Kindred musicians.

So I figured, maybe we had some common ground. I went to one of their shows, in a shitty dive called the Tattooed Mom. They played a few songs and got some folks beating the shit out of each other under the guise of dancing, and I got a picture of them, which I've also attached. After they finished their "set," their roadie-cum-ghoul brought me backstage. The leader of the four I met called himself "Freddie Leather," and I was barely able to keep my eyes from rolling out of my head. But I gave them the sell, told them that I agree they should have the freedom to worship however they want, that they didn't need the Invictus or the Lancea et Sanctum to make that happen, blah blah blah. I even put a little bit of my Daeva juice into the mix.

After I was done, Freddie looked at me and asked me one question. "Did you and your Carthian friends attack the Faithful in New Orleans?"

I paused and got as far as "Well," before something hit me in the back of the head. I got a glimpse of some large woman with scars on her face, holding a broken guitar in her hands, before the rest of them jumped me. Fists rained down, clothing got torn, and more than once, I felt someone's fangs in my skin. I put a little more juice into the other parts of the Daeva package, and was able to punch, kick, and bite my way out of the pile enough to run like hell.

These assholes are a problem. They look and act a lot like a bad stereotype of us, and a lot of Kindred aren't going to spend time sorting out the difference. Worse, they seem to have a bug up their ass about the New Orleans situation, and it doesn't look like the local Lancea et Sanctum are in a big damn rush to deal with them anytime soon. To top it all off, from everything I've seen, they are True Believers, capital letters and all. And after emailing some people around the state, it seems "SoL" and "JCHC" graffiti is showing up in other places as well. This might not just be a few asshole Kindred, but a whole movement.

So, it's your problem now. I suggest finding a way to deal with them as fast as possible. Piles of ash cause a lot less problems in my opinion, but you do what you have to do. I'm done with these assholes.

- Sam

Attachment: 03_SoL_Son_Of_Satan.flac

Attachment: SoL_Show_Pic_1.jpg

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SUSPICION

I confess to the sin of suspicion. Forgive me, for I have sinned. I have long suspected Bishop Solomon Birch of complicity with the Invictus. I met him once, many years ago. He spoke and acted with such faith and devotion that I immediately believed it was a facade designed to lure me into some oblique part of his own Danse Macabre. Although he has done little against me, he has also done little for me. The seeds of suspicion, once planted, are hard to uproot. This is why they are a sin, although sometimes a necessary one against other Kindred.

I attach proof of his devotion. Still, I am suspicious. Still, the demon of doubt and paranoia gnaws under my skin, eating away at my insides. But it shows the reach of my Praxis, how far is the rule of New Orleans. A pluck at the web, and Chicago vibrates.

Listen to how Bishop Birch vibrates now. It is a long-held tradition for sermons to take the Word and apply it to an immediate situation. Usually, these are problems or quandaries presented to the flock on a tangible level — fears and dangers that affect them now. The priest gives them guidance and succor through the Word. Using a situation so far away from the flock in questions feels political, even if it benefits myself. And my mind circles back to suspicion. What does he gain? How does he profit? Where does New Orleans end and Chicago begin?

I have faith in the Lord. I have faith in the Word. I do not have faith in Solomon Birch. But I will take his support and smile at him until I know his game.



[noises of the recorder being positioned]

BIRCH: ... gathered here today to talk of politics. But particularly, the *Rule of Golgotha*.

[thumping sound]

BIRCH: I know most of you say you have read *The Testament of Longinus*, but I expect most of you skip to the good bits, like Longinus selling his own mother in the forum. Don't get me wrong, reading the *Testament* can be entertaining; but *all* of it is valuable.

Consider *The Rule*. It's dry. It's dull. It's really a list of rules for monks to abide by. Recently it changed heavily, depending on whether you stand with the Authorized or

Revised version. A lot of people in the Lancea et Sanctum love to argue about it, but I don't know how many of us have actually *read* it.

[sound of pages flipping briefly distorts Birch's speech]

BIRCH: ... use the Revised version for simplicity. Again, let's look past the arguments of things like word placement and look to the heart of what is being said. We don't all live like monks. I know I don't.

[soft laughter]

BIRCH: But there are things in here that all Longinians can learn from. Let's jump to chapter ten. Have any of you read as far as chapter ten? It's long after the rules about honoring the Dark Father and ignoring the works of heathens. It starts with how we've drawn apart from the workings of the Camarilla. But right away, in the first paragraph of the chapter, there's this. Let me read it for you:

"We know, however, of the insidious nature of politics, which even within the walls of these sanctuaries pits brother against brother and postulant against abbot."

Think about that for a moment. Even these monks, these vampires devoting themselves to study and pure thought, recognize that Kindred are inherently political. This isn't something that comes up every now and then. This isn't something you can blame on the modern world. This goes back to the Camarilla itself, and even segregating yourself from Kindred society doesn't make you immune. So they put aside a chapter of their Rule just to talk about politics. Both versions of the Rule have some form of this chapter. They considered it important.

The chapter goes on to talk about how terrible politics are, and how stupid humans are for claiming that kings have a divine mandate. Let's skip ahead to the fourth paragraph, where it says, "he who is best suited to rule and most willing and able to undertake its burdens should do so." Sexism aside, we have here an admission that whomever has the power and the desire should take it. Not "elected to do so," not "appointed by consensus," not "divided between numbers of bureaucrats."

There's some good stuff about our flocks and how we're tied to them, but I want to jump to near the end. "It is of benefit to us, therefore, to cooperate with the rulers who do not ask us to abandon our faith, who do not punish our brethren for their piety and who will not commit usury or extortion for such leniency."

[sound of a heavy book being closed, followed by silence]

BIRCH: This is something I worry about, brothers and sisters. It's something that bothers me every night. These aren't vague ideas dreamed up thousands of years ago. These are real concerns right now. Look to Houston, Texas. Already I can hear, "Why Texas? I don't wear a ten-gallon hat or spurs on my boots." Well, you do, Sammie.

[one loud laugh]

BIRCH: But Houston took in many of the flock from New Orleans after the horrible problems with Katrina. And they said, "You can come live with us. All you have to do is listen to a little speech about the Carthians. All you have to do is hear our sales pitch. All you have to do is sign on the dotted line and join the revolution."

[a heavy thump]

BIRCH: "All you have to do... is give up Longinus. And in a few years, you can go back to New Orleans. Help them rebuild. Help them grow. And all you have to do is give them a little speech about the Carthians."

[a long pause]

BIRCH: I don't know how many of you have met the Catholic... excuse me, Prince Vidal of New Orleans.

[soft laughter]

BIRCH: He's eccentric, sure. I wouldn't want to spend time arguing how he manages to reconcile devotion to God to being damned for stabbing his son. Nevertheless, he is suited to rule. He undertook the burdens of leadership. He doesn't ask us to abandon our faith, even if it doesn't agree with his own... unique perspective. And he certainly doesn't punish us for our piety. But the Crones attack us for our faith because it differs from theirs. The Carthians mock our religion as an opiate for the masses. Time and again, we are abused and assaulted for devotion.

[another heavy thump]

BIRCH: I worry about this, brothers and sisters! I worry not for us, but for all other Kindred who mistake devotion as weakness! I worry for all other Kindred who believe that politics and piety are mutually exclusive! I worry for all other Kindred who seek to destroy us because they think that the lessons of the past cannot apply to the problems of the present!

[pause]

BIRCH: Forgive me. Sometimes I get carried away. But the point I want to make is that politics and faith are conjoined. We cannot exist without politics, but we need not discard our beliefs. They can co-exist. They *should* co-exist. Remember that, as you dance among the Kindred tonight. Remember that they think us weak, when we are at our strongest. Amen.

[various "amens" and light applause, suddenly cut off as the recording ends]

MY LIEGE,
SOMETHING
INSPIRATIONAL
FOR YOU. - F.

Lancea Et Sanctum



SUSPICION (II)

Strong words. Powerful words. I would not go so far as to call them "sincere," but they certainly sound good. Bishop Birch's connections with the Invictus are well known, and it doesn't surprise me that he has cherry-picked elements of a monastic rule to validate his point, even if he uses me as his example to cast off suspicion from his own plots and schemes.

In fact, it is that very connection to the Invictus that draws me deeper into my suspicions. They have been our allies for a long time, all the way back to the Camarilla itself, if you believe them. I suspect it was easier when we were two parts of one monolithic society. Could you imagine such an organization coming into existence tonight? One unified society, all working toward a common goal in the name of mutual protection and harmony? Utter rubbish, but it is a dream the Invictus still hold close to their unbeating hearts. And we would be their glorious state church. My suspicions about our allies grows deeper every night, as I wonder what role our faith plays in their plans.

Even our holy word is not immune. The Testament of Longinus has been revised. Revised! There were plenty of public reasons, innocent-sounding reasons. New scripture had been uncovered. We needed a more modern translation to reach out to new converts. Recent study on the nature of the material needed to be implemented. But what many do not know is that Henry Matthews, the editor of this glorious Revised Edition, is not of the Lancea et Sanctum. He is, in fact, an Invictus, and has been for some time. He bought his way onto the project, with

kind words and hard currency. Of course, it was all presented as being in the interests of further Invictus/Lancea et Sanctum cooperation, but all of the final details of the manuscript, of our manuscript, were in the hands of one not of the faith.

I am suspicious of the Invictus, but the concerns about Henry Matthews come from a place of evidence. I want to believe that he acts alone, but I continue to suspect the hand of our "allies" in this. It is lucky that I corresponded with Dr. Ballsden in the past, even when I expressed my displeasure at the temerity of revising our Holy Word. Yet, he understands my concerns enough to pass along a copy of his journal. I present it to you, so that you can see what I see.

REV. DR. VICTOR
BALLSDEN,

DPHIL, DD, OXON.

Most Excellent Prince Vidal,

I send these pages to you because I do not know whom to trust. Since the "inciting incident," such as it was, originated from your city, it seems best to send this all to you. I have attached supporting documents and written footnotes to give you more information in the interest of providing context. I send this as a letter of introduction. I am in the process of seeking passage to your city, and will seek to become a resident there if you will have me. I fear my time here is done.

Yours most sincerely,

*Rev. Dr. Victor
Ballsden*

Mary's Children

A reading from the Gospel of James:

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent to the Galilee, to the home of a virgin named Mary, who was betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph. The angel flung open the door, and said "Greetings, favored one, for the Lord is with you."

Mary shivered, to which Gabriel said, "For though you are a virgin, your womb is to become fertile. And you shall bear the son of the Lord, and when he comes he shall be called Jesus."

Mary bowed her head and said, "Let it be done, for I am the handmaiden of the Lord."

The virgin married her betrothed, and because she told him of the angel's message, he shared her bed without touching her. At that time, Joseph the carpenter was a young man.

Soon enough, as the angel said, Mary's womb became bloody and swollen. However, when time came to deliver, the midwife proclaimed the child dead. Though the child was a boy, Mary knew that the son of God could not be born dead. Therefore, she kissed the child and hid him in a wood, as Moses' nurse hid him in the reeds. She kissed him on the forehead, and called him James.

Though dead, the child grew. By the third year, when the virgin had miscarried twice more, James was able to speak as an adult, and often watched the living children from windows, where they would play by the light of the fire. As each of James' four brothers and sisters were born, they were born dead, and they were given to his care.

In the fourth year, with Mary still a virgin and pregnant again, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, declaring there would be a census taken. Each man had to go to his home city to register. Joseph also went up from Galilee, to the city of David, which was called Bethlehem, for he was of the house and line of David. James and his siblings followed, for there were bandits on the roads and they were hungry.

While they were there, Mary gave birth to her firstborn, born alive, and she named him Jesus. While she slept, each of his brothers and sisters gave him gifts, and then vanished into the night, each to go his own way.

Only thrice did the brothers and sister of Jesus gather again. First, when his mother was sick with worry, they called him home, and were denied. Second, when he was murdered upon the cross, God blotted out the sun, so that they could watch and comfort their brother. And thrice, when they found the betrayer of Jesus, and hung him from a rope.

And from the day of their brother's resurrection, they aged no further. The angel Gabriel appeared to each, and told him to make his way into the world, and to be fruitful in the manner of the dead. And he warned them of a soldier, who would bring them the word of God but also His curse. James nodded, and smiled, and secretly made his own plans for the one known as Longinus.

This is the word of the Lord.

1 August

See Attached

I still cannot believe the details in the New Orleans fragment.

The idea is so incredible, so insane, that more than once I wanted to just throw it away and never think of it again. However, the legate who brought it to me was very earnest, claiming that there were some Kindred in the Louisiana area who believed fervently in this. Unfortunately, all but this copy were destroyed in that catastrophic hurricane, along with many of the believers. Still, it has the ring of authenticity about it – Prince Vidal is quite notorious for his mixture of Catholic and Longinian tenets, and this certainly seems to be in line with that. My initial enquiries to Prince Vidal, however, have been pleasant and fruitless, as he knows little about the source of the apocryphal fragment.

Given the uniquely American nature of the document, I invited Dr. Caroline Petronius to come visit me in Oxford. Our working relationship on the Revised Edition of the Testament of Longinus was vigorous and sometimes painful – she has embraced the American tendency to equate "disagreement" with "volume" – but I cannot deny that she is a brilliant Longinian scholar, and I valued a second opinion.

My finances are not what I would wish them to be, but the legate in question (I now recall that his name is Richard – I should make an effort to remember that next time we meet) has ownership of a private airfield just south of Abingdon. He was willing to take on the cost and planning of flying Dr. Petronius in exchange for us sharing our findings with



him first, and a credit should we succeed in publishing the work. I believe Richard fancies himself a budding scholar, but sadly, I think his duties and his short temper make that a long and difficult road for him.

The least I could do was drive down to the airport to meet her. She was much as I remember her: a handsome woman with short blond hair, a dark business suit, and slacks with a bright-coloured shirt underneath, and entirely unnecessary glasses. While I have been a doctor long enough to understand that the line between "education" and "business" is perhaps blurrier than it should be, I can never get over how Americans seem to discard even the pretense of separation. We shook hands, I helped her with one of her bags, and I thanked Richard before showing her to my car. I opened her door for her, which irritated her as it always did. Shortly we were driving back to my offices, and within hours, she had settled into one of the flats I specifically had set aside for Petronius, Matthews, and other overseas visitors. We chatted politely about nothing until we made it back to my office and I showed her the fragment, by this time carefully preserved in a clear plastic bag.

She read it several times before setting it down. "It's insane," she finally pronounced.

"That was my first instinct as well. But considering the context...."

Petronius put her hand up. "Please don't lecture me, Dr. Ballsden. I'm saying this isn't just a unique interpretation of our existing scripture. This is outright heretical."

I blinked. "But surely...."

"Consider this: it is entirely possible that there are now sects of Longinians who believe that Longinus wasn't cursed by God. He was Embraced. Further, that his sire likely was created by angelic intervention. And two of the most well-known Longinian scholars are suddenly meeting over it." She took off her glasses and wiped them. That's when I noticed her hand was trembling.

I was shocked. It took me a minute before I could fully consider the ramifications. "All of our work on the Revised Edition would be called into question."

She nodded, putting the glasses back on.

"Perhaps I should call Matthews," I said, reaching for the phone in my pocket. "He's visiting in London to check on the second printing -"

"No!" She stood suddenly, her eyes flashing with emotion. For a moment, I thought she would try to force her command on my mind, but she simply put a hand on my arm. "I wouldn't. At least, not yet."

"You don't want to drag Matthews down with us?" I said.

She snorted and leaned over to search for something in her messenger bag. "Quite the contrary. I'm worried he'll be the one to put the weight around our necks."

"I don't understand."

She pulled out a copy of the Testament of Longinus, the one we worked on. "Have you read Eschaton recently?"

"To be honest, while the apocalyptic prophecies presented there have some academic interest, I don't find much need to reference it on a daily basis."

"Read Eschaton 7." She handed me the dog-eared book, and I flipped it open. The slim volume felt comfortable, and I easily navigated to the section in question.

"Verses eight through ten are missing," I remarked.

"I noticed it a few nights ago, soon after the print run was produced. I'm sure either of us would have noticed such an omission, but Matthews ~~was~~ the final editor. ^(I have attached a copy of the text in question for reference) He had to have intentionally removed the references."

I handed it back to her. "The Eschaton fragments were always notoriously difficult to parse. Most of them didn't even make sense. I can barely recall what the original passage was."

"I have some of my notes still here in town. I'm going to dig them up and refresh my memory. I suggest you do the same, and we can meet tomorrow at midnight."

I nodded. "I will pick you up then."

Her hand trembled again as she put the bag over her shoulder. "Actually, let's meet at the flat. Until I know what Matthews is up to, I'd rather not...." She smiled at me. "Well, if we're seen together and I'm not throwing chairs at you, people will become suspicious."

I was reluctant to visit her alone, but I saw few options. "Very well. At the flat, then."

The sun is coming, so I must stop for now. Tomorrow night I will look through my notes on Eschaton again, and find a safer hiding place for the fragment.

2 August

Now that my hand has stopped shaking, I should write everything down before the details escape me.

I am not a wealthy Kindred, but I understand the value of investing in security. The flat I used to loan to visiting Kindred is on a sub-basement floor that no one else in the building knows about. One-half of the floor is storage for items that I can't easily keep on the Oxford

¹¹And I said to Amoniel the angel, "What does this mean?" and the angel said, "This is not for you to understand. This is only for you to set down that others might understand."

⁷We came to a great mountain, and a vast door of iron was set into the mountainside. ²A thousand times a thousand men and women who had skins of snow and rain, and the claws and feet of beasts, and eyes made of night and many other things. ³They hammered at the door and clamored for it to open. ⁴The door opened, and the people rushed in, and the creatures behind the door looked like demons, and some of them were beautiful and some were hideous. ⁵The demons begged for mercy, and vowed that they had loved the people and had not meant to harm them. ⁶and the people stormed the place behind the mountainside and put the demons to the sword, and took their place, ⁷and they despoiled the earth and went out, and took slaves just as the demons had once done.

¹¹And I said to Amoniel the angel, "What does this mean?" and the angel said, "This is not for you to understand. This is only for you to set down that others might understand."

ESCHATON 7:11

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grounds, while the other is comprised of the spartan flat. It makes it easy when I need to fly in consultants to look over objects of particular interest, but not real value, and it means that there is no possibility of a human wandering into the area unless they are specifically invited – usually for the purposes of nourishment.

When I arrived at the appointed time, I saw that the door was slightly ajar.

My instinct was to call out for Petronius, but my years as a vampire have taught me that discretion is frequently the better part of valour. I pulled the shadows close to me, sharpened my senses, and carefully stepped inside.

On some level, I wished I saw signs of a struggle. If there were broken tables and chairs strewn about, perhaps the horror of what I saw would have made more sense, or been valid. Maybe I could have felt better about what happened to her knowing that she fought to preserve her Requiem. I'm babbling, trying to avoid setting this all down.

When I entered, the flat was much as I usually leave it: a simple open-room plan with enough furniture and supplies to comfortably house two. In the centre of the room when you first walk in is the collection of couches and television detritus that comprises the "living room" area. Next to the coffee table was a pile of moldering ash and dirt that I have unfortunately seen too many times. On the wall behind the couch were three letters painted in blood.

VII.

I had heard of VII, of course, but only as anecdotes and rumours. No incident of them has ever occurred in or near Oxford. Certainly, the death of a scholar would seem to be

beneath such bogeymen. Wild speculation of what may have caused this spun through my head. My hands trembled, but I focused my mind to keep my gift of stealth active as I searched around the flat.

I went to examine the remains without disturbing them. I forced myself to stop thinking of the vibrant, passionate Kindred who used to be here, and tried to make observations about them. The remains themselves were unremarkable, but the environment around them was illustrative. The lack of destruction I previously noted likely indicated that either she was taken by surprise, or by someone she knew. The fact that it was close to the door reinforced that. As I leaned in closer, an unusual scent drifted into my nose. There were the usual notes of loam and faintly burned flesh, but on top of those was the faintest whiff of cologne. Although I am by no means a connoisseur of such scents, I recognised it as "Amonage Dia Pour Homme." Specifically, I knew it because Henry Matthews favored that particular brand of expensive cologne.

What does Matthews have to do with VII? Was the graffiti a red herring?

I went over to search the desk. A small pile of books and documents covered one side, while an open laptop dominated the space. I hadn't been attacked since I entered, and no other Kindred seemed to be present, so I carefully let go of the shadows to examine her notes. The computer password valiantly resisted my attempts, but the hand-written notes were more illuminating. Particularly, there was a small notebook that I remembered her using when we were working on Eschaton. Taking it up, I flipped eagerly through the pages until I arrived at her notes for chapter seven. Most of her translation was relatively close to the final printed version, so I skimmed to 7:6. My memory is quite good, so I transcribe what I read here.

(6)and the people stormed the place behind the mountainside and put the demons to the sword, and took their place, (7)and they despoiled the earth and went out, and took slaves just as the demons had once done. (8)But the demons rose back up, their corpses animated, their tongues wagging, and they reached for the people with long fingers, (9)and they said "We are the true children of James, dead son of Gabriel, dead brother to Jesus, (10)and we will destroy all that Jesus loved and all that Jesus feared."

(11)And I said to Amoniel the angel, "What does this mean?..."

Even now, I shiver in fear. On the surface, it seems to be more of the chaotic blather that comprises much of Eschaton. Further, 'James' is hardly an uncommon name, and many have used the euphemism of 'brother of Jesus' to mean a wide variety of things, none of them

literal. However, taken in conjunction with the New Orleans fragment, the passage is terrifying in its implications. A murderous cadre of bestial dead bent on destruction. Could it be that VII is a reference to chapter seven?

Of course, this is hindsight. At the moment my hands had just taken the translation and put it in my pocket, a heavy blow knocked me to the ground. I rolled over to see my assailant, only to discover that there were two. One was a short, heavy-set man, and the other was a tall woman with scars on her face. Both were wearing black clothing from head to toe, and both hissed at me in melodramatic fashion. Both were standing between the door and me. Fangs peeked out from parted lips.

In my time, I have met with the rougher elements of our collective Kindred society. I hear stories of their ability to land powerful blows or resist an incredible amount of harm, all while spouting off quips that probably sounded more intimidating in the moment than in the halls of Elysium. I regret to say that I am not one of these Kindred. I pulled the shadows around me in the hopes of evading them until I could reach the door.

The scarred woman punched me, and I fell to the ground again.

"Please," I said. My teeth felt loose in my jaw, but I didn't seem to have any injury that a night of feeding wouldn't fix. "I'll give you whatever you want." The heavy-set man grabbed the back of my jacket and picked me up easily, as if I were a doll. He set me on my feet and held me there, as the tall woman moved to close the door.

As I have said, I am not a vampire of combat skill, but I have learnt a threnody, a personal hymn. In the past, I have found it useful to simply take the skill of another when I was pressed for time, but I had to sacrifice knowledge to do so. I took the notes in my pocket and held them for the two vampires to see. "This is what you seek, isn't it? The only translation of the missing verses." I waved the notes in front of the woman's face, keeping my desperate tone. "It's just as Socrates said. The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."

As soon as I chanted the words, the woman with the scars began to suspect. Too late – I took the notes in both hands and ripped them in half. As I did, I could feel the man's grip on me shift as his knowledge of physical brutality flooded my mind. I kicked backwards, shattering his kneecap, letting the stolen knowledge guide my muscles. He screamed and let me go, and I turned the fall into a lunge, punching hard into the woman's throat. Neither injury would be serious – despite my stolen skills, I am no brute – but it distracted them long enough for me to make my way into the hallway and disappear. They never once spoke.

The skills are gone now, like a torpor dream, which seemed logical at the time but when you tell it to another seems ludicrous. I cannot go back to my office, but the sun continues in inexorable climb towards our mutual oblivion. Tomorrow night, I must confront Matthews.

3 August

The meeting with Matthews did not go as well as I had hoped.

Professor Matthews notified me that he would be in London to look over the European second printing of the Revised Testament. The London office of SPLD was nothing special, just a small rented office containing a few ghouls who handled the business end of things. It wasn't even in the City of London, but rather in Islington, a little over an hour south of where I worked. I drove to the building, walked past the ghouls loitering in his front office, and entered his sanctum unannounced.

Matthews looked impeccable in his dress shirt, sleeves rolled up the elbow. I always had a desire to lick the hollow of his neck whenever I saw him, urges long repressed by my Embrace coming up to the surface just by looking at him. Working with Serpents always drives me mad. He was writing something down when I walked in.

"Matthews," I said by way of introduction.

He jumped a little at the word. Childish, I know, but I felt it suitable retribution for how he made me feel. He looked up and smiled, setting the pen down. "You startled me, Victor. Are you ready to look over the printing proofs?"

"In a moment. We have a more pressing issue."

He ignored my comments and came around the desk to perch on the corner, looking down at me. A whiff of Amouage Dia Pour Homme came with him. I heard Caroline was in town as well. How is she?"

I ignored his irritating habit of forced informality. "It seems she is dead."

The long pause. The glance away. Matthews was every inch the man shocked by the death of a colleague, but I didn't know whether that simply meant he was an excellent actor. "How did it happen," he asked.

"She was allegedly killed by VII. Presumably over the omission you made in the Revised Edition."

The eyes came back to me, hot with emotion. "I don't understand what you're implying."

"Eschaton, chapter seven, verses eight through ten. They're missing. See for yourself."

Impossible," he said, rising from the desk again. "I just checked the proofs myself yesterday evening." He opened a drawer and pulled out a stack of pages, loosely stacked and with sticky notes jutting out at strange angles throughout. He pulled the pages apart, looking for the right chapter, and then stopped. The long pause. The glance away.

"I presume they are still missing," I said when he didn't respond.

"I've looked through these proofs a dozen times. A hundred. I've never noticed it before."

"You're the editor," I said coldly. I stood up from the chair and walked over to the stack. "You're the only one who could have removed it. Given your attention to detail, the very reason you were asked to join in this pursuit, I find it unlikely that you could just miss three verses."

Matthews started to speak, stopped, and then went to lean on the back of his chair. "If you have something to say, Victor, say it. Given all we've done together, I think I at least deserve to hear your accusation directly."

I tapped the stack of proofs. "Why did you cut the verses, Professor Matthews?"

"I didn't, Doctor Ballsden. And before you ask, I don't know who did, or why anyone would kill Caroline over it." He straightened up, staring me in the eye. "If that is all, I believe you can see yourself out."

"That is not all," I said, idly flipping over the pages of the proof. I was scanning the pages as I spoke, looking for anything else out of place, any other convenient omissions.

"You mean the New Orleans fragment," Matthews said. "Do you have it with you?"

I let the pages fall back to the desk. "I never told you about the fragment."

The long pause. The glance away. "No, of course not. That was Caroline."

I started to step closer to the door. "I don't think so."

Matthews put the smile back on. The desire to taste his skin intensified. "Why don't you show it to me anyway? Perhaps there's some clue as to why Caroline met her unfortunate end."

I didn't answer. I took another step backwards to the door.

"Victor" he said, and it was easier and easier to remember that he was my friend, my very best friend. "I don't want to have to tell the Curia Cruentus about your work. I'm an outsider to the Lancea et Sanctum, but my word still carries a certain weight. I'd rather we sit down together and have an intellectual discussion about what you've found."

The Curia. Comprised of powerful Cardinals and other elders, the Curia would be heavily involved in any declaration of heresy. Matthews worked heavily with them as we worked on the Revised Edition. I didn't doubt that he had the sway he claimed.

"Give me one night," I said with a resigned tone. I have some research notes I have to compile, and the matter with Dr. Petronius still needs to be cleaned up. We can meet in my office tomorrow evening."

Matthews checked his phone, pressing and swiping the screen a few times before he nodded. Very well. I'm relatively free tomorrow. I'll have someone drive me up, and we'll spend a few hours going over everything you have. Hopefully from there we'll be able to sense who did this horrible deed, and you can investigate further before I fly back to Harvard." We shook hands, and I retreated into my car.

I cannot let the Curia get involved. If they were to discover that the Testament itself had been altered to suit the needs of an Invictus (or his VII masters), the understanding between our two covenants would crumble. They would surely blame Petronius and me to save face with our peers in the First Estate. And history has taught me that it is always easier to blame the dead.

4 August

This is my last entry. I must write quickly before I send this all to Prince Vidal.

Matthews never arrived at our appointed time. To be fair, I never expected him to. While I claimed I was compiling all my notes on the missing verses and the fragment for our discussion, in reality I was preparing them in a secure location unknown to any other Kindred. When the appointed time arrived, there was a polite knock on my door. On the other side was not Henry Matthews, but the short, heavy-set man and the tall woman with the scarred face. The man slammed into the door as I was opening it, and the woman rushed by him at incredible speed, slapping a hand over my mouth before I could speak.

It was smart that they learnt from their mistake, but as I said, I was expecting them or someone like them. I had spent my hours upon wakening preparing a miracle of Theban sorcery. Much as the soldiers at the Crucifixion whipped and jeered Christ, I was able to call forth my own whip.

I reached forth my hand, and my own Vitae whipped out across the short man's face. The barbs of my faith gouged into his flesh, and he screamed. The woman turned to look, and I sank my fangs into the meat of her palm. Her warm Vitae filled my mouth, and

I swallowed, stealing her strength for myself. She yanked her hand away, tearing her own flesh, and I pulled the whip back to hit her across the chest. Again and again I whipped them both, as they tried to fend me off with their arms. Then the short man grabbed at the whip and pulled. I let the whip dissolve into dust, and he fell backwards in surprise. I reached into my pocket for three nails I kept there, another miracle of mine. I plunged one into the palm of my hand, chanting from the Malediction of Longinus as I embraced the pain. The woman grabbed her hand as well, and screamed as she fell to her knees. The man rose up, but I bared my fangs at him and hiss, shoving the weight of all my personality at him. He fled in terror.

I used the other two nails – untreated by Theban sorcery – to pin the woman to the wall of my office. She fell into torpor during the process, but only after a fair amount of screaming. I searched her pockets, and found a corporate credit card for Atlas Industries, one of the local corporations Matthews and the Invictus used for international shipping. The name on the card and the name of her ID card didn't match, so I didn't bother to retain the names.

I suppose one of those more rugged Kindred I wrote of earlier would have said something poignant and witty at this point, but I had nothing to say. Instead, I simply kicked over the can of petrol I left under my desk and set fire to my office, leaving the woman inside as I made my way to my car.

I do not know if Matthews is working for himself, or on behalf of the Invictus. I do not know if he or the Invictus are the puppets of VII, or if it is a ruse. I do not know if VII has anything to do with chapter seven, or if even in the grace of Longinus there is room for coincidence. What I do know is that decades of research and translation wore my faith down to a nub. It took heresy and the torment it brings to reawaken my faith in Longinus. I do not know if I will ever find more on James, or anything conclusive to show if he was the sire to Longinus, but I will keep looking for as long as I am able.

Yours in Faith,

Rev. Dr. Victor Balladen, DPhil,
DD, Oxon (emeritus)

BLINDNESS

I confess to the sin of blindness. I should have seen the flaw in our approach.

It is one thing to bring fledgling vampires into our fold. New Embraces, eager to find structure and meaning in their lives, are natural assets for the Lancea et Sanctum. This makes sense, and is valuable. Further, it is valuable to show the word of Longinus to other covenants (yes, even the damnable Acolytes, if they decide to stop following their pagan goddesses), so that they may find structure and meaning in their lives. This laity of Kindred makes sense, and is valuable.

The flaw exists in Kindred who leave their covenant to join the true faith. On the surface, this seems to be a benefit, but I have seen nothing but pain from such a betrayal. Yes, I call this betrayal, for if one were to leave the faith and join another, abandoning their devotion to Longinus and the Lord, would we not consider them a traitor? If one leaves a group they claimed to be utterly devoted to, how can their new devotion be stronger?

The Fifth Canon of the Sanguineous Catechism explains the need for evangelism, and the role of the Testament in that evangelism. Does the Monachus not say that we are to "bring all who would hear into the darkness of the word of Longinus?" Yet, for every betrayer we bring to our bosom, we embrace all of their enemies and none of their friends. Our Church grows weaker with each convert, not stronger.

I submit that baptism of all who consider themselves Longinian is what Monachus asked of us. Once the sinner has had the blood sprinkled on their head and heard the words "I baptize you in the name of the Dark Father, the Spear, and the Shield," they have seen the way. Do we need to extend the Confirmation to them? Do they need to take our Communion?

I do see examples of those who fled their covenant and have truly embodied what it means to be Longinian. Indeed, they have shown faith when others have used faith as a means to destroy. In particular, I am thinking of the diary that has been uncovered recently from Port-au-Prince. I feel a kinship with those Kindred — another city torn apart by natural disaster, — another court struggling to deal with the aftermath. Whereas New Orleans has grown stronger from its crucible, Port-au-Prince falls deeper into despair. However, it is one Kindred, formerly of the Invictus, that gives me the most hope.

I have been blind. Forgive me, for I have sinned.

PORTAU-PRINCE AT NIGHT . HT

Title: #ThatAwkwardMoment when you meet up with your ex

Security: Private

Dear Diary/Journal/Blog/Thing,

I'm going to make this post private. I don't need the rest of the Kindred hearing my whining. Sure, it's a story as old as time: Girl joins the New York Invictus. Girl moves to Haiti. Girl meets Crone. They fall in love. Girl survives earthquake. Girl finds religion. Girl joins the Lancea et Sanctum. Crone breaks up with girl. The end.

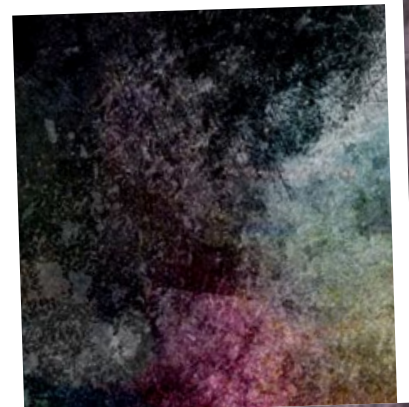
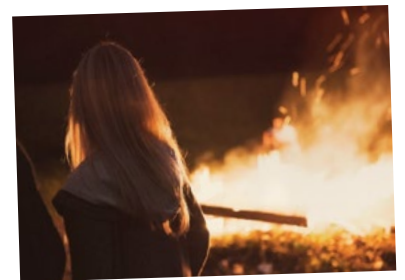
It's true, though. Since I converted back in 2010, Leila hasn't really spoken to me except on official business. I can see her point: our covenants hate each other like cats on fire. I guess a part of me was hoping to be star-crossed lovers, able to work past the differences of our respective houses to find true love and happiness. Except that bit at the end where everyone dies, of course. But when most of Port-au-Prince gets wiped out in a massive earthquake and you're looking down the barrel of the worst cholera outbreak in recent history, I guess there isn't time for romance.

Which makes me asking for a private meeting with her even more awkward.

I mean, it's not as if we haven't seen each other. With the recent... reduction in headcount, Prince Raoul Bonnefil decided that he needed a democratically elected Primogen council to help wrangle all the Kindred problems in Port-au-Prince. I don't know if it's because he's a Ventruer, or because he's old, or what, but he broke the seats down by Clan. The few Daeva left in Haiti decided I should step up and represent them, while the Mekhet consulted whatever Iwa they hang out with and settled on Leila as their spokesperson. So whenever the Prince wants to have a meeting or a phone conference, we talk and argue (mostly argue) about city business. I tried a few times to talk with her privately, but she acted as if I wasn't talking.

But this was city business, even if it was just between us. Last night, we all got a text message from Prince Bonnefil, saying that the Lancea et Sanctum and the Circle of the Crone would have to offer restitution for their transgressions. No indication of what these transgressions were or anything, and no one could get a hold of Bonnefil afterward. My Archbishop and their High Mother or whatever both decided that since the Primogen were the closest to the Prince's ear, the two of us should be the ones to sort it out. So, I emailed her, and we agreed to meet at the Champs-de-Mar Park, across from the rubble of the National Palace. I spent hours fussing over what to wear. Even after four years, I still get butterflies around her. I ended up wearing my charcoal Primogen suit, flats, and Longinian pin, although I left an extra button on my blouse undone.

Leila arrived fifteen minutes late, as I was checking my phone for the thousandth time. She always wore surprisingly bright colors for a Shadow, and tonight was no exception: a sunny yellow sundress with a matching head wrap and no shoes. She



stepped in front of me before I noticed her.

"Genevieve," she said quietly. Sure, my Clan has the reputation of being the sex kittens of the Kindred world, but something about the way she whispered my name just made my toes curl.

"Leila," I responded, trying to keep things cool. "Thank you for accepting my invitation." I offered her my hand.

"I would appreciate skipping the small talk," she said, ignoring the hand. "This is a serious matter."

I let my hand drop. "Sure, of course. The Prince's edict."

"So what did your covenant do to earn his ire?" She crossed her arms and stared at me.

I winced. She always reached right to the heart of the matter. Usually to crush that heart in her hands. "My Archbishop doesn't know anything."

"You mean the old white man refuses to accept responsibility. How shocking."

I smoothed down the front of my jacket. A nervous gesture. "It may not mean much, but I sincerely don't think anything was done on our end. I spoke with the laity and the priesthood, and none of them knows of anything unusual. Or more unusual, given the situation." I took a moment to look her in the eyes. "They asked me to find out what the Circle might have done."

Her eyes flashed a moment, and then she looked away. "We have done nothing to disrupt the Carthian's laws."

"You mean Prince Bonnefil's laws."

She looked back at me, frowning. "That is what I said. Do not waste my time with semantics. And stop using your abilities to manipulate my feelings for you, or I will walk back out of this park and blame you for this whole problem."

I wasn't using any powers. The emotion she was feeling had to be her own. Did she still have feelings for me? I took a completely unnecessary breath and plowed on, ignoring the insinuation. "It's clear we need to speak to the Prince to find out why he is so concerned, but I think it's best if we both go in on the same page. It helps if we're both on message."

Leila gave me a crooked smirk. My hands trembled, so I held them behind my back. "That sounds like the Invictus talking."

I shrugged. "I used to work in social media, both before and after my death. No matter what team I'm playing for now, I know the value of a consistent message."

She nodded, and the smirk disappeared. "Agreed. You will make the arrangements, and let me know." Then she was gone.

So that's how my conversation with my ex went. I need to get in touch with the Prince's people and set something up, if they'll even return my calls. I suppose I should be pissed that I'm being ordered around, but I'm too busy cycling between being a lovesick puppy and abject terror at whatever Bonnefil has in mind. More later, diary.



PORTAUPRINCE AT NIGHT.HT

Title: That could have gone better....

Security: Private

Dear Diary (can I call you Diary?),

Well, I got in touch with one of the Prince's secretaries, and arranged for a meeting with the three of us at the Galerie Marassa. I've always liked Marassa — unlike some of the museum Elysia I've been to in the States, the Galerie Marassa is a nice, intimate place featuring local art, including some amazing Voudoun flags and Catholic figurines. It was a masterful touch, really — a secular place featuring religious iconography perfectly balances the Carthian, Crone, and Spear's sensibilities. I guess Bonnefil chooses good people to work under him.

Anyhow, I met Leila outside. She was wearing an orange dress and head wrap tonight, and my compliment bounced off of her as we were led into a side gallery by two muscular men in short-sleeved dress shirts. The walls were seafoam green and framed pictures and items hung sparsely around the room. Lots of images of the Iwa and the Madonna.

In the center of the room sat a folding table and three folding chairs. In one sat Raoul Bonnefil, shuffling a deck of cards. He wore a pure white suit with a matching trilby perched on his bald head. Our Prince prides himself as a man of the people, and he doesn't stand on ceremony when simplicity will do. If you glanced at him, you might think he was just another middle-aged Haitian man enjoying a quiet game of solitaire. But when he looks at you, power and authority wash over you like a wave. He's a Ventrue to the core.

"Good evening, ladies," he said in Haitian Creole, standing up and waving us over to the chairs. "Shall we get right to business?"

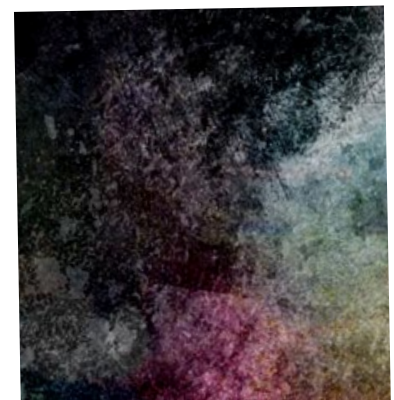
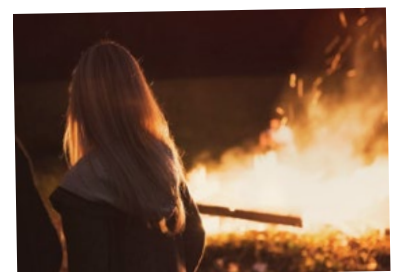
We sat. Leila crossed her legs. I didn't. "Thank you for taking the time to see us, Your Majesty," I responded. "We've been empowered by our respective covenants to discuss the nature of your edict."

"Isn't it obvious?" he said, smiling. "Religion is poisoning our country."

I paused, and looked at Leila. She was looking back at me, equally confused. We turned back to Bonnefil, and she spoke up. "We don't understand, Prince Bonnefil. It has always been my understanding that your covenant has a rather neutral view of religion."

He giggled at this. It wasn't laughter or even a chuckle, but an almost coquettish giggle. "I'm not a Marxist. I don't believe that religion is the opiate of the masses. I believe there is something out there in the world, and it is angry for what we have done."

I tried to keep my face neutral. Prince Bonnefil has been known to bluster now and then, but this was different. He was very calm and jovial about... whatever this



was. Something was very, very wrong. Keeping my voice even, I asked politely, "What have we done, sir?"

He stood up suddenly. His chair collapsed, falling to the concrete floor with a loud bang. I jumped. Leila didn't. "What haven't you done?" he bellowed suddenly. "In 2010 God sent an earthquake to Haiti, killing thousands. Not even a month later he sent another one to Chile. In 2011, yet another one devastated Japan. Typhoons have wreaked havoc in the Philippines. Heat waves hit countries all over the world. Mortals sweep it all under the rug of 'global warming,' but I know the truth. I know that we have offended the anvizib." He pointed to the ceiling, one finger trembling.

Leila continued to look calmly at him. "Perhaps—"

"A second flood!" he laughed, cutting her off. This time she did flinch. "You will bring a second great flood that will destroy us all. The Crones and the Spear play at hating one another, but I know your game. You are working together to wipe out all of those who don't follow your rules, who don't play your game." He walked over to me, putting a hand on my shoulder. "You two don't even hide it very well. I bet you warm each other's beds while you plot to destroy Haiti, don't you?"

I started to speak, but Leila beat me to it. "If you had been paying the slightest bit of attention in our council meetings, Bonnefil, you'd know that if I could, I wouldn't share a building with this woman, let alone her bed. The fact that we are both here in front of you is nothing short of a miracle—"

"Witchery!" he said, laughing. Spittle flew from his mouth as he said it.

"—and should be telling about the concerns we have regarding your leadership. If you explain what the problem is, we will do what we can to ease your mind."

"Proof! Problems! Ease!" He let go of my shoulder and kicked the card table over. Cards flew everywhere, and it slid against one of the walls. In my hysteria and fear, I noticed one of the legs was bent. "Your very belief is heresy! Your existence is the reason Haiti still suffers! You will tell your cults to stop worshiping false idols and return to the glory of the One True God, or I will have you all murdered in your beds!"

"Prince Bonnefil, if you'll just allow us to explain," I pleaded. "I understand you're upset, but there's no connection at all between our covenants and these events. All of us are working hard to rebuild Haiti, just as you are."

Bonnefil casually picked up his chair, reopened it, and sat back down, as if nothing were wrong. He giggled again. "You think I'm mad, don't you?"

I closed my eyes and said nothing. There isn't a good answer to that question.

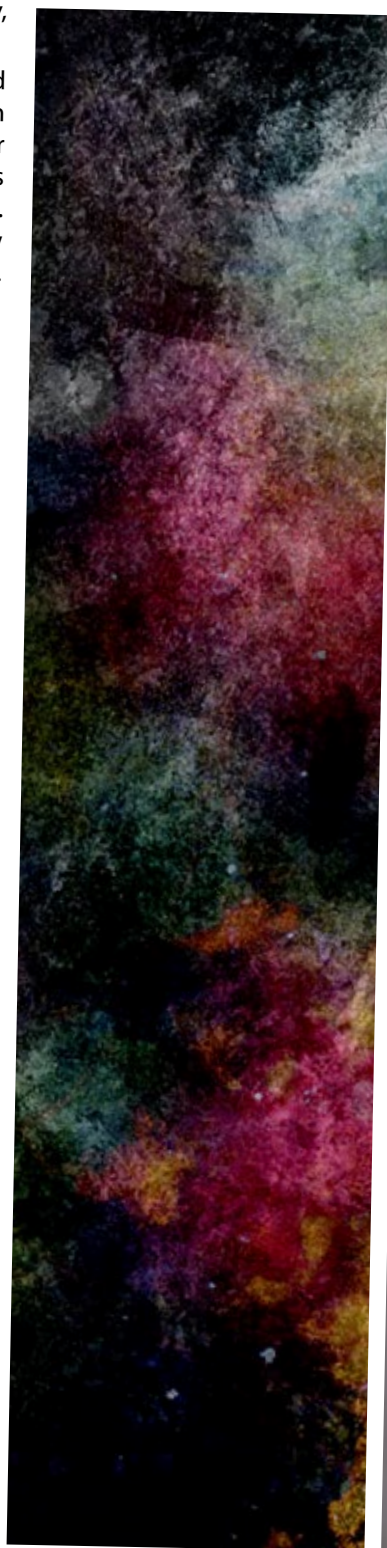
"No, I understand," he said calmly. "But soon, everyone will see things the way I do. Kindred, humans, even babies will see all of you for what you really are." He snapped his fingers, and the two muscular men grabbed our arms and started shoving us to the door.

As the door of the gallery closed behind us, I could hear the faint sound of giggling.

I wasn't sure what to do after that. Leila just dusted herself off and said that she had some questions to ask. We've agreed to meet at C'est Si Bon — it's a late-night bar/restaurant with lots of people around, and if Bonnefil does plan to kill us, we're hoping that he still values the Masquerade enough to not do it in front of a crowd.

I'm terrified. After this, I'll write a report for the Archbishop, but I'm not sure what will happen. I'm just a convert, and for all the Lancea et Sanctum ideology that all are equal in the eyes of Longinus, I know my place on the totem pole. For all I know, I'll die here in Haiti.

I don't want to die.



PORTAU-PRINCE AT NIGHT . HT

Title: What is Malkavia?

Security: Private

Dear Diary,

It's weird. I know all about the psychological component of humanizing a brand or a technology to make it more approachable, and yet we've been writing to our diaries and journals as if they were people for centuries. Now I have this image of a three-hundred-year-old vampire in robes leaning over a massive journal with guttering candlelight writing "Dear Diary, today I met the dreamiest guy."

Sorry. I babble when I'm terrified. Usually I laugh when I'm scared too, but since the meeting with the Prince, I'm scared of my own laughter. That's weird, right? I admit I haven't been thinking about it too much. Dinner with Leila didn't help me freak out any less. It wasn't Leila, but... let me just start over.

I didn't bother dressing up: tank top, shorts, the kind of clothes anyone in Haiti would wear. I spent the entire evening in public places: shopping, at museums, even around road crews knocking down destroyed buildings. The point was to avoid getting jumped without witnesses, but it also reminded me just how far Port-au-Prince needs to go. I've even been hearing stories about how some families are getting eviction notices minutes before the crews show up to knock their homes down. How did we let things get so bad? Aren't Kindred supposed to be able to influence human institutions and prevent these things? Watching trucks push rubble around, I began to wonder if Bonnefil didn't have a point.

When it was time, I met Leila at C'est Si Bon. Of course, she looked amazing in pastel green. Even though I know that everyone around me thought I looked hot in the crappy clothes I was wearing, I still felt like a slob next to her. She had a natural beauty and grace that felt superior to the artificial sensuality I conjured up. We got a table that was away from the crowd but still visible to most people, and she launched right into things.

"Have you heard of Malkavia?"

I shook my head.

"I talked to some of my sisters. Turns out it's a disease that drives vampires crazy."

I blinked. "I didn't know diseases affected us."

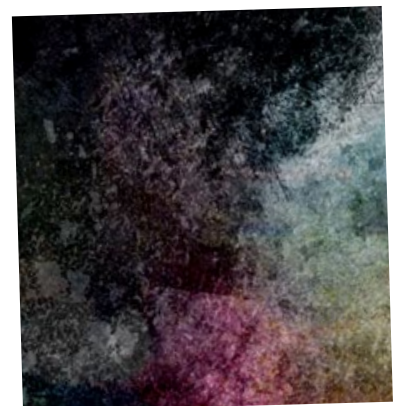
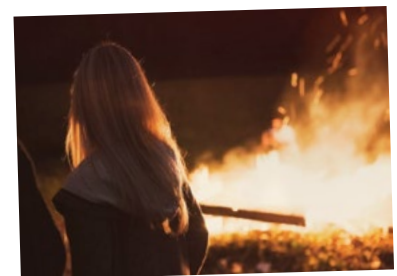
"Of course they do," she said, dismissively. "Just not in the same way that they affect humans."

"So you think he's insane?"

She looked at me. "Don't you?"

I leaned back into my chair, and moved my drink around on the table. "I guess I was hoping that maybe reason, or even prayer, would—"

"Don't."



I looked up at her. "Don't what?"

"Don't bring your bullshit God into this. Not now."

This got me angry. "Maybe you weren't in the same meeting I was, but Longinus is a part of this. So is the Mother of Monsters. Dress it up however you like, but this is an attack on faith. It doesn't matter whose."

Her lips parted into a snarl of disgust. "It does matter whose. If he were content to focus on Longinians, I would leave you to his insanity."

I had the overwhelming urge to punch her. Something in the back of my mind wanted to beat her, pin her down, and sample her body and her blood just one more time. Just... take what I wanted. Instead, I put my palms on the table and closed my eyes, mentally reciting the Sanguineous Catechism in my head. "I'm trying very hard to be respectful of your faith."

"Really?" She laughed — not a giggle, but a full-throated bark of completely unhumorous laughter. "That's a change from how your faith usually treats people like me."

I was about to toss some hurtful comment in her face when I noticed a disturbance among the other diners. I turned to look, and saw that a handful of people had walked in, asking for donations for medical supplies to aid with the cholera outbreak. They were soft-spoken, holding their hands out for a few gourdes or even just some change. Their skin was taut against the bone, but I couldn't tell if they were dehydrated from cholera or just from lack of good drinking water. The other diners weren't taking the risk, though — some pulled their plates away from the charity workers, while others simply got up and left. A couple of the waiters looked like they were heading to the back at high speed, probably to tell the manager.

The charity workers were by our table when they noticed us. We locked eyes, and I debated pulling out some of the money I had on me to give to them. As I started to reach for my purse, all of them pointed at us and started to giggle.

"Heretics!" they said between laughs. "Blasphemers!"

"Time to go," Leila said in my ear.

I nodded and forced myself to stand up. A thousand things were racing through my head. Did they mean us? Do they have Malkavia? Is cholera Malkavia? Can I get it if they touch me? But I concentrated and focused all that natural Daeva desire into a gentle push in their direction. I hoped that I would make my way past whatever gripped them inside and get them to love me for just a little while. I could see their faces change from insane fury to adoration, and I knew the false love had taken hold.

"I'd like to step outside, please," I said quietly to the gathered group. "My associate and I would love to talk to you all about your concerns." I glanced over my shoulder as they murmured among themselves, and saw that Leila had vanished. My new friends backed up a little to let me get around the table, just as the manager came around to start yelling at them. They turned to look, and I ran like crazy.

Leila appeared by me as I got to my car, but I was so freaked out already that I didn't even have energy to be any more freaked out by her sudden appearance. "This is bad," she said quietly.

"You think?" I said loudly. I glanced around nervously as I heard my own voice bounce back at me from the concrete and brick, and lowered my voice. "Yes, this is bad."



Leila gave me that smirk again, the one I loved so much. "You did good back there."

"Thanks. You did a great job of not being there." I leaned against the car for a moment, just enjoying the night air. "Story of our relationship, really."

In my head, I winced. It just came out. I really didn't want another round of arguing with her. I just wanted to go back to my haven, climb into my bed, and pretend the past five years never happened.

Instead, I felt her cool lips pressed against mine, her tongue trying to slide into my mouth like a velvet shadow. The feel of her body against mine was exotic and comfortable all at the same time, and my palms tingled as I returned the kiss. My hands started to slide around her waist when she broke off and took a step back.

"Call the Primogen. We need to meet tomorrow night." I tried to nod, but she was already gone. Damn it.

O Romeo, Romeo. Wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name. Because I cannot get the taste of your lips out of my mind.



P O R T A U P R I N C E A T N I G H T . H T

Title: Worst. Meeting. Ever.

Security: Private

Of all the places to have a top-secret meeting, I never expected it would be in a parking lot. I mean, I guess it makes sense — no one will think to look for you there, especially in the middle of the night. Plus it's hard to sneak up on you when you can see in pretty much every direction. But I guess I still had visions of James Bond in my head.

Sorry, Diary. Babbling again. I should probably delete all this crap, but I want to get it all down first. I'm scared if I don't just keep pushing through that I'll never do it.

Anyhow, I called the other Primogen. Jean-Claude Ambrose is the one I called first. I figured he's Gangrel, so he'll know the best way to make sure we survive this meeting. He's the one that suggested the parking lot, the one by the airport that was devastated by the earthquake. Le Satin of the Nosferatu wasn't a hard sell, either. I debated for an hour whether I should call Villard Brésil. He's not a direct relation to Bonnefil, but he's still Ventruue, and I was worried that they would stick together. But he's also Invictus, and that's what won me over. I figured I could play the "alliance" card between our covenants enough to at least get a fair hearing before he ran back to his clanmate with the news.



So, I was standing in a parking lot with three pissed-off Kindred and one maybe-not-so-pissed-off ex-girlfriend. There was nothing else for meters in each direction except a few cars (I don't know how Le Satin got there). Some old chain-link fences surrounded the lot, but they were hanging limp in a number of places. From here, you could see how the airstrip was broken, with jagged asphalt teeth jutting up into the sky. Leila and I took turns laying everything out: the meeting with the Prince, the information about Malkavia, and the incident at the restaurant.

Once we were done, Jean-Claude was the first to speak. He crossed his arms and looked at the group with a frown. "I say we kill him," he announced in Creole.

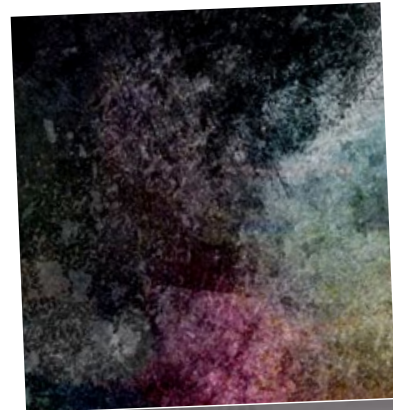
Villard took a step toward him, pointing a finger at his chest. "What, we get one report of him being a bit unstable, and you jump right to murder?"

Jean-Claude shrugged. "Once he takes out the Spear and the Crones, he'll find a reason to come for us. I didn't survive all this just to be killed by a mad Carthian."

"You mean a mad Ventrue," Villard countered.

"If you like."

Le Satin raised a hand, and the rest of the group fell silent. No one knew much about him/her, other than he/she wore a silver, featureless mask and robes. Some of the Kindred claimed that he/she was horribly disfigured. I always assumed it was just for effect. He/she also claimed to speak for Le Mystère, some homegrown covenant I



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never heard of before I got here. I would laugh about a group called "The Secret," but we're called "The Spear and Chapel," so I guess I don't have room to judge.

"Setting aside the Prince's edicts for the moment," he/she said in French. Le Satin always spoke in French. "The disease that Primogen Leila mentions does exist. We believe that her research is sound."

"Does it have much in common with cholera?" I asked.

"Traditionally, no. Malkavia affects the mind, whereas cholera focuses primarily on the body. However, we do know that the disease does affect mortals. We proffer that this could be a new strain."

"It would certainly explain a few things," Leila mused. "Everyone's had a difficult time wiping it out, and the combination of vampires spreading it among the humans and it not actually being cholera would account for that."

"Indeed, Primogen Leila," Le Satin said, his/her mask inclining slightly. "As such, we feel it is at least worth bringing to the Prince that this disease is a larger, more pressing issue than his prior edict. His reactions to that will help crystallize further actions."

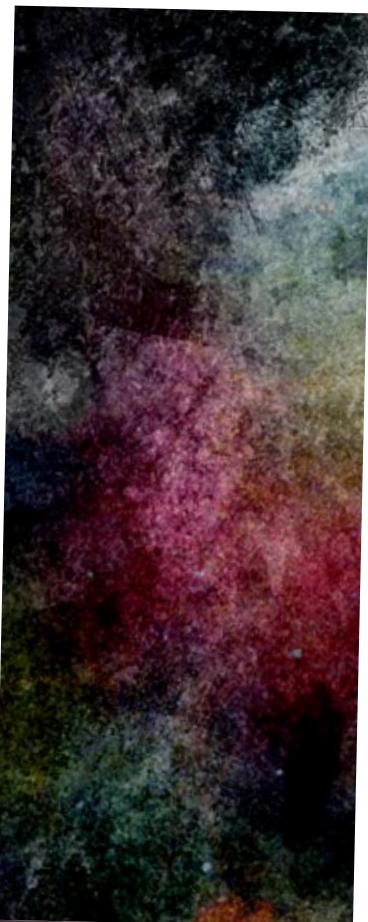
Villard started to speak, but we all saw a white sedan pull up to where we were meeting. The conversation fell silent as it pulled up next to us, and Prince Bonnefil stepped out, giggling. He was wearing the same white suit, and carrying a briefcase.

"Well, well, well," he said, drawing out the syllables. "What a pretty little conspiracy we have here."

I noticed all the eyes of the Primogen looked to Villard, but he seemed as shocked as anyone else did. Jean-Claude looked away and spoke to the Prince. "Don't recall inviting you here."

"Do I need an invitation to talk to my own council?"

"No, of course not," Villard interjected. "We'll be happy to help you in any way we can."



"Your courtesy is appreciated, monsieur." As he talked, the two goons from the museum got out of the car, and pulled the battered card table from the trunk. They set it up on front of Bonnefil, and he put the briefcase on it. The table rocked on its bad leg, but the Prince ignored it and calmly opened the briefcase. He pulled out a bag of blood. It had markings from the University of Miami field hospital set up on the other side of the airport. He brought it over so that Leila and I could see it.

"I don't understand," I said, looking at the blood so I didn't have to look at Bonnefil.

He simply giggled, and pulled out a knife from his pocket. I saw Leila tense.

"You want us to drink this?" I asked, hoping to get a reaction or an explanation.

At that point, Bonnefil screamed, and the knife went down into the blood bag. It sprayed all over Leila, me, and the Prince. He kept stabbing the bag and his own hand, screaming, "Die Die Die," as he did. Behind him, I could see the other two goons had bags and knives in their hands as well, and they were moving toward the other Primogen.

I'm not really sure what happened next. Leila disappeared. I heard screams and rending flesh, probably from Jean-Claude. Le Satin took his/her mask off to look at one of the goons, but I couldn't see his/her face. Then there was Bonnefil was trying to stab me.

My instincts kicked in. I started punching him as hard and as fast as I could. I put every ounce of my blood and will into the blows, just trying to get him off me. When he fell back, I leaped on top of him, smashing his head into the ground over and over. I think I was screaming too. Then, my hands were full of ash.

I kept pounding the ash into the concrete until I felt Leila's hand on my shoulder. "Genevieve," she said quietly. "It's over."

I looked up. All that remained was the five of us. Jean-Claude was covered in blood and ash, and a little got on Villard as well, who looked horrified. Leila has some on her face and dress, but that was probably from the initial spray. Le Satin looked fine, and his/her mask was back on.

"You have just murdered the Prince, Primogen Paternoster," Le Satin said in his/her flat voice.

Jean-Claude folded his arms. "Saved us a lot of trouble, I say."

Villard wiped some ash from his face, looked at his hand in horror, and tried to wipe it on his leg. "We can't tell anyone about this. Not anyone. The Carthians will come after us all."

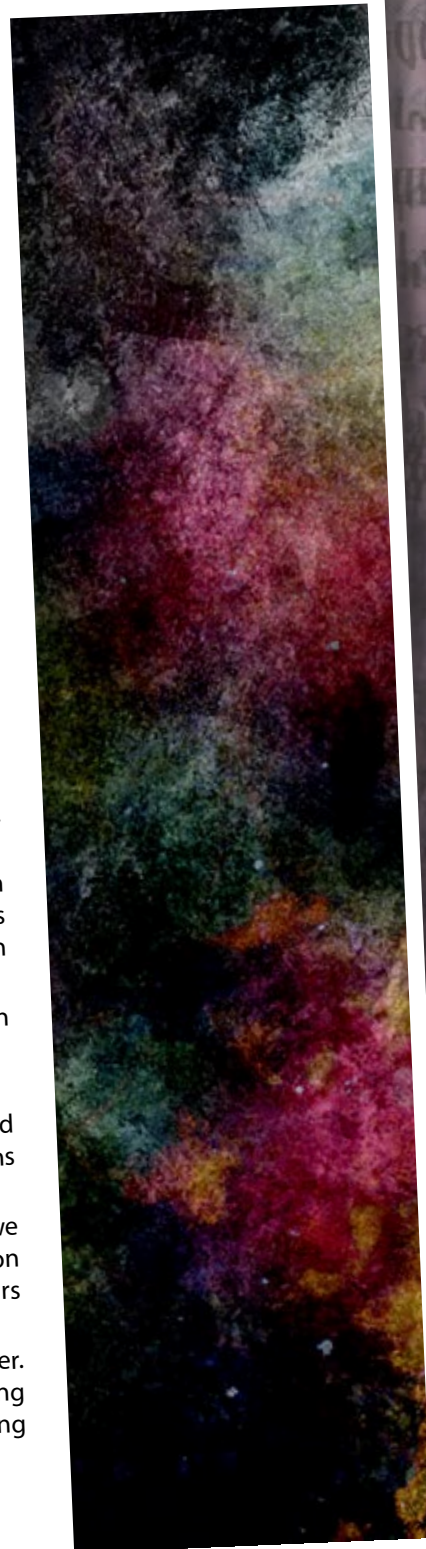
Le Satin nodded. "I agree. Until the council decides on a suitable replacement, we propose that a fiction is erected. Prince Bonnefil is focused on the reconstruction of Haiti, and cannot be disturbed. The council will, naturally, handle all his affairs in the interim."

"A conspiracy of silence?" I said. I asked a question, but we all knew the answer. I couldn't take my eyes off my hands. I couldn't stop thinking about the feeling of beating him until he died. But I couldn't confess to it. That's why I'm writing this — it's the closest thing to a confession I can do.

Le Satin looked to Leila. "Do you agree, Primogen Leila?"

"Of course," she said, that lovely smirk on her face. "It'll be fun."

Then she giggled.



FURY

I confess to the sin of fury. When I read tales of those of the true faith having their belief discarded, mocked, or ignored, I become furious. My bestial nature rises up in me, and I want to rend apart those who would dare discount true Longinians.

While there is a certain practicality to consider when one's faith intersects with the rest of Kindred society that does not belittle or deepen the faith. We are not creatures who do well cloistered away to meditate on matters of philosophy. We are social creatures, and we have a duty to bring the Word to all vampires who would hear it.

We do not use faith as a tool of power like the Invictus.

We do not use faith as an excuse for excess like the Circle of the Crone.

We do not use faith as propaganda like the Carthians.

And we do not treat faith like a germ to be studied like the Ordo Dracul.

For all of my frustration and outrage in this confession, I reserve a special hatred for Dracula's puppets. The Invictus at least make a show of respecting our faith. The Crones at least have faith, even if it is in a pagan goddess. The Carthians at least recognize the power of faith, even if they treat it as a tool of mind control. However, it is not something to be cured. It is not a defect.

The miracles we perform with our study of Theban sorcery is not another power of the blood that can be bottled, categorized, and reused. It comes from our Damnation, our connection with a God who has cursed us to walk the earth for Longinus' sin of murdering His only son.

But where any sensible Kindred would see something miraculous and holy, the Order only sees numbers and equations. They act as if God can be understood, as if the right paper or the right study could unlock the backstage door to the universe and give them a hand at the levers and switches. Study only allows us to approach knowledge of God, but we will never understand Him. We will never better Him. We can only learn and study and master small pieces to better appreciate the wonder and beauty of His plan.

Forgive me, for I tremble in fury whenever I even think about how these creatures dare to discard our holy work and treat it as so much dross. I hope that this report I have attached will help you understand just a small portion of the studies they conduct on those of the true faith, and how they truly view our holy work.

I. TITLE PAGE

Study: Isolating The Mental Pathways That Comprise "Faith" In Kindred (2013)

Author: Master Sigge Vång, Gothenburg, Sweden. Open for peer review.

Corresponding Author: Master Sigge Vång (svang@ordogothenburg.org)

Financial & Equipment Support: Gothenburg Ordo Dracul Lodge

Conflicts of Interest: None

II. Abstract

A third attempt to locate and isolate the neural pathways that comprise religious devotional and irrational belief (hereafter, "faith") in Kindred. Subject C was a member of Prince Vidal's court (New Orleans) who believes that the disaster was the result of "God's divine will."

Add more to this

III. INTRODUCTION

I have conducted a number of studies previously, at the request of the Ordo Dracul of Gothenburg, with the design of reducing or removing irrational religious thought from Kindred. Such a design would be applied to the lodge's goal of reducing tension and strife in our society. Previous attempts focused on purely psychological and psychiatric methods, which proved inconclusive. For this study, it was decided that a strictly physical analysis of the affected brain structures would be necessary. The brain of Subject C provided some enlightening insight into potential avenues for exploration, although again it produced no conclusive evidence. It is my opinion that additional subjects will be required.

IV. METHODS

Context: The study was conducted in the secure examination room of the Gothenburg lodge. It is soundproof and has no windows, allowing investigators to perform examinations in isolation. The typical array of medical tools was available.

Design: The design is simple: physically examine the brain of Subject C, and then induce the subject to perform outward manifestations of faith (hereafter "faith reactions"). Given that Subject C needed to actively practice their faith during the examination, the study was designed to keep Subject C alive and conscious for as long as possible. Previous studies noted that CAT scans and Kirlian photography were insufficient for studying fine-grain changes in the Kindred psyche (see 34.5/2010). As such, removal of Subject C's scalp to directly observe the brain with instrumentation is necessary. Consideration for the amount of pain was discussed, but I decided as lead researcher that the pain would increase the possibility of necessary faith reactions, and thus was not a factor that needed to be reduced.

Subject: Subject C is a nomad (self-identifying as a "mendicant") from New Orleans who fled to Sweden in 2005 after the disaster brought about by Hurricane Katrina. This Kindred identifies as a male Kindred, as a Gangrel, and as a creature following the faith that the mythological Longinus was the inciting vampire in a pseudo-Judeo-Christian context (hereafter "Longinian"). Subject C recently physically attacked a Carthian ally of the Ordo Dracul, and as such, the lodge was given leave to conduct this study by the Queen-Elect of Gothenburg (see 37.1/2013).

Add sampling strategy, study variables, data collection procedure, and analysis methods! This study is barely half-written!

V. RESULTS

Before Subject C succumbed to the Final Death, I was able to document seventeen distinct faith reactions. Some were vocalized (typically variations on the phrase "Save me, Longinus!"), while others were physical reactions (typically closing the eyes and sub-vocalizing). One faith reaction was particularly strong, and worth documenting. Subject C had a scar in the shape of a lance on his chest. During one faith reaction, the scar began to glow and rise out of his chest, becoming a distinct lance. Application to the pain sensors in the brain aborted the faith reaction.

Subject C refused to answer any questions about that particular faith incident, but it is my opinion that this is the first time we have been able to study the Kindred brain during the use of Longinian-based faith sorcery (hereafter "Theban"). This incident has provided the most potentially useful data. The detailed logs are listed in Section IX, but to summarize, there is a marked decrease in activity in the parietal lobe during this experience. Other faith reactions had a negligible and inconsistent decrease in such activity, but the Theban faith reaction corresponded exactly to the decrease and subsequent return of parietal lobe activity. This corresponds to the findings of Andrew Newburg (University of Pennsylvania; see Section IX).

Mortal studies are irrelevant and insignificant. Toss this reference.

VI. DISCUSSION

There is not enough evidence that stimulating parietal lobe activity is sufficient to reduce or remove faith reactions. However, there is the possibility that such stimulation can retard or eliminate Theban sorcery manifestations. One working hypothesis is that overall brain activity needs to fall in order for faith reactions to take hold — in essence, the less the subject thinks about the situation, the stronger faith takes hold.

A complete leap in logic with little supporting evidence. I'm not even bothering to read the rest of this. Your conclusions are spurious, and your methods are faulty. We need to have a long discussion about what your goals are before I'll condone a retrieval, but you might as well have wasted this opportunity.

FAITHLESSNESS

Finally, I have committed the sin of faithlessness.

For many years, I have allowed myself and other Kindred to wander from the path. In the name of politics, in the name of peace, in the name of civility, in the name of modernity, in the name of adaptability. There was, and always is, a reason to set faith aside as inconvenient or problematic. It is Satan's greatest trick to get us to lie to ourselves.

As Kindred, we place high value on our ability to adapt to modern times while embodying ancient truths. Covenants born from the dust of ancient Rome stand alongside those created within recent memory. We recite ancient traditions while wearing the latest suits. Discussions as old as time take place while listening to bleeding-edge music. Call it the Masquerade, call it using the tools at hand, call it survival instinct, but we are not static creatures.

Yet, faith does not allow for adaptation. God does not change His clothes or His haircut to suit modern times. He is eternal, unchanging, and omniscient. Some may quibble that the mortal and Kindred forms of faith are subject to revision (for did not the edicts of the New Testament supersede some of the more extreme tenets in Leviticus?). The line is drawn in different ways, and some of those lines have shaken my faith to the core.

God doesn't care about lines. He doesn't argue nuances. He doesn't quibble on details. He demands faith, pure and untainted. One doesn't worship a "mask" of God, because God needs no masks. One doesn't claim a goddess of pain as God, because God doesn't limit Himself. For all of our creeds, and denominations, and titles, and heresies open and secret, the Lancea et Sanctum believe in Him. We have faith that our role in His plan is predetermined. We can never truly know why monsters are necessary for His plan, but knowing is not faith.

This is a point I have struggled with; I suspect all Kindred of faith struggle with this at some point. Faith is not knowledge, but it is also not the lack of knowledge. If He wanted unthinking monsters, we would all be draugr, only moving from murder to murder. Instead, He gave humans a mind, a mind that can become even sharper after years of the Requiem. He gives us tools such as supernatural sight and miracles of faith to uncover His secrets. Why would we have all these things and then be asked not to use them? I do not question His plan, but I also do not consider Him a fool. We must be expected to use them. I have faith that the sun will rise tomorrow, but I still wear a watch to know when it will occur.

Therefore, we study. We question. We quibble and draw lines, because each Kindred fills the unknowable with faith and each of us finds different things unknowable. In the past, I have confused questioning with a lack of faith, and in that mistake, actually lost it.

I fear I am not explaining this well. Let me illustrate by way of an example.

When I seized the title of Prince of New Orleans, I knew that this city was important. There was no objective data that I was able to point to, although there was plenty available. There was no signpost that showed me the best path forward; although my skill and natural talent held me in good stead. But a part of me took all of this information, all of this knowledge, and used that to commune with the divine. From that, I was able to conclude this city will be important in the years to come. That is faith.

Over the centuries, others came to challenge me. Suffering betrayal on all sides, I compromised, I raged, I fought, and I lost. I was the Prince. In all of this, I had faith that I was the Prince necessary to make this city important. In the act of bringing this about, I lost actual faith, because I am not the necessary component. He is. I am His tool, and a tool does not become self-important about the fact that he is a tool.

Then, Katrina. Terrible, bloody, wonderful Katrina. New Orleans was devastated. My people were in ashes, metaphorical and literal. I was powerless, Prince of a broken city. In my darkest moments, I blamed Him for this. I saw this as punishment, as a slight, as a violation of an agreement between peers that never existed. And after I raged, wept, and swore, I did something I hadn't done in a long time.

I prayed. Not mouthing old words as a show, but sincerely prayed to Him. I did not speak to Him as a peer. I did not treat Him as a servant to dole out miracles. I humbled myself before Him, and asked for guidance, as I had not done since I started as Prince. I looked at all the information I had, and where I could not find the answer, I used faith. Again, the conclusion was that this city was important.

And it is. For did not God send this tragedy to New Orleans just to prove that Kindred society is no longer a series of isolated city-states? Is it not true that Kindred all over the world speak of New Orleans as a mecca, as a warzone, as a cause, as a bloodbath? Do they not think of me and the pain of their brood in the same moment? Moreover, did He not hand me the opportunities I needed to take back my control?

Kindred should have faith in themselves, and faith in Him. Some choose to vest their faith in Longinus, but Longinus would not be without Him. Either way, those who put their faith solely in one or the other are doomed to fall. Faith in Him exclusively is an insult to the tools He has given you. He does not want blind soldiers, but thinking generals. Faith in yourself

exclusively is an insult to Him. A general who leads the army on his own path is worthless at best and a danger at worst.

I see now that I had lost faith in Him and myself. I see that faith needs to be restored to the other Kindred. Certainly, the pagans of the Circle of the Crone need correction. Absolutely, the hollow mouthings of the Invictus should not be tolerated. Of course, the arrogant "science" of the Ordo Dracul should no longer take credit for His work. However, I see now that the biggest concern is those who have no faith at all. And the Carthians are Godless. They have nothing but hate and destruction at their fingertips.

Forgive me, for I have sinned. I have lost my way. Longinus, Christ, and God have all given me sign after sign, chance after chance, and I was too blind to see them. Now I have. Now you see as I have that He has given me a new purpose, a new reason to be. I now know that New Orleans is not a city but a symbol, a rallying cry against those who would obliterate not just our faith, but also the very idea of faith. They turn it into propaganda or discard it entirely, replacing His will with their own.

They must be stopped. They will be stopped. And with every ounce of my Vitae, I will make sure that New Orleans does not fall to their Godlessness.

I send this confession to the Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, Servant of the servants of God. Hear my words, that even a Damned creature such as myself can see the light.

Forgive me, your Holiness, for I have sinned.

Prince Augusto Vidal
Catholic



ORDO DRACUL

I have a task for you.

You will take Flight 319 out of Heathrow, to Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. It has been booked and paid for; the tickets are waiting at the appropriate location. When you arrive, report to the taxi terminal, and wait for a man in a grey suit with a black leather briefcase. He goes by Barnaby. Introduce yourself, and go with him. His master is Doctor Nathaniel Mire, a Dragon employed in the Research Triangle. Interview him. Remember what I first told you.

-D-

N.B.: The sole speaker is Dr. Nathaniel Mire, Scholar Emeritus of the Dragons of the Triangle. Interviewing him is the Shadow, Frances Black.

You're saying this won't pick up your voice at all?

[pause]

Ah. I would have liked to end up with more than half a conversation, but too late now. I noticed, earlier — your voice didn't echo, as it should have in the hall. Some of our kind look like Escher had a go at anatomy, but it's the little things that truly disturb. You were revived postmortem, yes?

[pause]

I'm putting together a paper, "Anomalies of the Embrace." Perhaps I could get your thoughts sometime. With due credit, of course, but if you prefer to keep things confidential, I can make arrangements. May I ask a personal question?

[pause]

Autopsy?

[pause]

It's what they do, if it's suspicious enough. They put your body on the slab, and take it apart, piece-by-piece, looking for whatever killed you. I watched one of them work, once — I'd never seen anything quite so intimate, so careful. Someone did that to you, you know, in the days before your Embrace. They embalmed your body, treated it with chemicals to stave off decay. Were you an organ donor? If so, do you know what they took? If they did, do you notice anything different, anything missing? Perhaps, if you'd be willing to submit to a physical examination, I could help answer your questions.

[pause]

My apologies. That was a bit forward, even for me. Welcome to my laboratory.

[pause]

You don't seem impressed. Normally, when I have company, I flip on that device over there. It makes such lovely sparks. I could also replace this suit with a suspiciously stained lab coat, perhaps. Have Barnaby play something appropriate on the pipe organ. Were you expecting a pipe organ?

[pause]

Touché. There wasn't any trouble on the way in, was there? We are conveniently close to the airport. I trust Barnaby showed you ever courtesy.

[pause]

Good. Barnaby, see to the animals.

[pause]

An experiment in cognition and perception. They're perfectly conditioned, I assure you. Except for the Florida panther, she's still a bit touchy around strangers.. Don't approach her—you haven't signed the waiver.

[Mire laughs.]

[pause]

Savage? That's rather judgmental of you, Miss Black. All she wants is safety and a meal — the same as any other living thing — or otherwise. Yes, I know it's what passes for a title for my kind, but I dislike the term.

[pause]

That's how the Lords would see it. But that's their gift, isn't it? They can talk anyone into doing almost anything. Really, you could do the same to any human if you had the right setup, and the proper control of their innate neurochemistry. Maybe you'd need something to replicate the time-delay, or to trigger more complex motor functions, but organisms do more devious things to each other every day. And who has mastery of all non-human life? Not the Lords, I can tell you that much. The mind-bending power to edit one's own memory.

[pause]

No, I'm not so arrogant as to believe the Embrace removed me from the living world completely. What would I gain if it had? Life has been consuming other life for billions of years, and it's come up with the most ingenious ways of expediting the process. Many of my kind completely fail to see the big picture, but that's not entirely their fault, now is it? The education system in this country has been dismal for decades. They don't see the wonder in everything — only the violence. There's an appeal in the violence, I admit, but it's not what's truly important. At best, it's a pleasant distraction.

[pause]

Why thank you. These gifts need not strip me of my mental faculties or civility. It's just that sometimes I smile with a great many teeth.

The Blood is a strange thing, Miss Black. It unites us, even as it provides the raw material for further change and differentiation. You could call it the closest thing we have to genetic material. It passes from Sire to Neonate in the Embrace, and carries with it something of a legacy. Of course, if you called it that, you would be ignoring the fact that the Blood is more than just a set of genes that reshuffles itself in the hopes of producing successful offspring. The Blood has a life of its own. It responds to the environment in ways we have only begun to understand. It raises the question: is the Blood the vector we use to reproduce, or are we the vector it uses to perpetuate itself?

[pause]

Very well. Let me ask you something; what, right now, is responsible for your sense of consciousness and agency? Your brain is a lump of inert flesh. If I were to put you in an imaging scanner, I wouldn't see any activity at all, even if I had you speak, or picture an object, or perform a simple task. If not for the influence of the Blood, your brain would have decayed long ago, along with the rest of you.

[pause]

Well, I won't know for certain as long as you refuse to let me have a look.

[pause]

Hmf. At any rate, I don't think those two scenarios are incompatible. Bloodlines, in particular, are a fascinating example. That kind of specialization allows for the exploitation of unique niches, with all the blessings and curses that brings. That's not the only means of specialization; there are plenty of others on the table. Take, for example — hm. Have you heard of the Burlesque Grotesque?

[pause]

I do, too, but I've never been able to *find* them. I suppose it may be for the best, though, after the little conversation one of my interns — ah — intercepted. Here, see for yourself.

DO NOT FAIL TO SEE

THE BURLESQUE GROTESQUE

THE ORPHEUM THEATRE
TONIGHT ONLY!
MIDNIGHT

The beautiful.
The wanton.
Something of the terrible.
Witness a spectacle both Haunting and Savage.

BEHOLD THE UNCANNY!

Experience flights into the further regions of experience in a
Breathless night of Weird Pageantry:

THE PATHS OF FATE · MEMENTO MOROI
THE ABYSSOPELAGIC OPERA "THE MOBIUS STRIP TEASE"

THE MASQUE OF VAMPYROTEUTHIS INFERNALIS

And Don't Forget —

"THE CREEPING CHRYSALIS"

Our troupe of Mummies and Guisers will undergo a shocking metamorphosis in full view of the audience.

Tell the audient void you saw... **THE BURLESQUE GROTESQUE!**
— only those who speak the password will be admitted —

"They
are
horrible —
horrible
beyond anything
you can imagine
— but wonderful.
They haunt one for
hours afterwards. I am still
shuddering at what they
showed."
—Samuel Loveman, Chicago
Nightlife Revue

To: knine

The Cacophony is not a spectator sport, Keyes. You have to keep dipping your nib in that ink, or it will go dry. Take tonight. You should be accompanying me to the Burlesque Grotesque. Performance art for the All Nighters — not your scene — I know.

They might be a conclave of flakes and freaks, but that's still a conclave of stiff. They are an echo in the signal that sounds across the country. How do they do it? No one ever sees who puts up the flyers; they just flap into town. Heard they even pop up in the most dead-zone of cloisters. I have one in my hand now. "Transhuman." "Post-mundane fashion." Good god, this promises to be awful. Maybe I'll get a few laughs.

The signal's the thing. That's how the Movement will triumph. We will learn to do it better than all the others do. The Conspiracy of Silence came up with the Cacophony. Did you know that, Keyes? Is that not hilarious? They wrought it, but we will perfect it. Samizdat with teeth!

Ear to the echo.

—Walter

From: discord_scholar

To: knine

The show, Keyes. The show! CA dence in the glow. Ah. Fumbling fingers. Touch screen. Hands haven't trembled since I died. The Burlesque Grotesque, Keyes. Chthonic vaudeville. Ghastly. Voluptuous. Gaudy. Fantastic. Delirious. Alien. Hideous beauty.

The bioluminescent scripture. The glow had cadence, Keyes. Then it was over. The barker bowed in his tall top hat saying, "Safe home, dear friends, and come again!"

Not just spectacle, Keyes. More. I have to see more. Will write up a proper review for the forums later. I'm not the same person who walked into the theatre.

I am so hungry.

Ear to the echo.

From: discord_scholar

To: knine

What state am I in?

I don't know when I'll be back, Keyes. I don't care what Helen said last meeting. Dull-toothed troglodyte. This isn't obsession. It's due diligence.

Everyone should study the Cacophony on the road. The flavor of the echoes change. You have to feel it out, Keyes. Intuition before the analytical. Such gems in the truck stops, on the bathroom stall walls. Imagine, Keyes, how the old ones used to do it, scratching symbols into stone. Tweets that took centuries to fulfill. Contemplate that.

The flyers flap into towns like swarms of bats. I catch them, but I keep missing the show. I'll find it. I must see it again.

From: discord_scholar@allnight.com

To: knine@allnight.com

Found it, Keyes. Went to a used record shop, requested the correct album from a girl with mismatched eyes, and she handed me a flash drive.

The show was in a pool. Underwater. Black as pitch. Sensory deprivation tank for an intimate audience. An innovation on the black box theatre. The novelty!

We waited.... Minutes? Hours? Sightless zones. Starved senses stretched. Minds transcended. They put drops of blood in the water, Keyes. I could taste it. Something fishy. Then something from the Suidae family? Something kine. Something Kindred. I detected every nuance. A pre-show for the taste buds, a silent sonnet on the tongue. Never were my senses so puissant. Never such sagacity.

The hallucinations. The little box was an endless sea. Reefs. Cities. Planets. I was in a prehistoric ocean. I was in the womb. Thus primed, the real show began. They danced with liquid grace. The writhing dreams. Bellows of revenant wales. Where did deprivation delirium end and stage-effect begin? I don't know.

They had to be Haunts and Savages, Keyes. Mutations. Body modifications. Metamorphosis. Communication through luminescent patterns, like schools of deep-sea fish. LED? Black light? Strange evolution of bestial corpse flesh? I don't know.

The Beast noticed, Keyes. But it didn't howl. It stopped pacing its cage, stopped begging for blood. It just...watched. I swear, Keyes. The Beast became contemplative. I realized we were just in the way. This was a primordial Punch 'n' Judy show meant for the Beast.

Then out of the water. Then the barker, "Safe home, dear friends, and come again!" His black leather top hat glistened wetly, like a marine mammal, and a slitted eye winked at me from its crown.

From: discord_scholar

To: knine

I'm inside, Keyes. They didn't see me.

Followed the echoes. Rumor says there's a post-show for the select VIP following every burlesque. What connects them? Rumor says Dragons. Spoke to Dragon contact. She was just as mystified by the troupe, maybe apprehensive.

I saw the show tonight. The most elaborate theatre yet. As a pre-show, the barker led us through six rooms, each lit a different color, each a different mime show. Then the seventh room, the black box, the choking room. No water this time. Some kind of vacuum-sealed room. No breathable air. An odd feeling, more subtle than the lightless pool.

A young man leapt up, clutching his throat. Fell to the floor, gasping like a dying goldfish. Some hipster breather had fooled everyone and snuck in. We all laughed and made faces. Then the show...

I almost had it this time, Keyes. I nearly saw it.

Have to go. After the show, they ushered everyone out. But I hid! Going to see the post-show. Through the blue room, the purple room, the green room, the orange room, the white room, the violet room, and back to the choking room.

Have to see.

From: knine

To: discord_scholar

Walter,

Where the fuck are you? What happened?

—Keyes

From: discord_scholar

To: knine

Mr. Keyes,

We delight to inform you that Walter has joined the show.

Safe home,

—The Management

Have you heard of the Jiang Shi? I hadn't, either, until I came to the Triangle. They're one of the most fascinating developments I've encountered to date — so much like us, and yet so different. They may well be a sixth Clan, forming right before our eyes.

[pause]

Yes, it's Chinese. Some of them trace their Blood back there, but others don't. Some are from Iceland, others are from Italy, or Greece, or Turkey, or a hundred other places. If they were uniquely Chinese, then we could pinpoint a place of origin, and look into what exactly made them — and that would be too easy, now, wouldn't it? Instead, they've left us to with more questions than answers. Are they a separate lineage, becoming more like the Kindred due to similarities in ecological niche? Are they a new offshoot of the Kindred, gradually stabilizing into a form we'd recognize as "one of us"? Does their evolution reflect our own, or is it completely different? Were the five Clans separate lines that converged over time? If so, why?

[pause]

Convergent evolution — the tendency for things to adapt to the same role in similar ways, regardless of ancestry. Forgive me for stretching the metaphor, but I think it's appropriate.

[pause]

If it is the case for us, I don't know if it's the case for the Jiang Shi. Still, there's so much that we take for granted, the Clans for example, and all the myriad offshoots we call Bloodlines. We give them names, and pretend that they're something akin to families, or noble lineages. It's all so very neat and tidy, and it helps keep us from thinking about how it all ties together. Have you ever met one of the Moroi, for example?

[pause]

Hah, point. However, would you believe I have an account from one of them? Regrettably, the man who collected it didn't survive long after.

YOU ARE THE VOIVODE. YOU ARE THE DRAGON. YOU ARE THE LAND.
I AM SHRIKE. I AM MOROI. THE MOROI ARE LOYAL.

CLICK.CLACK.CRACK.

CONFESSOR JACOB WAS TO WRITE THIS. HE NO LONGER CAN. I WILL WRITE THIS. I AM NOT A GOOD SCRIVENER.
BUT CONFESSOR JACOB TAUGHT ME LETTERS. HE BROUGHT ME A BOOK OF RIDDLES. I LIKE RIDDLES. I LEAVE
YOU A RIDDLE FOR WHEN YOU WAKE.

THE ONE WHO BUILT IT DID NOT WANT IT.

THE ONE WHO BOUGHT IT DID NOT USE IT.

THE ONE WHO USED IT DID NOT KNOW IT.

I WAS STUCK, UNTIL I THOUGHT OF IT FROM THE SHOES OF THE LIVING. CONFESSOR JACOB CALLS THAT
EMPATHY. YOU DID NOT TRIGGER ME FOR EMPATHY. YOU TRIGGERED ME FOR THE ONLY THING I AM GOOD AT.
M IS FOR MURDER. EVERY MURDER IS AN ARITHMETIC PROBLEM OR A KNOT. I JUST SEE THE SOLUTION. I MAKE
THEM UNDONE.

SCREECH.SCRITCH.SCRATCH.

WHEN CONFESSOR JACOB SAID I HAD PURPOSE, I NEARLY WEPT. BEEN SO LONG, IN THE HOUSE OF WAITING.
THE OTHERS SLEEP. MY MUSIC BOX BROKE NINE WINTERS AGO.

C IS FOR CHILDREN. YOUR TWELVE CHILDREN. TWELVE KNOTS.

CONFESSOR JACOB WAS TO WRITE HIS TESTIMONIAL. HE DID NOT FINISH. I HAVE FOUND PIECES OF IT. I STICK
THEM HERE.

I, Jacob Horne, Confessor to Voivode Hrodrick Vogel and caretaker to the Moroi of the House of
Waiting, do declare this record truthful.

My Lord, I know you, and so I know that your nightmares teem with guilt. I hope that when you
wake, you will believe the certainty that I already hold: you did the right thing. The deep love you have
for all of your childer is undeniable. They are the backbone of your power in the domain, but this had
to be done.

The compassion you showed in avoiding this final solution was commendable. Night and day in your
laboratory, seeking a cure. Malkavia, the terrible contagion. It came on an invisible wind. For all your
might, Lord, you could not stop it. We understand so little; only that it spread through your line on
the sympathy of your blood. There is no telling which of your childer was infected first. Perhaps the
result of an experiment gone wrong.

Hesitation only allowed it to spread. No telling how many of them are infected. Perhaps all. Only
a thorough purge can save you. Leave it to us. I drove into the suburbs. I selected Shrike. He shows a
low cunning, perhaps even brilliance, at ending life. Moreover, he is stealthy. When Shrike does not
wish to be seen, not even I can detect him.

I write this, because you asked. You said you needed every detail. Every death must hurt as a thorn.
Torpor will cleanse your mind. It must. We will cleanse your blood. I already miss our talk.

WHEN THE MOROI ARRIVE, SEEK SHELTER OF STONE. SO THEY SAY.

CLICK.CLACK.CRACK.

FIRST, THE MASQUE. CONFESSOR JACOB CALLED THEM. COME FEAST WITH FATHER. ONLY SIX SHOWED. BOLT GO THE DOORS. ROAD WENT THE FIRE. CONFESSOR JACOB ONCE GAVE ME HOP.FROG TO READ. SIX OURANGOUTANGS!

YOU ARE THE VOIVONE. YOU ARE THE DRAGON I OBEY. TWELVE THORNS. I WILL MAKE IT HURT.

SHRIEK.SHRIKE.SCYTHE!

N IS FOR NORMAN. BURNED, WRITHEN, AND CALLED YOUR NAME.

L IS FOR LEVAR AND G IS FOR GABBY. HOWLED LIKE ANIMALS ON THE CRACKLING.

H IS FOR HESTER AND A IS FOR ARTURO. I CHOPPED OFF THEIR HEADS AS THEY RAN OUT THE DOOR.

B IS FOR BELINDA. NEARLY GOT AWAY, ROLLING ON THE GROUND. I BIT, RIPPED, YANKED HER APART. VOIVONE, YOUR CHILDREN ARE TOUGH. IT WAS NOT TINY.

TRIP.TRAP.TRIPE.

CONFESSOR JACOB EYED HER REMAINDERS ON ME. HE WRETCHED RED.

and she Embraced her infant child. Maddened by the abomination, she fled. Enter two Kindred: a Gangrel and a Nosferatu, summoned to the graveyard by the child's wailing. What to do with the hungry dead babe? They decided to put it to death. They both decided to commit Amaranth. Such blasphemy instantly cursed the two wretches, twisting them into an amalgam both bestial and grotesque. Forever possessed by the fragments of the infant monster's soul. Forever Moroi.

If you believe the old stories, my Lord. Tripe and nonsense, most likely. Yet, are they Haunts or Savages? What is more primal, immoral, and ravenous than an infant?

THE OTHERS TOLD OLD STORIES, AT THE HOUSE OF WAITING. IN SLEEP, I HEAR SWEET SINGING, FEEL GENTLE ROCKING.

CLICK.CLACK.CRACK.

YOU ARE THE VOIVODE. YOU ARE THE LAND. IN THE CITY, ALL BIRDS AND BEASTS KNOW YOUR NAME. SOME HELPED ME. I HARRIED YOUR CHILDREN. I FELT LIKE GRENDEL. CONFESSOR JACOB GAVE ME BEOWULF TO READ. I FELT SAD FOR GRENDEL.

SHRIEK. SHRIKE. SLYTHE!

W IS FOR WALDEN. HE HAD A GREAT FALL. THEN THE RATS ATE HIM. AWAKE, BUT UNMOVING. MOUTH OPENED AND CLOSED, OPENED AND CLOSED, BUT NO SCREAM. SKIN WRITHING WITH ROOTING RATS BENEATH.

I know Walden held a special place in your esteem, Lord. Know that he died well. Know that watching these deaths has been the single bitterest chord of my Requiem. Know that I carry on, unblinking, for you.

R is for Rayna. I put a tiny fear in her head. I wrapped myself in Not-Knowing. I followed her for three nights. The tiny fear grew. Laughing, she threw herself to a train. The sleepy crows laughed too. They got the joke.

V is for Vanija. Head dashed with a claw hammer. Pulled her into Not-Knowing. She screamed, but her ghouls, just two arms away, did not see, and did not hear her.

C is for Caleb. Eaten by bravery. Confessor Jacob used Dragon magic and bright lights, until day was night. I came with the noon. Caleb had Dragon magic too. He did not fear fire or sun. Your oldest, strongest. I reached inside. Down under my bed. I let out a howl so unspeakable, the plants withered, and even I felt uneasy. Caleb fled outside, to the sun he did not fear.

S is for Sachiko. Eaten by bad memories. Your cleverest. Hid in a Perilous Nest. The house had many bad memories. The walls whispered nursery rhymes that boiled my blood. It ran from my ears. The shadows ate my flesh. I kept forward. I hugged Sachiko to me. The shadows ate our flesh. When I walked out, I was naught but bone and gristle. She was naught but ash.

I ate none of your children, Voivode. Confessor Jacob says I must not let the Monster Under My Bed out. Confessor Jacob knew so much about your children. At first, squeamish, but then excited. At first, his mouth was always clamped shut, but then, it was always open.

On further reflection, I am disgusted with the degeneracy into which your childer. They squander the teachings of the Dragon. They take for granted the miracle of your blood. I think, when you wake, you will see this was all for the best. Does the Mystery of your blood not make me just as close to you as they? Are we not connected? They do not appreciate it, Hrodrick. They do not!

ONE MORE THORN.

CLICK.CLACK.CRACK.

O IS FOR ODESSA. WE FOUND HER AT HOME. SHE SHED HER SKIN. I SAW. LIKE A SNAKE. IT FELL AWAY PALE. SHE WAS PINK. WARM. BREATHING. BEATING HEART. SHE HELD A BABE. IT FED FROM HER BREAST. I COULD SMELL SWEAT MILK.

I CREEPT. I RAISED MY FISTS. READY FOR THE SCREAM. SHE DID NOT SCREAM. SHE SANG. NO ONE EVER SANG TO ME. MY MUSIC BOX BROKE NINE WINTERS AGO. SHE SANG AND ROCKED.


CONFESSOR JACOB YELLED. KILL THEM ALL! CONFESSOR JACOB SCREAMED. ABOMINATION! HE FOAMED. HAD THE MONSTER UNDER HIS BED COME OUT? HE LUNGED FOR THE BABE.

SHRIEK.SHRIKE.SLYTHE!


I PULLED OFF CONFESSOR JACOB'S JAW. I TWISTED OFF HIS HEAD. HE WAS SOFTER THAN YOUR CHILDREN WERE. YOU ARE THE VOIVONE. YOU ARE THE DRAGON. YOU ARE THE LAND. I LEAVE THESE SERVENINGS FOR YOU.

ODESSA, THE BABE, AND I WILL LEAVE. YOU WILL NEVER FIND US. I AM SHRIKE. I AM MOROI. THE MOROI ARE LOYAL.

Z IS FOR ZIVA. SECRETS AND SECRETS.



Come back to me, Hrodrick.
Come back to me, Hrodrick.
Come back to me, Hrodrick.
Come back to me, Hrodrick.
Come back to me, Hrodrick.
Come back to me, Hrodrick.
Come back to me, Hrodrick.
Come back to me, Hrodrick.



Have you heard of the Red Queen's Race, Miss Black?

[pause]

Yes, that's where it came from. Suppose that you have a fox and a rabbit, or a wolf and a deer, or any other predator and prey you'd care to name. In each generation, some rabbits are faster than others are, or better-camouflaged, or otherwise more suited to survive the fox. These rabbits survive, reproduce, and pass on their traits to the next generation. The fox, meanwhile, has offspring of its own, and those who're better at spotting and chasing prey are more likely to get a meal. The rabbit gets faster, and so does the fox. The traits change, but the status quo does not. They're running as hard as they can just to stay in place.

[pause]

Well, yes, you can say we're a form of selective pressure on humans. That much is obvious. But what I was getting at is this — what predators, and what parasites, are exerting selective pressure on *us*?

[pause]

Oh, they're out there. A lot of our kind fancy ourselves the apex predator, but the truth is that we're just one hunter in a robust ecosystem of the dead. There are *things*, Miss Black, that look at us prey. Some of them might have been human, once. Some of them were not. They are out there, and they could care less about our delusions of grandeur. They are out there.

[pause]

Oh, it's not as if they're here, in this room. If they were, I would know. It's just that I'm not enough of a fool to think of myself at the top of the food chain.

[pause]

Well, yes, of course they'd fit the bill. But even ignoring them, there are many things out there that don't fit into our neat and tidy mythology of the Blood. They seem to have their own niches in our ecosystem, and sometimes, their own habitats as well. I remember — ah yes, I do have it filed. A firsthand account of one of those habitats, so to speak. Regrettably, the source is far from reliable, and transparently biased against us. I would kill to have an account from a more respectable observer.



I spent four years in Peoria, one night. Began with ice cream. Ended in the Weir.

The acne-scarred kid in the drive-thru window said, Hey, aren't you? I nodded. Oh man! I can't even - He regaled me with all my bit parts, poems, and B-movie heavies, all the stunt-man work, all the elaborate death scenes. I've died so many times. He recognized my mug, but couldn't recall my name. No one ever does.

The ice cream cones looked comically small in my big hands. I passed one to my little girl, sitting in the backseat, spinning in her oversized red hoodie. Thank you, Daddy, Little Red said, and she said it just right, because Acne Kid all but went, Daaaa!

He gave me my change and said, What's in the box? pointing at the curio occupying the front passenger seat.

Gwyneth Paltrow's severed head, I said. Acne Kid brayed. I laughed. Little Red laughed too, but she didn't do it right, because Acne Kid suddenly looked disturbed, then ducked back inside, closing the window. Then we were on the road. And a muffled voice from the box said, That wasn't funny.

SHIT. SHIT SHIT SHIT. JUST GONNA WRITE THIS DOWN. AS MUCH AS I CAN REMEMBER EVEN THE INCIDENTALS. THE THORNS RIPPED MY MEMORY. REMEMBER THE THORNS. REMEMBER ROOM NUMBER 9.

I ate my ice cream. Little Red didn't. She lets me do stuff like that with her - carrying her on my shoulders, pushing her on the swing, tucking her into bed. She calls it mending the sheep's clothing. She gets practice. I get something else. The ice cream was a treat for riding so long next to the thing in the box.

Little Red kept practicing her laugh. Eventually, she got it in tune - perfect child laughter. She mimics as good as a hand-fed raven. She can make so many sounds.

Then there was singing. Wasn't the car radio. It was from inside the box. I leaned left, keeping my massive bulk as far away from it as possible in that little car. Sometimes, I hate my job.

Many miles. All the way up to Chicago and back. Nothing but nothing, and the Woods, and the Weir. Central Illinois has its very own Twilight Zone bubble. No Kinreed in or out, save the Savages. Like Little Red.

Don't remember all the miles. The thorns tore them away. Don't remember getting off I-55 or diving into Peoria. I don't even remember exiting the car.

It was one of those neighborhoods where walking barefoot will get you an STD. I held the box as far from me as I could, followed Little Red into a small warehouse. Props. Costumes. Like a theatre company set up shop and forgot. Even a cemetery and park sets. Plastic trees. Styrofoam tombstones. Down the steps into the chapterhouse of the Ordo Dracul.

Full disclosure: I don't like the Dragons. Don't like their secret handshakes and code words. Don't like their bullshit Mary Shelley science. Every Lick in the Four Fiefs feels trapped, except the Dragons. They're happy as clams all cloistered up. What the hell are they building in there?

But who listens to the bellyaching of phouls?

Down below, we got some nervous looks. Even monsters know to be afraid of my little red death. We made our delivery.

Hello, Kopaion Jacob, said Little Red.

Greetings, Sheriff, said the thaunt.

Just Jacob? I couldn't believe it. Gauchy names are a fashion statement in the Four Fiefs. Some thaunts look like Max Schreck took a dump. Not Jacob. Looked average, save for a ridiculously long scarf wrapped around his face, covering his mouth, just his nose peeking over. But the scarf never moved when he talked, and his voice always seemed to come from other places, muffled by cloth. Don't know much about these things, but I think the thaunts have the Weir in their blood.

Jacob opened the box like it was his birthday, pulled out a severed head - the skin

mummi ed to an odd blue-green. He called it Orpheus. No, not that Orpheus, he said.

Jacob gave Little Red the grand tour. Really tried to impress. I saw some shit. I don't remember all of it. The thorns! But I remember what I saw in Room Number P. We'll get back to that.

Then Little Red gave Jacob the tour of the Woods. The Woods ain't woods exactly. It's anywhere outside of our four shriveled corpse cities. The desolate old farm houses. Unlit roads. But the Woods can creep in anywhere, like vines. That dark alley. That boarded-up fast food joint. The Woods is in the air, that sort of 3 A.M. dread. It can crawl into your mirror on the wrong sort of night.

In the Woods lurks the Weir. Don't know what that is, exactly. All the Licks are terrified of the Woods and the Weir, all except the Savages. So the Savages rule.

The Dragons paid the Savages something obscene. And so Baron Leer sent his best psychopomp to give Jacob a tour of the Weir. The Haunt had a ledger with a list of places, called them worms nests.

We fathomed that list. Place by place. My memories are thorn-ripped tatters - an abandoned school - a corn field where none of our shadows matched - the truck stop bathroom where water droplets oozed up. Oddity by oddity. That night never ended.

Little Red guided us. She knew where to step. Where not to step. What words to say. When to leave a pile of sticks, or bones, or a saucer of sour milk. She led the way like she'd practiced it for years. Like she knew all the twists ahead of time.

No one seemed to notice Jacob carrying a severed head. He held it up, like a lantern, at each stop. Sometimes, it would sing. Different songs. Couldn't recognize the languages. Then Jacob scribbled notes in that ledger, maybe based on the tone or the words. Jacob was afraid of the Weir, but he was also getting off on it. Fucking Dragons.

Some places were duct. Some were not. I remember something rubbery and squelchy rising out of a pond, and Little Red tearing into it, sending it back squealing. Did that happen? Do the children really gather there and pray to it, throwing in offerings of hamsters and kittens?

Then, the Br'er Patch. Just a tiny patch of stunted trees and shrubs on the outskirts of Peoria. Doll heads hanging from the branches. Little Red climbed on my shoulders and added her own doll head to the collection. Orpheus sang. We entered. Should have come out the other side in thirty paces. But it kept going. Orpheus screamed. I can't remember. Thorns! All over. Fleeshy scarecrows dancing. Autumn folk. Footsteps that sound like rain. A paunt man with bleeding fountain pen nibs for npennails. If he signed you into his book, you were done. Running. Thorns! Here, there, and everywhere. Thorns ripping my clothes, my hair, my esh. Thorns stabbing me now - stabbing me at eight years old crying for mom - stabbing me when I woke up in the hospital to find out my wife and daughter had died in the crash - stabbing me on my suicide night when Little Red appeared with a counter offer. Ripping.

Came to in the car. Panic attack. Tears. Little Red stroked my cheek. Oh my poor Cowardly Lion. Her claws were wet. She put her wrist to my lips and I suckled, paci ed like a sobbing toddler. Even Jacob was shaken. Orpheus wasn't making any noise, but his blue mouth still screamed.

The thorns took something from me.

Jacob said we had one more stop. It was a dud. We built a bonfire at a reputedly cursed campground. Nothing. Orpheus remained silent. Jacob stared into the ame, his back to us. Jacob said that Old Leer and the other Savage barons couldn't resist the offering the Dragons gave them, but that they probably couldn't afford to let the Weir become less mysterious.

Tonight was more successful than you were hoping, yeah? he said. Is this the part where you're supposed to kill me?

No hesitation. Little Red let the Big Bad Wolf out. The night turned to

fur and teeth, all hurtling toward the Haunt. He stepped closer to the ve, practically into it. I've never seen a Lick give so little regard to so much ame. Little Red couldn't get that close. She paced and growled.

I have a counter offer, Jacob said.

Like a horror (in on seeing), the fur and teeth receded. Her hoodie was askew, exposing pale belly. I caught a glimpse of them, the nightmare menagerie, the thousand faces of the Beast, all pressing her esh like it's a theatre curtain on opening night.

Jacob said he could keep what he'd seen a secret. He said the Order could use someone with Little Red's skills. He said that maybe the Order could be of use to a woman trapped for decades and decades inside a little girl. He held a aiming brand to his face without a inch, said that the Curse could be conquered; change could be achieved. And if Little Red wanted to make her own independent study in the chapterhouse, he could keep that a secret too. No one keeps secrets like the Dragons.

Little Red agreed.

I don't like the Dragons. I don't want them changing her. Now I got a crazy plan. Maybe I had it when I put pen to paper. Going to tear these pages out and send them to you, Leer.

I know. You're the big bad baron. I'm just a lumbering phoul. There's nothing I love more than Little Red, and the only thing that scares me more than her is you and your slit-cheek grin. But if you're reading this, and you agree to get her away from the Dragons, and do it without harming her, I'll tell you everything. I'll tell you what I saw in Room Number P. I've been in the Weir, but Room Number P beats all.

Save your child. Save our little girl.

I know you know better, but many of our kind aren't so enlightened. There is more to the Curse than perpetual stasis, and a body preserved, forever, at the moment of its death. I believe the Coils and Scales aren't so much forcing change on an unchanging corpse as controlling that change and making it manifest within a time-span that we can perceive.

[pause]

Oh, I've heard stories. I'm sure you've heard stories, too — a few that might hit close to home, even. The first Mekhet were all like you; but what was once the norm is now a rare and precious exception. That's not even counting records of things that don't map to any of the modern Clans. Where did they go? Were they wiped out? Did they become Kindred, or did they become something else entirely? And if so, did they have any say in the matter?

[a low growl, in the distance]

[pause]

Oh. I'm sure it's nothing. As I said, she's still a little touchy around strangers. None of the others have reacted, have they? But yes, where was I? The Coils. They're one means of asserting control, but they're by no means the only one. There's a certain power in ritual, one that goes beyond humanity's need to feel things are predictable and safe. In our case, it offers us a way of dealing with our new state of being, and as you can imagine, many of us have developed our own methods. I've kept records of them, including some that you or I might consider... unorthodox. It's to be expected, really. The Order is far-reaching, and there're bound to be little branches here and there with their own ways of doing things. I have a number of accounts, but the most recent is out of Montreal—

[pause]

Yes, out of Montreal. I have it right here in my files. It never reached its intended recipient, but as touching as it might have been to him, I think it serves a nobler purpose here.

Dear Scratch,

Long time, Spooky. We used to drink out of the same bottle. That diabolic hangover. You slept so long. Miss me? Still pretty? You were always pretty to me, Scratch. Beautiful as a wax museum fire. My first childhood crush was on a melting face, before they pulled me out. Your twisted girl. No one says "twisted" with that kind of adoration. No one says it like you, Scratch.

Anyone living still love you now? We're both coming on the year when that will be impossible. How'd that happen? We were so young.

Jeepers creepers! It's cold. The kind of cold that makes dead limbs break off. Have to drink it away. Have to kiss them so long and savage, you can cheat fog for a breath.

Is it cold in Chicago tonight? You bolted up tight? You slept through the heat. Got away with it too. No one can see you. No one can get at you now. Eh, Scratch? Except the ones behind your eyes. Still throttling the dead in your head, Scratch? Can't trust eyes. Can't know which ones see the black ribbon wrapping the birthday gift of your soul. That ain't easy. I know.

Tonight, I ambulated up and down the Rue Saint Paul. Teasing the Devil. Ever do that as a squirt, Scratch? I did. Every 3 A.M. stuck an arm or leg over bed's edge, daring the Boogeyman to pull me under, down to the all-night town, away from home, away from my parents. I teased the Boogeyman tonight. Rue Paul isn't one of its rules, but everyone knows to keep away. Bad luck follows.

You know about the rules, right, Scratch? They talk about that all the way in Chicago? Roach motel Montreal — all licks to enter, none to leave. Anyone ever tell you about the Nameless? The Devil has six rules.

I. DON'T KILL EACH OTHER

II. DON'T GATHER FIVE OR MORE AT A TIME

III. DON'T LEAVE THE CITY

IV. DON'T LOOK FOR ME

V. DON'T IMPERSONATE ME

VI. STAY AWAY FROM THE CROSS

I can spy the cross from where I write this, out the pub window. It glows atop Mount Royal. That's where the one and only Prince died. Anyone who goes up there dies. I know if I look fast enough, I'll see the Boogeyman perched up there. I'm never fast enough. Think of it, Scratch. Every monster in Montreal is afraid to go up that hill.

Remember the early nights, Scratch? The roaring nights. Nights of our idyll. Canines like kitten's teeth. A speakeasy pumping in every chest. The Haunted Hood and the Flapper Macabre — you and me, Scratch. Course, they didn't call you Scratch back then. Remember the summer nights by the river? Feeding bread and blood to the ducks. How vicious they turned!

I miss that voice. Like flint glass. "The best is yet to come." No one can say it like you, Scratch.

I've got an itch. Fixing to break rule six. I'll stop at the mailbox first. Then I'll shove my letter opener through my palm for clarity. I am Impaled. What can the Devil do to me that I have not already done? Maybe I'll find chrysalis on the cross.

It's been so long, but I wonder if you'll feel it, Scratch, feel it like I felt it when they put you in the river.

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

Cut a long story short, I didn't go up to the cross. This is terror. The real stuff. You can only squeeze transcendence out of real suffering and fear. I thought I'd run out of things to fear. Before Montreal. Before the Nameless. The perfect calamity. The danger you can't flee. The monster you can't hunt. The only way out is to transform. But into what?

To change, you have to know who you've been. There's been many me's since that deranged flapper just learning to fly. The one you knew.

Remember who you were, Scratch? A skid rogue fresh out of his wooden kimono. Drunk on Never-Neverland, the copper burn in your gut, the strength in your arms, you could do anything. Top of the world, ma! Higher than an opium den, but then you came down. You got to changing. No one warned you. No one told you about the things wriggling in Haunt blood.

Remember their laughter, Scratch? Like razor blades and January wind. You came wailing —

into Elysium, staring at your hands, afraid of your own reflection. Their grand joke. No one laughed louder than your sire. But you got the last laugh on that useless tit. Eh, Scratch.

They stopped laughing when I dipped you and kissed you deep. I rudely reached down and copped your lot. So un-ladylike. Didn't know you. Didn't flinch from your face. Didn't mind the centipedes crawling out of your decayed zoot suit and down my glad rags. Always liked bugs. Mother hated that.

A perfect moment. I was just a whelp like you, but every Kindred eye was on us. Silence. Gasps. Dead ready to blush. That a choice bit of calico like me would go barney mugging a spooky grim like you. I could feel my Serpent cousins shudder. I ate it all up. Tasted like freedom. Tasted like mommy and daddy's disapproval at my every morbid turn. Felt like the time I took the shears to my long locks, cut away all the plans the parents had for me, starting between my legs and running through every plodding day to the grave. I cut away their doll-crafted identity. I cut all my strings.

Arm in arm, we dusted that dead blow. Beauty and the Beast. Perfect exit. Remember, Scratch?

Memory is tricky. I've got colored strings on my fingers to help me remember. Eight strings. Orange — visit Post Box 5170. A green string — meeting with the Order elders. Red — the Rite of the Impaled. Yellow — meet with Tiffany West. Purple — meet with Julien Vasseur. Blue — meet the Lady Without Eyes. Black — go to the cross. A white string, caked in gore. What was that for? What am I forgetting?

Tonight, I cut the orange string. Nearly every lick in the city has a key to Post Box 5170. Carthians dreamt it up. We can't gather, so we put our words in there. Society without society. Just like the breathers do it, tripping on digital light. By themselves, but never alone.

I collect quirks now. Did I tell you that, Scratch? I save affectations. Tonight I met a girl who talked with her hands. There were faces on her palms, in magic marker. Fany grotesqueries, like Felix the Cat cartoons. I sipped her. Then I snipped those quirks with my invisible scissors, buried them in the shallow graveyard in my guts. What do I do with those stolen, invisible parts? It's all for the Great Work.

Write me back, Scratch, and I'll let you into my laboratory.

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

Tonight, I cut off the green string. Gathering of the grey beards at the Order. Everyone cozy. Everyone complacent. Just tinkering away in their underground labs below the snow, below the Nameless. No one wants to push. Bushwa! The heirs to the wisdom of Dracula, and they're all a bunch of canceled stamps. Audacity is the only virtue. A finger to the sky is the only prayer. You know me, Scratch. Bearcat till the end of days. So I beat my gums and put an interrupt to their static with something suitably prickly before blowing out. Maybe I should act my age.

Remember when we first crept to the Order's doors? Two scared kids, skulls turned to haunted houses. Do your ghosts still gab, Scratch? Ever look back in on that penny dreadful hell you call your mind? That's where you heard your sire. Started in one January night and went on for months — on and off — till you put your head through a wall.

Recall when you first confessed that to me? We were giddy on a hophead's blood behind the Biograph Theater. Something ate at you. Horrors had dripped like a broken faucet till you were bursting full of dead water and red ruin. Your chin dipped and the words spilled.

Your sire never did adjust to newfangled motor cars. Hard to say what was wrecked worse, the automobile or her, but she crawled to you for help. Did you remember her laughter then, Scratch? Did you say something snappy before juicing her soul?

Wind back, Scratch. To that moment. Your hand clapped your trap shut. But the words had already stained my ears. Your poor eyes, so wide. Did you plot to croak me in that awful moment? Till I busted up laughing. Your face screwed into confusion. Then I confessed the same thing to you — only mine was a broodmate sibling, and I didn't wait for a car. Then we both brayed.

How'd you say it? "Two can keep a secret if both of them are dead...and in love." No one says it like you, Scratch. We sealed it blood to blood. A little perversion. A Hungarian Wedding.

We had the same dirt on each other. Yin over yang. The perfect friendship. The only two Kindred in the world who could be genuine with each other. Two amorous psychopaths guilty of the same unthinkable crime. There's love for you. Eh, Scratch?

The swinging nights. The hungry nights. How much longer did we have together? Three years? We lived a lot in those three years — ten gallons of revel poured into a one-gallon jug. You and me, chasing our dangerous drug. Remember their faces? Every time we said it would be the last time.

Then the voices. First your sire. Others followed. Behind the eyes. The ones you eat remain. Then they eat you. Dying by bites. Afraid. And who could we tell? We needed some hoodoo. We went to the Order. Never telling them why we studied so hard.

We brewed our own solution. Mental thuggee! Our happiest fancy. A little meditation. A dash of method acting we learned from that thespian Shadow who was just dying to get into the silent films. Every night, we lay on rooftops like fallen snow angels. Guiding each other through the meditation. Telling each other, in exquisite detail, how we murdered the voices that night.

Mental thuggee. We got our mitts on the ghosts. Strangling. Electrocution. Decapitation. Boiling in oil. Feeding to a vat of eels. Every night, a new massacre in our brains. Re-killing the ghosts. Waking up the Beast and feeding it their bones.

Mental thuggee. You and me. Eh, Scratch?

We promised each other we'd stopped using. But you didn't stop, did you Scratch? Always room for one more. They made you pay. Beat you down into the big sleep, filled your pockets with rocks, and threw you into the Chicago River. Back in '26.

I felt it, Scratch. In the blood. I was goofy for you. I felt the scabby river water filling my throat. I went fluky that night. I tried to find you, Scratch. I couldn't. I went cold turkey that night. I killed cravings with pain. Then I got Impaled.

What about you, Scratch? Still riding the D-train, Daddy?

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

Swear I saw something up on the cross, but it was gone by the time I got out my pocket binoculars. Been watching all night. Like the fountain pen ink? It's freeze-proof. Fancy!

Did the last letter get your dogs growling? Don't be such a Mrs. Grundy! Everything's Fake.

Snatched three affectations this week. A girl walking in Parc La Fontaine wore an impossibly long scarf that flapped like punch-drunk tentacles. A young poet at an open mic night, in a cramped bookstore on Sainte-Catherine, sported hair dyed like a chessboard. Just up the road, at a billiard's bar, a willy crone wielded one fingernail, far longer than the others, the wicked orange of a pumpkin grown in Chernobyl. I took out my invisible shears and stole all three quirks. Buried them in the cemetery of my guts, just above the voices you and I ate in the roaring nights.

Now I'm in the icy cold. Been watching the cross all night.

IV. DON'T LOOK FOR ME

Does bird watching count? Don't know. There's no teacher's edition of the rules, just several dozen Kindred corpses. I'm playing chicken with an invisible bugaboo.

Leeching the warmth off the roof of an all-night poutine joint on Rachel. Warmed my innards on spiked blood at a nearby bar. You'd get a laugh, Scratch. It's decked out all neo-speakeasy. Gouging prices just like a blind pig. Mixologists working mad science in nitrogen fog. Kids playing at being bohemians. Father times and face stretchers playing at being kids. Everyone ossified on snazzy coffin varnish.

I hid the Beast by neurotically tearing the labels off any dead soldiers in reach and nervously bouncing my knee. Quirks I stole from breathers. You forget how much they move till you try to magpie that shit.

Not a lot of licks in that joint. They do big spectacles of juggling flaming shots and fire breathing in there. But I'm good. Got my hound on a short leash. Once stole a quirk from a Marlboro Man who snapped his fingers to light his Zippo. Couldn't light a lighter that close to my face till I stole the breather's tick.

Wanna know how?

Scratch that, Scratch. Think I saw something.

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

Last night, I cut off the red string. Rite of the Impaled. Night of the question. Who's last off the spike?

It starts with our mortal followers. You know me, Scratch. Cult of personality. My mouth is like a circus. I let loose the esoteric on my vintage tongue. The walls echo with their refrain. Everyone's on the trolley. Wisdom only comes from calamity. Transfiguration from agony. It's an underground boxing society. In Montreal, that's literally under the ground, bellow the snow, in the sweltering room — an abandoned chamber you can only get to through the hidden hole in the wall of a board game store in the underground mall at the McGill Metro station. One of our ghouls manages the shop.

After the chin music, blood, and teeth spitting, the floor opens to more rarefied mutilation. Scarification. Modification. The modern primitives shine. We feed off their clumsy enthusiasm. We stretch our fleshy limits.

Then it's just the chosen, licks, and ghouls. There are three of us fully initiated into the Impaled. I'm the oldest. Wren and Jean-Baptiste round it out. But any Kindred is welcome. The young Dragons tend to take a shine to me. The Circle digs our style. Carthians wander in, looking for something to rekindle their fire. The Spear is broken, and the lonesome pieces need some spectacle. These nights, their prayers don't go answered. The Nameless shut down God. That, at least, I can respect. Eh, Scratch?

But there's that pesky Rule Two. We keep in tight communication, a guest rotation, so we don't ever go above that fatal five. Last night, it was a Circle chica crooning to the spirits and a Carthian named Chad. He's a dewdropper and gore grubber from way back. Always there for the free meal. Never put the letters BYOB together.

The rite is a simple thing. Wren played the Impaler. She helped Jean-Baptiste up on the spike and slid him down. That awful sound. My turn. I waved Wren away. I am the Impaler and I am the Impaled also. I lifted myself up on the spike. I pulled myself down. Inch at a time. Howling in whangdoodle tongues.

The Circle chica, infamous for her brutal hoodoo, shivered.

Who's last off the spike? When you succumb to the Beast, blood, or big sleep, it's over. Jean-Baptiste lasted three hours. I stayed up there all night, through the day, and into tonight. In the dark. Feet off the ground. Sliding down in geological time.

That's where we find wisdom, Scratch. You see things on the spike. Somewhere between the Beast, the Woman, and madness. I go inward. I commune with the souls I ate. I make a monstrous peace. The young ones think it's all about the scars and gashes. It's not where the spear sticks out from, but where it lays within. Me, and the multitudes within me, are pierced. I am victim and victimizer, sipping wisdom from both broken cups.

That's how I murdered the voices. That's how I killed the cravings. How do you deal, Scratch?

Hanging, scourging, stretching, flaying. What can the Devil do to me that I've not done? On the spike, I enter my mind laboratory. I pin all of my nameless fears like a moth collection for study. And when they wriggle on my cold needle, my fears will be afraid of me.

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

I'm a new woman tonight. Every time I go up on the spike, I die. Every time, I'm reborn. Step into my laboratory, Scratch.

On the spike, I go inward. I sink into the Sheol in my stomach. I go grave robbing for parts. I harvest all those quirks and affectations I squirrel away. I take them up to the lab in my skull and I rebuild myself. I graft those traits to my psyche. Big messy stitches. I throw the switch. Sparks! Something new rises. I'm the doctor, and I am the monster also. Dig my mad science, Scratch?

Let the others toil on the crude clay. My experiments are ethereal. Replace enough parts on a car, and you have a completely new car.

I must look like a patchwork tonight. Strings on my fingers. Creepy faces drawn on my palms. My talking hands. Tapping my teeth with my single, long, nuclear orange press-on nail. My impossibly long scarf. My chessboard dyed hair. The staccato laugh I took from a cabbie. The shuffle-dance walk I took from a vagrant.

Wren and Jean-Baptiste ask me why, if shaking the shackles of identity is so important, do I still cling to my slang. It's true, I do. Worse than when you knew me, Scratch. My mouth is a plastic cliché. It's my mask. It's the level-marked whiskey bottle a recovering alcoholic keeps in the drawer. It's the fat before picture in my wallet.

In the shop windows, my reflection is a blurred smudge. The people never notice. When I stab a safety pin through my hand, my focus sharpens. The reflection clears. I see what the breathers don't. Starring back is beautiful grotesque. The stitch monster. Several sets of rotting limbs sewn on. The post-modern, Model T Promethean bitch let loose on the world. My Great Work.

On the spike, I find chrysalis.

I'm off the D-train, Scratch. Been sober now for a mortal lifetime. Taught myself to eat souls in smaller bites. It's all about portion control. The grafting process is rarely permanent. Those invisible parts rot away and die. I steal more parts. I take a wrecking ball to myself, and I start all over.

Always a new me. A different combination. What combination will free me from Montreal?

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

Received a cigar box full of extracted fangs in my mailbox. Must be on the right track. Rattled it and could swear I heard distant screams like the sea in a shell.

Tonight, we played Cross the Bridge. It's a game. A minor Impaled ritual of our own device. We stand at the far side of the Victoria Bridge. Below is the St. Lawrence River. One step ahead is Saint-Lambert and freedom from Montreal. I don't even remember what road brought me into the city. This one would take me out.

III. DON'T LEAVE THE CITY

Wren, Jean-Baptiste, two Carthian whelps, and I, we giggle like nervous teenagers. We stick our toes just over the edge. We sweat blood. Who's last off the spike?

The Carthians run. Jean-Baptiste runs. I run. Wren is the last! Her first time. The nerve! I tackled her and we went down in a cackling heap. Jean-Baptiste joined in. Three tangled Dragons eating each other's tails.

For all I know, the Carthians are still running.

Did the Boogeyman notice us? I hope so. I'm rattling the fangs.

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

Tonight, I cut off the yellow and the purple strings. Woke up to the embarrassing wetness of rejected ink. The icy mitt of the tats that never take. Then I dolled up and got social.

First stop, Julien Vasseur, a hotsy-totsy Invictus of my line. Julien's well-heeled bodyguard didn't think I rated for an audience, but I pulled the palooka's arms out of their sockets and kicked him in the stomach for sobbing.

Julien is sick of his slick clique of drugstore cowboys and billboards cowering in the First Estate. Sick of hiding from the Boogeyman. He's looking for something else. He sees it in the Impaled. He likes that we're kicking the hornet's nest. Julien's full of encouragement, but he don't know from nothing about the Nameless.

So I went to see Tiffany West. She's an avant-garde artist in the Circle. Dropped in on her exhibit, a study in abstract terror. Her art is like a dream. Like a religious experience. Puzzles with hidden traps. The Nameless plays a role. There's something there, but it's intangible, falls away like sand when I squeeze.

Bushwa!

I'll have to see the Eyeless Woman.

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

Tonight, I cut off the blue string. Woke with my eyes sewn shut. I'm scared, Scratch. Savoring the sensation. Didn't want to travel on the surface, so I went underground.

Montreal's Nosferatu are underworld Ferrymen. They have the access. For a price, they'll guide you so you never have to see the cross or sky while shaking your stilts across the city. They're the ones who gave me the meeting place for the Impaled. Tonight, I paid the toll in secrets.

Remember, remember the fifth of November, 1935. That's when the Nameless came for the first and last Prince. In the '70s, the Carthians gathered to take power. I went to see the only survivor. She met the Boogeyman, Scratch.

The Eyeless Woman. Once upon a time, she was Eva Dubois.

I met with Eva. "Put me wise," I said

She told me about the night. Two dozen Carthians. Slaughtered. She returned, eyes ripped out, bearing the six rules. Said she could not see the Nameless, but it whispered in her ear, told her not to grow her eyes back. She hasn't, Scratch. Not for all the decades.

Then the Eyeless Woman leaned in and whispered in my ear. The words, Scratch. They're words I won't put to paper. Writing those words feels too much like toeing the bridge or climbing the cross. Maybe I'll record them later.

I went home. I stayed underground the whole way.

—Amelia.

Dear Scratch,

Thought the Boogeyman came for me tonight. Turns out, it was just a bindle stiff. It happens. Vagabond savages wander into town, not knowing the rules. Then they're stuck. Desperate. The apple knockers come sniffing your hunting grounds.

The bindle punk plunged his claws into my stomach, expecting a shriek. But I only grabbed his wrists and pulled his hands deeper into me. I am the Impaler and the Impaled. The look on my face melted his grin to goo. The poor savaged tried to pull away, but I only squeezed till his wrists crunched. He screamed at me. He begged. He cried blood.

I gave him a headbutt. Fast enough, hard enough, that his neck snapped. His head flopped back, eyes to the sky.

"Go chase yourself," I said.

He ran down the street, head like a used Pez dispenser. Poor, dumb mutt. He's stuck here now. I slipped a key to Post Box 5170 into his pocket before he scrambled. It's the thing to do.

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

They're dead. I was late. Fuck up in communication. How do you botch that? Fucking Circle Jerks. It was here. It was in our room. They're all on the spikes. Chopped up. Parts switched around. Mismatched jigsaw puzzle. Meat kebabs.

Another Rite of the Impaled. Wren and Jean-Baptiste arrived first. And then two Carthians. And then two Acolytes. Now they're all dead. Their faces. They saw it.

I'm going to get on the spike with them. One last time. Going into my lab. Then I'll know what to do.

—Amelia

Dear Scratch,

Two more strings. I cut off the gore-stained white string. Then I remembered. It was on the finger of a janitor I ate. Didn't mean to finish him, but his pump stopped. I took his blood and his quirk.

I cut off the black string. I'm going up the mountain. Going to the cross.

Do you still get the voices, Scratch? Fading till they're whispers. You know. When you can't quite hear the words. Just murmurs. That's the worst. Eh, Scratch? The odd word. TV static. Dying ghosts.

Will I end up just a voice inside its guts? Behind its eyes? But I'm strong at Mental Thuggee. Maybe I'll strangle it, till it's just a faint voice in its own body.

Will you feel it, Scratch? Like it felt it when you went in the river. Another voice. Put your mitts on that. I got no strings now.

Do me a favor and say it one more time. Come on, Scratch. Say it. Listen to yourself. No one says it like you, Scratch.

The best is yet to come.

—Amelia

Is it science? That's a complicated question. Modern scientific study has only been around for a century or two, and it's safe to say that the Order's still got much of the old philosophy in it. Reproducibility and peer review are cornerstones of modern science, but unfortunately, they aren't always practical for the work that we do. There are methods in the Coils, in the Scales, and in all our experimentation, but the truth is that sometimes all we have are anecdotes, stories, singular anomalies that vanished as soon as they appeared. Sometimes I wish the world were much tidier, but it's never seen fit to agree with me. Besides, there's a sort of charm in it, don't you think? You never know what could be lurking just out of sight, waiting to be discovered.

[pause, Mire laughs]

Yes. Sometimes it discovers us. I like to keep it the other way around, it's much easier on everyone involved, and doesn't make as much of a mess. Hm, yes, where was I? Science?

[pause]

Underneath it all, I think the Order speaks to our deep need to know, to understand, and to master. Humans have been doing that since they had brains big enough to manage it, and we were all human, once. We do have our more fringe elements, of course, but by and large, I like to think most of us are a rational sort. It helps keep things from going off the rails. I'm reminded though, of something you might find valuable. Your sponsor values anecdotes, correct? I have one, gathered by an associate who was willing to do me a favor. Let me see if I can find it —

[pause, rustling]

There.

"You new?"

"Uh huh."

"First time trying the steps?"

"Yeah."

"It'll change your fucking life."

"They said that when I got baptized, but it didn't do shit."

"Hehe, yeah. My dealer said it to me when he fronted me my first oxycoffin."

"Bet he was right though."

"Nah. I was already so fucked up on meth; the oxy was like coffee with too much cream."

"Sometimes wish it were still drugs. Drugs made more sense than this."

"You just need to do the steps. I was living rough and eating rats. Getting fucked by every Invictus asshole who came down to the burg looking to slum. I probably would've just kissed the sun one day, but I met Dr. Pope, and he showed me the Steps. It set me right up."

"Is Pope the heavy with the busted up nose?"

"That's Pushkin. He's Pope's guy. You start walking right, and he'll be looking out for you too. Last time my old man came sniffing around, looking for a little action, Pushkin broke his legs with a length of rebar and pulled out his fucking teeth with pliers! I swear to Christ, I never laughed so much. Getting right with the ones who made you who you are is part of the steps. You square things, and you get powerful. Nothing can fucking touch you then."

"I guess. Confidence is a powerful thing."

"Confidence? I need confidence like I need another cunt. You walk around with confidence without anything to back it up, and they'll have the guts out of you. Power is a powerful thing. You got a lighter?"

"Yeah, here."

"When Pushkin was done stomping my sire, I went up and told the old fucker exactly what I thought about him. I unloaded everything I'd been carrying for years, and then I set him on fire with kerosene."

"Jesus!"

"He survived. More or less. But I got this out of the deal."

"Pretty nice flask. Silver?"

"Yeah. It was his, and I filled it up with kerosene. Now watch this."

"Oh man, don't drink..."

"And this."

"What the shit? How is that not burning you? How are you evening standing that?"

"This is the ninth step. Dr. Pope says Step Nine means you *'Made direct reprisals to such people as harmed you wherever possible, making sure to injure them or others'*."

"And that gives you asbestos skin and a taste for kerosene?"

"No, it gives you something new, something that's yours and only yours. I was pretty tough before I did the ninth Step, but now when I sip kerosene, fire just tickles a little."

"What does that feel like?"

"It's like my skin is a shell, and inside I'm screaming and thrashing around. You ever get the coke bugs crawling under your skin?"

"Shit yeah."

"It's like that, except it feels like I'm the bugs, and I'm trying to get out. I did a couple other steps right too, and there's some other tricks I know, and it's the same. It's like I'm trying to claw my way out of my own skin."

"Why the fuck would you do it? That sounds horrible."

"No, that's the thing. It feels so fine. It's better than anything I ever did, breathing or not, but it's not drugs, blood, or sucking your sire's toes because he made a slave out of you. It's all you. It's like getting high off yourself."

"Well, if it works for you I guess it works for you. How do you get started? What's first?"

"Step One is admitting you're powerless over your frailties, and that your life has become tormented."

"So how do I actually do that? Do I have to set somebody on fire?"

"It's not like that. There's no payment for services rendered like the shit the spearmen or the pagan bitches do. This ain't religion. You follow the Steps, and you walk them to scary places where you don't know who's going to live or die, stand or crawl. And the steps force you to decide if you're going to get fucked or be the fucker, and if you work the process, and you do it with an open heart, then what you take back is a..."

"Asbestos skin and a taste for kerosene."

"Hehe, yeah. You get what you get, but it's what you're supposed to get, right? Did you meet Peg when you came in?"

"Was she the little girl with the goat? I seen some weird shit, but the look that goat gave me scared the balls off me."

"Only people in the program know this, but Peg worked all the steps. Started out as a scared little thing, now nobody fucks with her. She's Pope's Number Two now. I heard she got Goat when she did the eleventh step, and the goat is some kind of god. I also heard that she swapped her heart for Goat's heart, and Goat is now immortal, and she's invulnerable. I also heard that she's really Goat, and the Peg we see is like an illusion. I don't know. But if you're having trouble making a step work, she's the one to talk to. She's sweet as carrot cake if you bring some beef liver or a marrow bone for Goat to gnaw."

"This is too much to take in all at once. I got to process. This isn't like a cult, is it? I did the cult thing, and it never helped."

"No way. It's just people trying to help people through their recovery. You been a victim for a long time. It's all over you. This is like AA, but for being shit on instead of booze. When you do the steps, nobody is going to shit on you again."

"Well what do I have to do tonight?"

"You just stand up, tell us who you are. You can tell your story too if you want."

"I'm not... I don't really talk in front of people. Groups of people."

"Hey, I'll be here. You ignore everyone else, and you just talk to me, ok? Look at me, and talk to me. You don't need to worry about anybody else here, because they were all standing where you are now, and they all want the same thing for you. They want you to find your power, to find your strength, and to remember how to stand."

"I don't know if I ever knew how to stand."

"You doing anything after this?"

"I don't know. Probably looking for a bite or something."

"Let's get together after. We can work on your first step, or just talk or whatever. I really got a feeling about you. I think you're going to be one of the good ones."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. What do you say about after? Get a bite with me, and then hang out? My place is just down the street."

"I don't think... no, fuck it. I'd love to. It's been years since I could just talk to somebody who had any idea what I was saying, or who gave a shit if they did."

"Then it's a date."

I understand that well enough. I've always been a curious sort, myself, even when it meant looking for things that some felt were best left hidden. I got my start years ago, up in Massachusetts — Harvard, Yale, MIT. Each time, some small-minded soul would take offense, but my family was old money, and had ways of smoothing over wrinkles like that. In a way, I'm thankful to finally be rid of daylight academia. Those "Institutional Review Boards" and I never got along. I just wish it wasn't so... sudden.

[pause]

Oh, it wasn't because of anything I did. It was just one of those things, completely random chance, and nothing more. I was at the docks to pick something up — a valuable shipment, something I couldn't leave to a courier — when it found me. I felt something grab my ankle, something that wasn't quite a human hand, and the next thing I knew, I was in the water. I got a look at its eyes as it pulled me close. People say that shark eyes are cold and dead looking, but they aren't; not like that thing's eyes. I don't think there was as much as a glimmer of intelligence behind them. Its teeth ripped my neck open, and then my shoulder. There was a great deal of blood.

[pause]

We cannot choose who Sired us, Miss Black. You should know that as well as anyone. All we can do is make the best of what we're given... or not, I suppose, that's an option as well. None of us can deny the heritage of our Blood, but we need not be its slaves.

[long pause]

On that subject, would you like an anecdote for your records? I know some of our colleagues would disapprove of its contents, but both you and your patron seem like a more enlightened sort. It's rather self-congratulatory, I feel, but it does provide us with an opposing view of what it means to be the child of one's sire.

We are the Brides of Dracula.
We are yesterday, today, and tomorrow.
We are the wisdom of the dark earth,
and we do such things.
Call us Mara, Anoushka, and Lisette.
We will wear these names until chrysalis.
We have sloughed off so many names.
Let us end. Let us begin.

Let us link arms and dance —
ring around, mouth to tail.
Hear us, O Mother Night!
Mother who gave us birth,
so that we might drink the living bones
to defy the tyranny of worms.

Hear us, O Mother Night!
To thee do we feast
on banished children of Eve.
By our birthright, the immortal gods
may not lay hands on us.
We eat not at their table.

Hear us, O Mother Night!
To thee do we sing.
We are the ravenous chorus.
We are the Furies' chant.
Its discord shatters the chains
that fetter the soul,
destroys the harmony
that dulls the mind.

Let our frenzied song fall upon the ears of angels.
Let the sky rain feathers and tears.
By our fearful art, we weave words.
By our fearful art, we paint a legend.
By our fearful art, we sculpt a paradigm.

Man doth not yield himself to stagnation, decay, or
the curse,
save only through the weakness of his feeble will.
A man might be tricked into a stronger will.
A man might be fooled into transfiguration.
By our fearful art.

We sing of the Son of the Dragon.
Call him Vladislaus. Call him Tepes.
Call him Kaziglu Bey. Call him Dracula.
He who planted the forest of corpses.
We who perched in its branches and ate of its fruit.
We call him husband.

The Impaler Prince, epic hero of damnation.
What a base thing he was when we met.
A bloated tick. A gorged grave maggot.
Fallen in battle, risen as a revenant wretch,
bereft of clan and rational thought.
How came this grotesque accident?
Where for this cadaverous afterbirth?
Had a corruption fermented in its breast,
planted by the teeth or blood of some past fiend?
We do not know.

Writhing like a larvae, in battlefield muck,
gnawing corpses, licking gore-encrusted blades,
slicing his tongue in infantile zeal and drinking what he bled,
pushing fingers into the blood-soaked mud
and noisily suckling the vermiculated tit.
All hail the Voivode of Wallachia.

"Give this piteous grubbling release," we agreed.
Then we recognized him beneath the filth.
Even as he rolled in slime, he screamed at the sky,
as if in violent argument with God,
as if still in pitched battle.
He prattled on about being a better Lucifer,
a better Judas.

There is an ignorance of such chthonic depth,
that it swallows the stars and gulfs of night.
It is a rarefied delusion to assume
that Heaven singled one out for the curse.
In the dying light, illimitable ignorance becomes power.
In the malleable universe, what is believed can
eventually be.
Knowledge brings intimacy with one's limitations.
We bear the curse of knowing.
He does not.

The crawling prince bellowed on.
The sky did not answer.
But we did.

We locked together in a lusty knot
with him at our center.
Mouth to tail — blood in — blood out —
ever returning in to the self-same spot.
Three sires. One nativity.
He ascended from revenant leech to Kindred kind.
He took the best of our far-flung bloodlines.
He knew nothing of clan or inherited limitations.
In himself, he had no borders.
Potential everlasting.

Our creation rose upright,
gestalt of blood and will.
The origins of his damnation were a mystery,
but we made his damnation our own,
as the sculptor dares presume ownership
over earth-spawned marble.

With the gift of lucidity fading fast,
he crowed a bitter war laugh
and charged into the gloom for further battle,
set out to corrupt the earth and confound Heaven.
Our deluded Dragon Knight, tilting at gods.

We are the Brides of Dracula,
and we refine our creation.
In the deep sleep, he slumbers before us now.
Let us link arms and dance —
ring around, mouth to tail.
By our fearsome art, we shape torporous dreams.
He conquers the nightmare continents.
He impales all past selves and kills
any memory that would make him less than he ought to be.
With every slumber, we purge his impurities.
With every slumber, the flesh more resembles the legend.
Every slumber a chrysalis.

He has been a brute monster,
and sorrowful scholar,
and temperate teacher,
and student and prophet.
What he believes, he can do.
And so we sheer away all memory of boundaries.
Should we desire him to soar,
we have but to erase knowledge of the earth's pull.

He awoke believing he sired us.
And so we became his childer.
He woke believing he mentors us.
And so we taught him as his pupils.
Our words became his words.
We shape his dreams and the story.
We influence the storytellers.
Verse, like water, requires only time
to carve the mountains.

We are the Brides of Dracula.
Call us legend crafters.
Call us paradigm shapers.
We refine our creation.
We guide our sleepwalker.
Through him, we explore unlit possibility.
Through him, we fathom forbidden change.
Through him, we subvert the curse and tyrannous stars.

We are the Dragon,
by our three heads,
we are greater than our sum.
Swear to the axe!
Swear to the mysteries!
Swear to the dying light!

We are the Dragon,
and he is our son,
our experiment,
our Great Work.
Let us end. Let us begin.

I suppose. I'm sure you understand the need for security. I've found the need to fortify my working space against intrusion, and they double as both that and a novel experiment in animal perception. Sometimes it's a bit difficult to tell what's legitimate, and what's a false alarm. You haven't seen anything out of place, have you?

[pause]

You're certain?

[pause]

I find it fascinating that even after centuries of experimentation, we have only the faintest idea of how malleable the Curse truly is. We make new discoveries all the time, and find out that old ones weren't as simple as they looked at first glance. Isn't it grand?

[pause]

See, you get it. I—

[background noise. The same low growl, in the distance, followed by a throaty, hissing bellow, and a cacophony of other calls. It continues until the recording ends.]

Is someone there?

[pause]

Very funny. Is someone there? Can you see anything?

[pause]

Shut that off.

[end of recording]

Salvaged what I could. Either the mad doctor kept no technical notes, or they got up and walked off before the fire, oh so coy and mysterious. Here's a sampler of his deepest, most personal thoughts, instead. I hope you'll forgive me.

—Frances

I emerged from Chrysalis this afternoon. The sun no longer mires my brain down in sleep, and it feels as though I've escaped from a prison. If I so choose, I can devote twice as much time to my research — and I would be a fool not to.

Barnaby suffered significant injury tonight. I have prepared skin grafts to expedite healing. The procedure is simple, if well practiced. Skin grafts will soak in fresh human blood until tomorrow. I will then wrap them around Barnaby's damaged regions (in this case along the scalp, neck, shoulders, and back). Injections (two parts blood, one part Vitae) follow, along the edges of the graft, at intervals of half an inch. I've set up a morphine drip to tide Barnaby over until then, but it's done nothing to stop his complaints.

I have endeavored to broaden the scope of this procedure's applications. Kindred flesh grafted to living material (human and animal) has always resulted in necrosis for me (though a colleague swears she was successful). There has been some success grafting animal flesh to human bodies and vice versa. Lycanthrope skin?

Come to think of it, this very same procedure brought Barnaby into my employ.

The sky still glows over Research Triangle Park. Tonight it is a salmon pink. None of the other Defiant claim responsibility or knowledge, and I am inclined to believe them. They claim to be too busy to look into it, and I am disinclined to believe that. They're waiting for me to investigate by air. They know it is only a matter of time before curiosity and compulsion win out. They know me well enough. Wings can be a burden of a sort.

There is a tree growing from the wreckage of the Cabe Lands Cemetery, by the Eno River. It casts no shadow. Why?

Surgery was a complete failure. Physical evidence of possession by a malevolent entity remains elusive. Barnaby has begun disposal.

Experiments in the reanimation of animal tissue continue.

The basic process is simple. A syringe of my blood - at least 50 mL, undiluted - is introduced to the animal cadaver. I've conducted three injections on the ventral surface of the trunk, one on the ventral surface of the neck, and one on the dorsal surface of the trunk, near the spine. My choice of site seems completely irrelevant. The Vitae knows. Once introduced, the cadaver rises, and seems to gain both a normal range of movement and sharpened predatory instincts. Of course, this new creature cannot feed itself, rendering it dependent on the original source of Vitae. I rather like this arrangement.

The process has limitations. Of note, the cadaver cannot self-repair, and retains both pre and postmortem injuries. I want to see how far I can take this. Will attempt to animate tissues of several animals conjoined together.

Slept four hours in soil collected from Martinique, and am now displaying arachnid features. Field guide notes many species of tarantula native to the region, notably most of the genus *Avicularia*. Very colorful.

I spent the day asleep, melded with the acidic muck of peat harvested from the Cúl na Móna bog in Ireland. I experienced a vivid dream, all the more notable because I don't dream anymore. Torch-lit faces surrounded me, all of them yelling at me. I was important - a priest, perhaps. No, that's not it. I was a king. I raised my arm, and something sharp struck it, breaking it. The harvest had been poor, and they held me responsible. They bound me, arms over legs, knees to chest, cast me in to the dark water, letting it swallow me whole. I looked up. There was no sunlight, no entry hole through the floating layer of peat-it had closed its mouth. They had been chanting a name. An important name. A name that looks gigantically down. Do I dare remember it?

I awoke to find my skin slightly darker, of a slightly leathery feel. No other outward signs of change.

There are worlds within worlds. Our Lordly cousins will prattle on and on about controlling human thought, wax poetically about their tinker-toy dominion over living culture, but it already plays out, much more elegantly, across the whole animal kingdom.

Take, for example, the microorganism *Toxoplasma gondii*.

It's a devious little parasite. It spreads in the feces of the common house cat, and when it infects rats or mice, it reprograms their brains. They become more active and less afraid--they're even attracted to the scent of cat urine, which is normally anathema to rodent sensibilities. It manipulates the rodent back into the cat's mouth, so that the parasite may continue its life cycle in the only place it can, within the feline belly.

I follow the life cycles of parasites with great interest. There are patterns there. Something on the periphery of thought. Something familiar...

Back on track. Does *Toxoplasma gondii* affect the human host? Between 10 and 20 percent of Americans are infected, perhaps even more. Pregnant women are told to avoid it, out of risk of damage to the fetus. In healthy adults, it was thought to cause little effect. The parasite rests in the brain, dormant. But just how dormant is it?

I recently read a paper by a living Czech scientist claiming to have suffered behavioral modification by the parasite. He cites increased recklessness, changes in sexual behavior, impaired motor skills, and lower reaction times (which may account for an untold number of automobile fatalities). Other studies link toxoplasmosis to a variety of mental diseases including bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and schizophrenia.

Let the Lords boast about their layperson's knowledge of operant conditioning. They all look like children proudly tromping about in dusty, adult military uniforms discovered in the attic.

The living study is limited, however. It removes the human too far from the rat. The closest these studies can get to observe a human in predatory danger is by how recklessly one crosses a busy street. I can make the data pure. I can study the infected human as prey. For the next few months, I will limit my hunting to those confirmed as hosts to *Toxoplasma gondii* (with a little help from the Duke University medical records). Perhaps Friedman would be willing to co-author. In a second study, perhaps, I could manipulate my body to demonstrate feline features.

There are whole worlds that never see the sun. Movile Cave is one such world - five million years ago, it was cut off from the outside, and it remained sealed until a group of surveyors chanced upon it while digging in the rock. The creatures inside it were trapped, with no way to leave, or to obtain nutrients from the sun-lit ecosystems outside.

They didn't die out. They thrived.

Sunlight forms the basis of most of the world's ecosystems, but in places it cannot reach, other sources of energy pick up the slack. In Movile, everything revolves around mats of bacteria, no thinner than paper, that float upon the water. Much like bacteria in the deep sea, they derive energy from inorganic compounds, replacing photosynthesis with far more arcane chemical reactions. In turn, they are food for the countless invertebrates that crawl, slither, and swim through the dark.

Of course, the bacteria aren't so kind as to produce breathable oxygen; instead, they turn the air into a noxious soup of sulfur fumes and carbon dioxide. Breathers start running into trouble at around five or six hours. The things in the cave have not only adapted to this environment, they are thriving in it. Many of them lack eyes, instead relying wholly on senses that are far more useful in complete darkness. Some of them are pale, thin things, seemingly translucent, but no less deadly for it. They live, breed, and die without ever seeing the sun.

And it's in Wallachia, too. I would kill for samples of its clay, but I doubt that would satisfy me. Something about the place beckons to me, and not just intellectually. What else lies down there in the dark?

Perhaps it will be my Galapagos.

Friedman and I had another fruitful meeting yesterday. As it turns out, he's identified several locations of note within the Triangle - sites he feels could prove fruitful to my research. He claims he's seen things there that I'd be interested in, and used a great deal of hyperbole. He doesn't do that often. It made me suspicious.

He did provide me with tangible evidence of... something. A cockroach specimen the size of my hand, pinned and mounted in fine taxonomic fashion. It smelled faintly of oil and plastic, and when I peeled back its carapace, I saw its wings were glossy black. It reminded me of a garbage bag. He claims he got it from the test site I've designated A-3, a hospital incinerator that seems to have fallen into disuse. If it bears fruit, I would be pleasantly surprised. It would be nice to have a novel Nest so close to my laboratory.

Everything went wrong. What didn't I see? Why didn't I see it?

We went to test site A-3, but when we arrived, the place was deserted. I couldn't see or smell anything, alive or dead, much less the hive of creatures he promised me. It was just an incinerator room, covered in a decade's worth of dust, with no signs of disturbance anywhere. Friedman, though, swore there was something there. He told me he'd teach me how to see it right then, that he had a Scale prepared and ready.

The poor bastard never got the chance. Something came out of nowhere. I didn't get a good look at it, at first - just a blur of steel and blue light. It slammed him into the ground, and tore into him with claws like knives. I took offense, and got very, very angry. I tackled it off him, and wrestled with it, but it wasn't long before it started to overpower me. I remember looking up and seeing its face - a ring of eyes, bright blue and blazing in the darkness like tiny stars. That was it.

I still don't remember how I got out, much less with Friedman slung over my shoulder. I don't think it chased me. I haven't seen it since, but that's no guarantee it's gone away. What if it's -

No. Fear will paralyze me. I will make this entity and its lair a known factor. Until then, I've passed on word that A-3 is off-limits for the foreseeable future.

Friedman remains in torpor. I expected him to be awake by now, but it seems he was damaged more severely than I thought. I should have seen it going in; the Jiang Shi is notoriously frail, and not just by the standards

of my Clan. If I'd warned him, then perhaps he'd still be moving, and I wouldn't have his useless, torpid body lying under my lab bench.

Would he have listened to me if I had? What did the fool see in there that I did not?

I must find it. I must make it a known quantity.

Friedman is still torpid. I've started using him as a rest for my instruments. I have three micropipettes secured under each hand, and I've stacked boxes of slides on top of his chest. Childish, perhaps, but am I not allowed to make use of him while he's slumbering in my inner sanctum? Perhaps it would be asking too much for this treatment to actually wake him up. An awakened, angry Friedman is preferable to a completely unresponsive one, especially when his presence here is both inconvenient and incriminating.

I suppose I could move him to another secure location, but I feel better having eyes on him all the time. The only ones who come in here are Barnaby, and myself and Barnaby knows better. I just wish I could do something more productive with him - more productive, and less petty. It feels like he's done this just to spite me, the bastard.

Damnation.

I should've known better. I should have known someone so loosely tethered to their existence couldn't withstand even the most cursory autopsy. Barnaby tidied up the mess, but things just became much more complicated.

More security is in order. They cannot find out.

I found the soil samples that Friedman brought from B-2, a site he thought was related to A-3 somehow. Against my better judgment, I mixed up a bed of mud and fell asleep.

I dreamed again. This time, it was the eyes, staring at me from across campus. It knew where I was, and what I'd done. There was nothing I could do to hide from it. Barnaby sustained serious injury before I pulled myself out of it, but as before, he will pull through.

I can see it. Or can I? Perhaps a more novel approach to this problem is in order. Something trustworthy, and more adept at self-defense than Barnaby.



Finally, here's the doctor at his "best," writing his notes for a speech. Maybe it'll make some of the previous notes fall into place.

—Frances

Ladies and gentlemen of the Symposium, I bid you good evening. It's always an honor to present one's findings to one's peers, and tonight, I've brought a little something to sweeten the pot for you. Some of you can probably smell it already, to which I say — it's there for a very good reason. Be patient.

My latest research subject is, to put it in proper article form: A Novel Methodology for the Consumption of Incorporeal Entities.

Now, you may be asking yourselves if such a thing is even possible. As you are all learned individuals, you know there are a great many things out there that share the night with us. Some enterprising, curious, or unwise Kindred have learned how to prey on them. While they might not have human blood per se, some of them have fluids and energies that are close enough for government work. Obviously, there are practical concerns, such as discovery, but in some cases, the creature's very form proves a seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

Take, for example, a common ghost. It has no body; it is ectoplasmic residue left behind after a mortal's death. It's the spiritual equivalent of a bloodstain. Yet, ghosts are common, easily contained, and possessed of some form of spiritual energy. If we were to tap into this new resource, we would gain access to a new and novel source of sustenance, as well as a medium for more esoteric workings. But how?

I believe I've found a way, which I will demonstrate right here. My assistant, Barnaby, is in possession of a ghost — unless it's now the other way around, in which case he's in trouble.

(pause for laughter)

Say hello, Barnaby.

Let me direct your attention over here, to the test apparatus. As you can see, it has a large holding tank, filled with a gelatinous collagen suspension—a little something I cooked up myself. One part primate, one part pig, and a little dash of jellyfish. Why jellyfish? Because as it turns out, at least one species is allegedly biologically immortal, and I thought it might be appropriate. It's worked rather well.

Now, the blood. There's always blood, isn't there?

(pause for laughter)

The machinery attached to the holding tank is a modified EMF projector, broadcasting on frequencies associated with the neural activity of a living being. This is the bait. Some ghosts are very much attracted to the presence of the living, and this little setup is enough to fool one into thinking an available body is nearby.

(Pause for reactions. Perhaps call a volunteer, skilled in Auspex, to act as spotter?)

The spirit enters the vat, and cannot escape. It is, in effect, trapped in the gelatin; the mixture has enough mystical resonance to seem like a body, but it is not. At best, the ghost can thrash around, forming shapes and bubbles in the mixture.

(Point out interesting features in the gelatin. Perhaps some will be identifiable?)

As you can see, the results are quite spectacular. The thrashing does look dangerous, but don't be alarmed. The only thing you have to fear is getting your clothes a little dirty. If you so desire, you can even scoop up a little in your hand—like so—and consume it. In fact, I invite you to.

Thank you all, once again. It's a pleasure to be here. Enjoy the buffet!

(end, hold for applause, laughter)



Appendix: Trade Secrets

Each covenant keeps certain tricks close to their chests, holding them as edges and advantages. For some covenants, these secrets are expressions of religion, and thus must only be shared with believers. For others, these tricks act as recruiting tools to entice fence sitters. Others still use their trade secrets to ensure loyalty in sworn members. Regardless of the covenant, each uses their unique skills as a method of enforcing hierarchy; some members are more valuable than others are, and members who are more valuable get the best toys.

With Storyteller discretion, some of the Merits may be used outside their respective covenants. For example, the Carthian Merit “Mobilize Outrage” doesn’t offer any hard reasons why it couldn’t be used outside the Movement, or even by human characters. Its inclusion here reflects the fact that it’s generally taught to Carthians, and is an important tool to the Movement. While the sections state that such Merits require a dot of Covenant Status, use your best judgment for your chronicles. In some cases, for example “Toss That Shit Right Back,” it could apply for non-Kindred characters as well.

Carthians: The Tools of Revolution

In the Movement, you learn tools for survival, and tools for establishing and maintaining order in chaotic circumstances. Everything runs a tenuous balance between practical and experimental.

Merits

Members of the Carthian Movement have access to the following Merits. Unless otherwise noted, they have an additional prerequisite of Status (Carthian Movement) • or higher.

Alley Cat (• to •••)

Prerequisites: Athletics ••, Stealth ••, Streetwise ••

Carthians are the vampires most intimately familiar with the city streets. A Carthian with Alley Cat moves through the city unseen as any Nosferatu and Mekhet might, and gets where she’s going unimpeded.

Effect: When rolling to navigate, hide, evade, or pursue in your character’s home city streets, Alley Cat takes effect. With the one-dot version of the Merit, four successes mean an exceptional success on these rolls. With two dots, three successes make an exceptional success. With three dots, any successful roll is considered exceptional. Note that this doesn’t affect actual successes in extended or contested actions, but affords the advantages of exceptional success regardless of successes rolled.

Army of One (• to •••••)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status at equal or higher level

Carthians always have each other’s backs. A ranking member of the Movement is never alone.

Effect: To activate Army of One, the character must make a call or otherwise contact her allies in the Movement. This takes an instant action. Roll Presence + Politics + Carthian Status. In ten minutes minus the successes rolled, her backup arrives. She receives one backup Carthian per dot in Army of One. They will fight for her, or contribute to teamwork actions. If faced with a deadly or overwhelming threat, they may run if they fail a Resolve + Composure roll.

CARTHIAN BACKUP

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 2, Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Drive 2, Firearms 2, Intimidation 2, Politics 2, Weaponry 2

Disciplines: Celerity 1, Resilience 1, Vigor 1

Merits: Carthian Status 1

Initiative 5, Defense 4, Willpower 4, Health 8

Humanity: 5

Equipment: Baseball Bat (2 Damage), Handgun (1 Damage), Shotgun (3 Damage, 9-again), Leather Jacket (1/1 Armor)

A character may only use Army of One once per story. For each Carthian Backup that meets torpor or Final Death, the character loses a dot of Army of One. The Sanctity of Merits rule (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 109) applies. At Storyteller discretion, the backup may have a couple of additional, relevant dots or slightly different equipment.

Casual User (••)

Prerequisites: Not a member of the Carthian Movement

While your character is not a member of the Carthian Movement, she spends enough time around them to be considered one of the crew.

Effect: This Merit provides a handful of advantages:

- Your character receives a +1 bonus to all Social interactions with Carthian Movement members, as if she had a single dot of Covenant Status. While she cannot purchase Carthian Law Merits, she can count as a Carthian with a single Status dot for the purpose of Carthian Law consensuses and effects.
- Once per story, she can draw on a dot of **Allies: Carthians, Contacts: Carthians, Safe Place, or Herd**. This should come at the cost of a small favor from the Movement.
- If she ever formally joins the Carthian Movement, she sheds this Merit and adopts two dots of Status: Carthian Movement, essentially jumping up the ranks beyond the average recruits.

Court Jester (••)

Prerequisites: City Status ••, Politics ••

Many domains refuse to take Carthian members seriously, since members of the Movement point out the failings of the status quo, while not having enough power to enact solutions. While this can be a stark disadvantage in the political theater, some Carthians have learned to manipulate this reputation into a mantle of powerful punditry, where they're expected to tell the city when the emperor is naked. The political establishment effectively becomes unable to silence its most ardent critic. A wise administration finds a way to work with a Court Jester, not against her.

Effect: A Carthian with this Merit cannot suffer political repercussions short of death for the act of criticizing or challenging the establishment. A Prince or other authority figure attempting to enact political punishments, including but not limited to: censure, exile, removal of positions, destruction of property, or stripping Clan, Covenant, or City Status, finds his own City Status reduced by one dot as the city withdraws support. The Court Jester gains a Beat.

Note that this does not prevent clandestine punishments, or indirect reprisals.

Devotion Experimenter (••)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status ••, Science ••

Since, in many cities, the Carthian Movement has the fewest elders of any covenant, some Carthians specialize in studying Devotions, in order to make the most of their lower-level Disciplines. A Devotion Experimenter's task is to research new Devotions and teach their effects to her fellow Carthians.

Effect: A Devotion Experimenter is better at learning and utilizing Devotions than your average vampire is. She subtracts

one Experience from the cost of any Devotion, to a minimum of one Experience. Additionally, she gains the 9-again quality on all Devotion activation rolls. If she teaches a Devotion to another vampire, she gains a Beat, and her student enjoys her cost break on the power.

Fucking Thief (•)

Prerequisites: Subterfuge •••

Fucking Thieves, or Magpies to the less resentful, are Carthians that specialize in stealing the secrets of other organizations. While they can't dig in deep enough to master these tricks, they can learn enough to approximate them.

Effect: A Carthian with this Merit can buy a single covenant advantage reserved for another group, at one dot. For example, she might steal a first level Mystery of the Dragon, a Theban Sorcery, or Crúac ritual, or an Invictus Merit. This stolen knowledge is imperfect at best. Any failures with the stolen knowledge are automatically considered dramatic failures. Any Experience costs apply normally; this Merit functionally adds one Experience to the cost.

This Merit may not be taken multiple times. The dot of covenant advantage cannot be used as a prerequisite for another purchased Merit or ability.

Jack-Booted Thug (••)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status ••, City Status •, Intimidation •••

A Carthian with this Merit is widely recognized as a loose cannon, willing and ready to use violence to make a point. While everyone suspects she's willing to fly off the handle, intent is (usually) not a crime.

Effect: If a Jack-Booted Thug makes a threat, it carries weight. Her menace diffuses political action. Using Jack-Booted Thug requires a point of Willpower, an instant action, and a Presence + Intimidation + City Status roll. Characters with equal or less City Status than her successes are affected. Affected characters may not act against her or other Carthians in the scene either Physically or Socially without spending a point of Willpower. This Willpower does not add to the dice pool, and additionally, the dice pool suffers her City Status as a penalty.

Jack-Booted Thug can only be used once per scene. Physical violence from the Thug or any of her protected Carthians ends its effects immediately.

Mobilize Outrage (• to •••, Style)

Prerequisites: Brawl ••, Willpower ••••

Your character has the hands of a revolutionary. She fights with the passion of the oppressed. She breaks skulls the way a slave breaks his bondage.

Effect: Your character gains access to the following effects at each subsequent level of this Merit.

Strike to Preempt (•): Against an overwhelming opponent, a revolutionary's only choice is to strike first and to strike so

hard the opponent cannot strike back. Your character puts everything into a single attack to end things quickly. When spending Willpower on your character's attack, add her Willpower dots to the attack roll instead of the normal +3. This technique may only be used in the first turn of combat. She cannot take an action in the next turn, and loses her Defense.

Unbreakable (••): When resisting Mental or Social coercion, including from Disciplines, spending Willpower adds your character's Willpower dots to a contested roll, or subtracts from the opponent's roll on a resisted roll. This occurs instead of the normal +3 or -2 from spending Willpower. Unbreakable may only be used when your character is actively engaged in combat, or will be initiating combat in the next turn. This includes use of Strike to Preempt.

Dying On Your Feet (•••): The Carthian with this ability remains standing and fighting long after most vampires would fall. Her will forces her forward despite crippling injuries. While in combat, your character suffers no wound penalties, and is not subject to torpor when her Health boxes are full of lethal damage. Only aggravated damage, and thus Final Death, may stop her. At the end of the combat scene, she will fall into torpor if her Health boxes are still full of lethal damage.

Sell Out (••••)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status ••••, City Status ••••, Politics •••

A Carthian that takes the role of Prince often finds herself assailed from all sides. Critics from without question why she's in the Movement and yet claiming traditional rulership. Critics within look at her as a sellout. Many Carthians take similar but distinctly different roles when they lead a domain. This affords them some leeway with the Movement, and enough respect from outside to get the job done.

Effect: A Sell Out "Not Prince" enjoys the benefits of a single dot of Covenant Status in each covenant represented in the city. She gains the social advantages and dice pool benefits afforded those Status dots, and may learn covenant-specific advantages if she can find a teacher. Any time she would lose City Status, she can instead lose Carthian Status. She does not lose this Merit if she falls below the required Carthian Status. Indeed, she can be drummed out of the Movement entirely, and maintain it.

Additionally, she may count as a Carthian or not a Carthian at any time for the purposes of Carthian Law, as she sees fit.

Smooth Criminal (••)

Prerequisites: Politics •, Streetwise ••, Subterfuge ••

Your character always has the right double-talk, alibi, or non sequitur to diffuse a situation where she or an ally faces accusations of wrongdoing.

Effect: Once per story, your character may attempt to deflect an accusation made against her or another member of the Movement in the city, by mortal or Kindred sources.

Roll Manipulation + Subterfuge. If anyone wishes to push the issue, they can contest with Wits + Subterfuge, penalized by your character's Streetwise. If you are successful, the current scene ends, as your character drops a rhetorical bomb to end immediate debate. It doesn't entirely end debate; the issue can rise again. It also doesn't end captivity.

Toss That Shit Right Back (•)

Prerequisites: Athletics ••, Dexterity •••

When the revolution is backed against the wall and outgunned, the best option is to throw the enemy's weapons right back at them.

Effect: When attacked by a thrown weapon, you may opt to have your character dodge the attack. Roll the dodge normally (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 176). If your successes exceed the opponent's, your character catches the weapon, and tosses it right back. Apply the additional successes as an attack against the opponent. The opponent's Defense does not apply.

Carthian Law

Carthian Law is a hotly debated aspect of the Movement's place in the All Night Society. From whence does it come? Why does it work? When does it become unfair to the will of the people? While these questions have many possible answers, with no covenant-wide consensus, the Movement cannot deny the power of Carthian Law, and wields it as a weapon of revolution, and a method of surviving against established forces.

Unless otherwise noted, Carthian Laws only affect Kindred characters. With Storyteller discretion, ghouls made aware of Kindred law may be subject.

Breaking the Chains (•)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status •

The Vinculum, the blood bond, is one of the oldest, most fearsome tools of Kindred tyrants. To the Movement, blood bonds typically exist as forms of slavery, or in some cases as defense against such slavery. This Law exists as a form of defense against the blood bond, coming from the combined consensus of the local Movement.

Effect: A member of the Movement in good standing can only take Breaking the Chains. The character must be subject to an active blood bond at any stage. She must feed from – and thus become a single step bound to – a number of Carthians. Add one to the City Status dots of his regnant, multiply that number by three. He must feed from Carthians of combined Carthian Status equal to or greater than that number.

Upon doing so, his bond to the regnant shatters, and he establishes a single-step bond to the Carthians involved. He becomes immune to further blood bonds from the former regnant. Additionally, actions that would normally violate the blood bond effectively become an additional Dirge for

the character; thus allowing him to regain Willpower from those actions.

The Merit fades and is refunded per the Sanctity of Merits (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 109) once the bond would have otherwise ended. This includes fading over time, or by death of the former regnant. The character can have multiple instances of this Merit, reflecting additional regnants. This requires additional drinks from Carthians.

Breaking the Chains will not work to break a bond established by a character he's fed from as part of a past Breaking the Chains effort.

Cease Fire (●●●●●)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status ●●●●

Law, at its heart, boasts the ability to bring peace. Cease Fire is a Carthian Law built on that principle, essentially disarming Kindred of their greatest weapons. While this Law can be used to force some degree of peace, it's usually used after a massive upheaval in order to diffuse potential reprisals. After the Uprising of Vancouver in 1989, the Movement laid down this Law to stop the powerful, displaced Invictus status quo from striking back. After all, total disarmament benefits the less armed more than anyone.

Effect: Bringing Cease Fire to bear requires a consensus of at least half the Status-bearing Carthians in the city. Only one participant needs this Merit, however. Once the Cease Fire takes effect, all Disciplines and Devotions in the domain cease to work normally. Any attempt at activating a Discipline fails unless the vampire first spends a point of Willpower, which does not add to the dice pool. This Willpower point can be spent the turn prior in the case of powers that require Willpower for activation normally. If the power requires an activation roll, any dice that come up as 1s cause 1 level of aggravated damage to the user. If the power does not require a roll, it causes the user aggravated damage equal to the level of the power used.

Cease Fire lasts until the Carthian who possesses this Merit either uses a Discipline successfully, leaves the domain, or meets Final Death. Additionally, the user can set a condition for dissolution when laying down the law.

Coda Against Sorcery (● to ●●●●●)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status ●

The largely secular Carthian Movement maintains this ancient practice as a defense against sorcery. Precedent for this Law goes back as far as the Code of Ur-Nammu, over four thousand years ago. In essence, it constructs a set of rules for the way sorcery works or doesn't work, and shuts down anything violating those rules. The Carthian sets a sort of "rules of engagement" for the mystical, and the word of law enforces them.

Effect: When adopting the Coda Against Sorcery, the character signifies whether the Coda applies to all sorceries, a specific variety of blood sorcery, or a single defined ritual. This requires the character to have seen the power in effect, or at least be versed in the basic way it works. Note that this does

apply to non-Kindred magics if the character wishes. Changing the definitions requires the character abandon his current Coda under the Sanctity of Merits rule (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 109) and purchasing a new instance of the Merit.

Characters using a defined sorcery against the character suffer his Merit dots as a penalty on any roll to activate or wield said sorcery against him. If Defense applies against the sorcery, add his Merit dots to his Defense against attacks made with weaponized sorceries.

Empower Judiciary (●●●)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status ●●●

In many domains, a single Kindred is established as interpreter of the law. In Carthian domains, this is frequently not the Kindred at the top of the chain. This Carthian Law establishes a single delegate, which cannot be the highest executive Kindred in the city, as final arbiter of legal matters. The appointed judiciary does not have to be sanctioned by said executive, however. This allows the Movement to appoint a legal arbiter in spite of a Prince's decree. While this allows the Movement a degree of powerful arbitrary power, it has resulted in more than a few "judges" deaths at the hands of an angry Prince.

Effect: The character establishing the judiciary needs possess this Merit, the appointed does not. When appointing a judiciary, the Carthian sacrifices a dot of Willpower and Blood Potency. These dots do not return so long as the judiciary remains empowered.

The empowered judiciary can make proclamations of legal interpretation, which remain inviolate. She must make her proclamation in such a way that the majority of the city is privy, and the proclamation must relate to established or understood prohibitive city law. It does not, however, have to directly coincide with the stated message or intent of the law. For example, "None shall murder another Kindred" can be interpreted as, "Jonathan Palmer is not allowed murdering; mortal or Kindred."

Characters violating the public proclamation lose a dot of City Status. The effect is palpable, if not immediately obvious. Public opinion shifts hard away from the violator. Often, others will step up to fill the void left. If the character has no City Status remaining, he instead suffers aggravated damage equal to the judge's City Status. This is immediately obvious, as the violator's flesh chars.

With additional Blood Potency and Willpower points (to a maximum of 3 each), the judge may be empowered to strip Clan and Covenant Status from violators. Lost Status dots apply to the Sanctity of Merits rule, however, buying lost Status should be difficult at best.

Judiciary appointments last until the judge meets Final Death, or the highest executive power in the city changes hands.

Establish Precedent (●●)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status ●●●●

This Carthian Law forces an enforced law upon on all others to whom it applies. On the surface, this breeds an air

of fairness. On the other hand, a Carthian domain willing to offer up a bombastic martyr can cause immense harm to the rule of a tyrant, or can impose a firm example upon would-be opponents. When the Movement conquered Honolulu, the incoming President had an advisor physically attack him, executed him as a sacrifice, and declared any harm against the Movement punishable through this Law.

Effect: Establish Precedent must be used on the same night a law is. The Carthian invests a dot of Willpower to sign the punishment as precedent, which remains gone so long as the precedent remains in effect. For a year and a day, the Law punishes any further actions that match the violation. Only actions count, not statuses. For example, “being a Nosferatu” won’t be punished, but “using Nightmare to kill” will be. The violator must be consciously breaking the law, and must be aware of the law at the time.

Violators suffer one aggravated damage, and a specific Bane (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 108) chosen at the time the Carthian established the legal precedent. This takes the form of a mark burned into the offender’s flesh, which cannot be healed for a lunar month. The Carthian chooses the location of the brand, and it must be the same for all offenders. A character may be subject to only one such brand at a time.

Weaponize Dissent(••)

Prerequisites: Carthian Status ••

Sometimes, regimes have to change. This truism is both a great motivator for Carthian revolutionaries, and a bitter

truth for all successful Carthian regimes. To the Movement, revolution is almost a ritual, a celebration; it takes the place of religious and political observances in some other covenants. This Carthian Law marks the beginning of revolution; it empowers the lower class to rise up against their superiors. It turns the distrust of authority into a harmful force, making every strike against the status quo strike harder and faster. On the other hand, it also sets up rising stars for rapid removal from their new seats of power. It also protects from invaders from other domains, which while risky, can make a Carthian with this Law invaluable to defend a city from outside attacks.

Effect: Once a Carthian activates this Carthian Law, it remains active for a year and a day. It cannot be deactivated. From that point forward, it takes effect in any scene the Carthian is present for. Unlike many Kindred abilities, her presence can mean her torpid body, or a pile of her ashes. Death does not end Weaponize Dissent.

In any scene, the character is present for, any character’s City Status acts as a weapon bonus to any attack against him. This is to say, on successful attacks, add that much damage to the effect, of the same type. So a corrupt Primogen with City Status •••• suffers four additional levels of damage any time he’s attacked in the Carthian’s presence.

The Law affects all characters with City Status. It cannot under any circumstance ignore a given character. And in the case of invaders from another city, count any City Status they possess in their home city.

Weaponize Dissent is not cumulative; a character is only affected by a single instance in a given scene.

Circle of the Crone: Grave Flowers

The Circle favors creation. They create wildly, and with abandon. Their sorceries are often less practical, but wilder than other groups’. They’re also highly personal; any given coven of witches might have their own signature rituals.

Merits

Members of the Circle of the Crone have access to the following Merits. Unless otherwise noted, they have an additional prerequisite of Status (Circle of the Crone) • or higher.

Chorister (••)

Prerequisites: Not a member of the Circle of the Crone

Your character is not a member of the Circle of the Crone, but is close enough that she’s invited to rituals and observances.

Effect: This Merit provides a handful of advantages:

- Your character receives a +1 bonus to all Social interactions with Circle of the Crone members, as if she had a single dot of Covenant Status. With a teacher, she may purchase the first dot of Crúac and additional rituals. She can also purchase Circle of the Crone Merits.

- Once per story, she can draw on a dot of Allies: Circle of the Crone, Contacts: Circle of the Crone, Mentor, or Herd. This should come at the cost of a small favor.

- If she ever formally joins the Circle of the Crone, she sheds this Merit and adopts two dots of Covenant Status, becoming greater than an average newcomer to the faith does.

Mandragora Garden (• to •••••)

Prerequisites: Safe Place (same level), Crúac •

Your character maintains a garden of ghouled plants. They move and act on their own in slow, almost imperceptible fashion. As well, they act as a vector for your character’s Crúac.

Effect: Your character’s rating in Mandragora Garden determines the rough size, which must correspond with an equal or greater Safe Place. An Acolyte can use Mandragora she’s created herself as if they were her own hands and eyes for the purposes of Crúac rituals. This allows her to use her rituals at a distance. If she’s standing amidst her garden, she may add her Mandragora Garden dots to any Crúac ritual rolls. Additionally, the Acolyte may cast rituals on her garden that would normally last a scene. The magic of the garden sustains these rituals indefinitely. She may have a number of

such rituals active equal to her dots in this Merit. Mandragoras transplanted elsewhere wither and die if not cared for by a character with this Merit.

While she must feed her garden one Vitae per month equal to her dots in Mandragora Garden, the garden will produce twice that quantity in sap, nectar, or other fluids, which serve as animal blood, on which Kindred may feed.

Lastly, because of the intimate association a vampire must keep with such a garden, it becomes an extension of her body. Anyone attacking or otherwise harming the garden provokes her to frenzy as if they attacked her directly.

Note: A vampire's Mandragora take on qualities of her blood. They will bear fruit symbolic of her clan, for example. Some Daeva plants produce pomegranate-like fruits, for example, and Gangrel sometimes create Indian figs. If the character has a Crúac style, this will show up in her plants.

Temple Guardian (• to •••, Style)

Prerequisites: Athletics ••, Brawl ••, Weaponry ••

The Circle of the Crone is no stranger to persecution. Some of the Circle's predecessors developed this Fighting Style in ancient times, so its Gorgons could defend the group from the newly ascendant Lancea et Sanctum's purge of all pagan traditions.

Effect: Your character gains access to the following abilities at their respective dot levels. Temple Guardian abilities can be used together in the same turn, but not with other Fighting Styles. For example, Athena's Armor can be used when your character protects someone with Enyo's Defense.

Athena's Armor (•): Your character stands her ground for her temple, and remains unshaken. During any turn where your character is not attacking, ignore the first level of damage from any attack that hits her.

Enyo's Defense (••): Your character defends her sisters at all costs. So long as your character has access to her Defense, she can reflexively move up to her Speed in yards to intercept an attack against another character. The attack roll is made against your character's Defense (multiple attacker penalties apply normally), and she suffers any resulting damage.

Eris's Glory (•••): Your character's relentless defense of her sisters inspires them to greatness. Any turn where your character takes lethal or aggravated damage from a successful attack, choose an ally to gain the Inspired Condition. Additionally, any wound penalties your character suffers add to her allies' Crúac rolls. Since Crúac takes time, this barely helps in a fight. But your character's blood and suffering bolsters her allies off the battlefield.

Vinal Mythology (••••)

Prerequisites: Crúac •, Presence •••, Expression •••

Your character has established and grooms a reputation, a personal myth that's greater than the truth. She draws power and favor from this network of worship around her.

Effect: To draw a character into her personal mythology, a character must teach a lesson, show Crúac, or otherwise exhibit her personal divinity. Roll Presence + Expression after a significant interaction. If the witness denies her divinity, the roll is contested by their Wits + Composure. If successful, the character receives a "Seed of Her Divinity" Condition. The Acolyte achieves exceptional success on 3 successes instead of 5 on all Social rolls against the character. The character may resolve the Condition at any time by sharing and spreading the Acolyte's myth. The character uses the same Presence + Expression roll to do so.

With this Merit, certain Social Merits become easier to acquire. If she purchases a dot in Allies or Herd, she gains 2 dots instead of one. Previously purchased dots retroactively reward their additional dots as her myth spreads, at a rate of 1 per story. Mark these dots with a half dot on your character sheet, as they are not subject to the Sanctity of Merits rule.

What You've Done For Her Lately (•)

Prerequisites: Crúac ••

Members of the Circle of the Crone favor action. Acts of faith, acts of sacrifice, and acts of creation. The very act of performing Crúac reaffirms an Acolyte's devotion to the old ways, and impresses her sisters.

Effect: Once per story, during a scene where your character has performed a Crúac ritual successfully, you may add the level of the ritual performed to her effective Circle of the Crone Status. This affects her Social dice pools, the level of favor she can pull, and the Social Merits she can interfere with. The effects last for the entire scene.

Crúac Style Merits

Crúac Style Merits reflect the inner fuel, the bloody fertilizer within your character that fuels her Crúac. They not only flavor the results, but they bring an additional layer to the ritual's effect.

All Crúac styles flavor your character's blood sorcery, regardless of whether or not she uses the advantages in a given ritual. Your Merit dots add to any rolls to identify a magical effect as coming from your character, if the investigator is familiar with your character's sorcery. She may spend a point of Willpower upon casting a ritual in order to "mask" these identifiers, so long as she's not benefiting from her Style.

Crúac Style Merits

Crúac Style Merits reflect the inner fuel, the bloody fertilizer within your character that fuels her Crúac. They not only flavor the results, but they bring an additional layer to the ritual's effect. Think of the casting of Crúac as a vine, and the desired effect the fruit. Crúac Styles are a flower that grows along that vine. Adding a Style's effect is optional; you choose before making the Crúac ritual rolls whether or not your character

wishes the additional effect. Your character may only have one Crúac Style. She may eventually shed one and adopt another, but this is a redefining moment in her life that must accompany a loss in Humanity as she faces the truth of her mystical Vitae and a rebirth of person.

In addition to their basic mechanical effects, these Styles should be reflected in narration and effect. Higher-level Styles have more dramatic effects. While the effects may not always be obvious, they should be present in the story. If the character fails her Crúac roll, the effects become a burden at least, but more commonly an outright problem for her. With Dramatic Failure, they become a persistent menace.

Crúac Styles use a feature called “Magnitude.” The ritual level used, or the character’s Style dots determine a Style’s Magnitude, whichever is lower. Therefore, a character with a four-dot Style casting a third level ritual has a Magnitude of 3.

The following three Styles are the most common exhibited by Crúac users. Other, rarer kinds exist.

Crúac Style: Unbridled Chaos (• to •••••, Style)

Prerequisite: Crúac •

Your character’s Crúac exhibits unbridled chaos. When she enacts her rituals, things warp and change around her. The weather shifts suddenly in her vicinity. At higher levels of the Style and of Crúac, this may summon forth a natural disaster. Additionally, objects around her change on a molecular level to other substances.

Effect: When activating Crúac, objects around your character will increase or decrease in Structure and Durability equal to her Magnitude, as the Storyteller sees fit. If the Crúac succeeds, the changes should be distinctly favorable, but not entirely controllable. If the Crúac ritual fails, the changes should be wildly inconvenient and undesirable. At levels three and higher, this can warp and mutate animals, forcing unnatural, rapid evolutions. This might include adding or removing limbs, or other animals’ features (use Protean for a guideline). At level five, this can affect mortals.

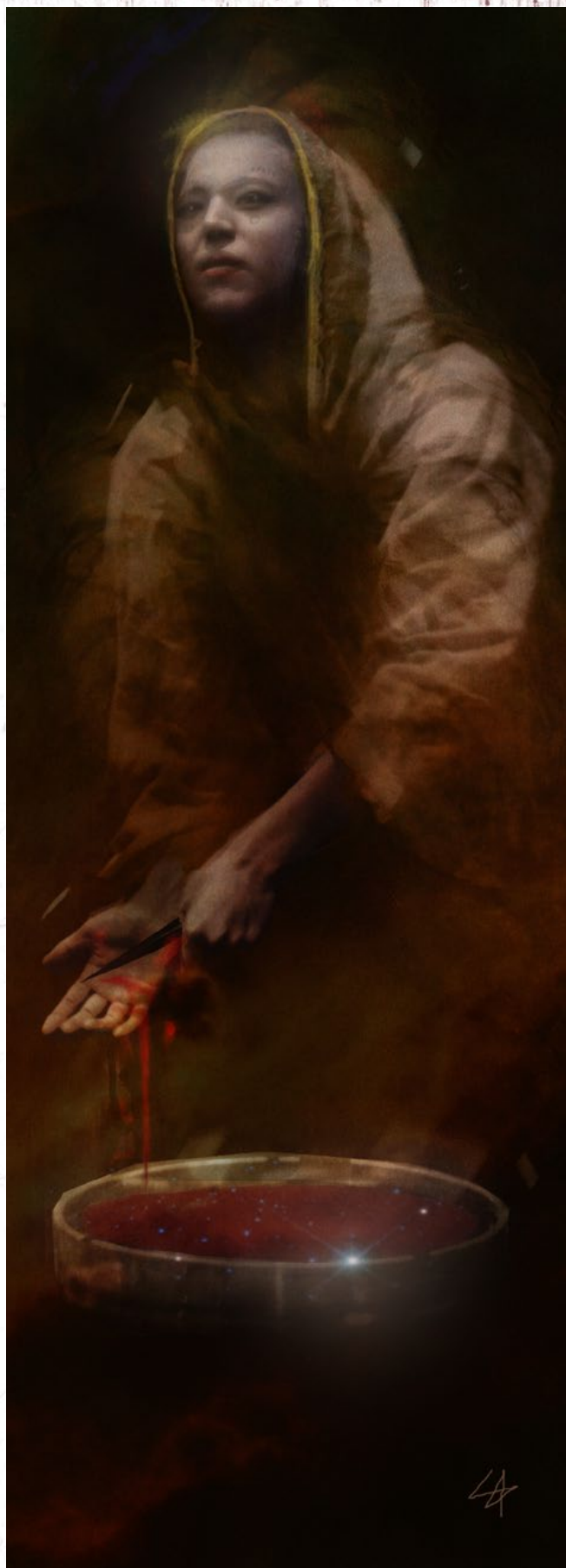
With the expenditure of a point of Willpower, this Style also causes a violent shift in the local weather. This is determined by the Magnitude. One dot might mean minor fog, whereas five could cause a hurricane. Your character remains immune to any Tilts caused by the weather effect, as she maintains a primal, intimate connection with it.

Crúac Style: Primal Creation (• to •••••, Style)

Prerequisite: Crúac •

Your character’s Crúac is attuned to a force of primal creation. When she casts her rituals, life blooms rampant around her. Plants multiply in size. Infertile characters become remarkably fertile. Animals grow.

Effect: When activating Crúac, all plants within her Crúac dots in yards (meters) rapidly grow in size, gaining an additional Size level for each level of Magnitude. Any plant, animal, or person that’s likely to bear offspring in the next year will bear twice the normal amount, or three times at Magnitude 4 or 5.



A particular plant, animal, or person can only be subject to one Primal Creation at a time.

With a point of Willpower, the Style forces immediate, violent, rapid cloning. Any living creatures of Size equal to or lower than the Magnitude begin growing additional limbs and features. Within one minute's time, they forcibly divide into two distinct creatures. Both are near-identical copies, losing one dot of each Mental and Social Attribute, to a minimum zero. This halves the normal expected lifespan of each creature.

Crúac Style: Opening the Void (• to •••••, Style)

Prerequisite: Crúac •

Your character's affinity for the Void shows in her magic; when she casts Crúac, she opens a tiny gate to somewhere unknown. This allows the Acolyte to birth a familiar of sorts.

Effect: When activating Crúac, your character summons forth a creature of unknown origins. It appears as a strange conglomeration of darkness and animal parts; the Acolyte can force it into a humanoid or animal shape with a Size equal to Magnitude. Make the creature using the Retainer rules (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 123). Its effective dot rating is equal to the Magnitude. It has Health levels equal to two plus the vampire's Crúac dots.

The creature will follow basic commands blindly, but will attempt minor rebellions to make the vampire's life... interesting. It fades from existence after one hour per dot of the ritual used, and only one such monster will be present at a given time; no matter how many times the vampire uses Crúac.

However, the vampire may buy the monster as a Retainer, rendering it permanently earthbound. This adds one dot of a Discipline per dot in the Retainer Merit. The monster may learn the vampire's Disciplines, and Celerity, Resilience, and Vigor. Creatures purchased with the Retainer Merit do not count as the one creature allowed at a given time.

With a point of Willpower, the gateway, which allows the oddity through, can also absorb others and drag them into a dark place of no return. This only works on living things; the other world doesn't want for Kindred blood. Choose a victim when using this ability. The victim feels the pull of the unearthly, and must resist or be obliterated. The victim rolls Resolve + Composure as an extended action. Each roll requires a point of Willpower. The required number of successes is equal to the Magnitude. While fighting this otherworldly absorption, the character suffers Magnitude as a penalty to all other actions.

Crúac Rituals

The following rituals are available to Crúac practitioners.

The Mantle of Amorous Fire (•, Transmutation •)

Target Successes: 5

To enact this ritual, the Acolyte must dance through the entirety of its casting, putting herself into a sort of ecstatic

Condition: Primeval Truths

Your character has gazed into the abyss, and it gazed back into her. She suffers an uncanny angst and melancholy, having seen truths her Earthly self could not hope to comprehend. She cannot regain Willpower, and must spend an additional Vitae to rise each night.

Resolution: Face the darkness. Risk Humanity Detachment, or otherwise take a significant action where your character briefly faces the void.

trance. She must enact the Blush of Life as part of the ritual – the cost of which counts as the cost of the ritual. Once complete, she falls, sweaty and exhausted. She must spend a point of Willpower to force her tired body to stand. When she does, she stands proud, fiery, lusty, and invigorated. Add her Crúac dots to her Presence for the remainder of the evening.

The Pool of Forbidden Truths (•, Divination •)

Target Successes: 5

This rite has the Acolyte spill her blood into a vessel, a basin, a cup, anything that can hold it. She chooses a topic she wishes to divine. Then, she places within it a vector for prophecy, be it tea, bones, or something more personal. The blood swirls, and shows her truths beyond reality. These truths bend her mind and crush down on her sense of identity. With effort and wit, she can interpret the revelation. She gains the Primeval Truths Condition. Roll Wits + Investigation + Crúac to interpret the vision. For every success, you may ask the Storyteller a single, one sentence question about the chosen topic. The Storyteller must answer truthfully.

Donning the Beast's Flesh (•••, Transmutation •••)

Target Successes: 7

Donning the Beast's Flesh allows the Acolyte to skin a beast, and craft a mystical hood, cloak, mask, or other article of clothing from its flesh. When any vampire dons the accessory, he can take the rough shape of the animal with the expenditure of a point of Vitae and three turns of transformation. The animal is a vague approximation, but imperfect in unnatural ways to a trained observer.

Unlike the transformations granted by Protean, the vampire loses access to all his Disciplines save for Auspex in the beast's shape.

Mantle of the Beast's Breath (••, Transmutation ••)

Target Successes: 5

As with Mantle of Amorous Fire, the vampire must dance into a trance for the entire casting of this ritual, activate Blush of Life, and must use a point of Willpower to stand from the

exhaustion. Once cast, she gains the Raptured Condition (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 305). However, this relates to an intimate, sensual connection with her Beast, instead of a passion for any god. Additionally, she gains her Crúac as a bonus to any rolls to ride the wave of frenzy.

Shed the Virulent Bowels (••, Destruction ••)

Target Successes: 6

Contested by: Stamina + Blood Potency

Shed the Virulent Bowels only works against living creatures. The Acolyte must have a lock of hair, nail clipping, or other waste from the victim's body as part of the ritual. Once the ritual is cast, the Acolyte may trigger it at any time in the course of the next lunar month. If the victim fails to contest the ritual at that time, his gullet splits wide, and his bowels eject from his body. This fills all of his Health levels with lethal damage, causing one lethal damage per turn until finished. Without immediate medical attention, he will certainly die. Even with such attention, survival is highly unlikely.

An alternative version of this ritual forces the victim to choke on nails that appear within his stomach. It's functionally identical, but the manifestation appears differently, and leaves a much more supernatural corpse.

Curse of Aphrodite's Favor

(•••, Transmutation •••)

Target Successes: 6

Contested by: Composure + Blood Potency

This ritual "gifts" a subject with a victim's love. In many cases, Acolytes use this ritual as an object lesson to neonates cursing their inability to find intimacy after the Embrace, as it creates an all-consuming obsession, a lust within the victim.

The ritual creates a potion, of which the victim must consume three separate drops, on three separate nights. The potion lasts until imbibed, and the casting creates three effective drops. The victim receives a contested roll against the Acolyte's final activation roll. If the ritual takes effect, the victim gains the effects of a full Vinculum, all relating to the subject of the ritual. The ritualist herself cannot be the subject of the ritual.

Curse of the Beloved Toy (•••, Divination •••)

Target Successes: 6

To cast this ritual, the Acolyte needs two things: a victim, and a beloved possession of the victim's. She must invest Vitae into the casting, at least three (as the ritual requires), and any amount beyond that. As part of the ritual, she must kill the victim. If the ritual succeeds, the victim's soul inhabits the possession from that point forward, haunting it, cursing it. If a new owner uses the item, the ghost can expend one of the Vitae spent in the casting to make a single action taken by the new owner a Dramatic Failure. Typically, this occurs at highly inopportune or dangerous times.

The haunting remains until the last Vitae is spent, or until the ghost is somehow exorcised or otherwise banished from the item. If the item is destroyed, the ghost spends one of the remaining Vitae, and will haunt a possession of the one who destroyed it.

Gorgon's Gaze (••••, Transmutation ••••)

Target Successes: 7

Gorgon's gaze infects the Acolyte's eyes with a milky, clay-like substance. She becomes unable to see while she has the ritual prepared. The next time a character sees her eyes, the ritual takes effect, and is "expended," flushing her eyes of the substance, and allowing her sight to return in the next turn.

Roll Presence + Occult + Crúac – the victim's Stamina. Each success causes one of the victim's limbs to turn to stone. Five successes render the victim completely transformed.

Each transformed limb causes the victim a single level of aggravated damage, and full transformation causes Kindred five points of lethal damage. For mortals, the limb is forever transformed and useless. For Kindred, the limbs heal when the damage heals. A full transformation is lethal to mortals. To Kindred, it renders them torpid until they can heal a single level of the damage.

Mantle of the Glorious Servish

(•••, Transmutation •••)

Target Successes: 5

As with Mantle of Amorous Fire, the Acolyte must dance herself into a trance during the entire casting of this ritual and enact Blush of Life. She must spend a point of Willpower to rise from the exhaustion. Once cast, the Acolyte gains a number of advantages for the remainder of the night. First, she gains a point of armor against all attacks, as her flesh has tensed and numbed. Any successful attack she makes causes an additional level of damage. Additionally, she cannot be ambushed or surprised, as she's constantly expecting battle.

Bounty of the Storm (••••, Divination ••••)

Target Successes: 10

With this rite, the Acolyte curses a victim with the force of storms, which leave the victim battered and surrounded by the dead, but rewarded with strange wealth for the assault. The curse requires a deeply personal object from the victim at the time of casting, which the Acolyte's blood consumes.

Between one week and one lunar month later, when the victim is around a group of bystanders, the storm strikes. It could be a typhoon, a tornado, a hurricane, a dust storm, or any other devastating weather phenomenon. Its effects may be widespread or surprisingly localized, at Storyteller discretion. The victim suffers a number of bashing damage equal to the vampire's Crúac dots. Approximately a third of the bystanders – not the victim – die as result of the storm.

Afterward, the storm leaves massive wealth to the victim. This could be an insurance settlement, found cash, valuables, or any other form of coincidental wealth. Consider it Cash Equipment at five dots of Availability (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 192).

Note that this rite kills otherwise unnamed characters. Use of this ritual constitutes Detachment at Humanity 2 or lower.

Denying Hades (•••••, Transmutation •••••)

Target Successes: 8

With this rite, the Acolyte pulls a recently dead mortal's spirit forcibly back from wherever it was going, and thrusts it back into its corpse. To do so, the vampire feeds the corpse the Vitae used in the ritual casting. The person gasps back to life, regardless of the circumstances of death. He does not heal beyond recovering a single Health level. He does not stop rotting. He is, however, fully conscious and aware. He does not, and indeed cannot sleep. While he remains "alive," the Acolyte suffers one aggravated wound she cannot heal until the corpse is laid to rest. This manifests with her flesh drying, flaking, and crumbling like a long-dead cadaver.

Denying Hades works on corpses dead no longer than one day per dot of the vampire's Blood Potency.

Mantle of the Predator Goddess

(•••••, Transmutation •••••)

Target Successes: 8

As with Mantle of Amorous Fire, the Acolyte must dance herself into a trance during the entire casting of this ritual and adopt the Blush of Life. She must spend a point of Willpower to rise from the exhaustion. Once cast, the Acolyte flows with the grace of a perfect predator for the rest of the night. Add her Crúac dots to any rolls for feeding. Additionally, add her Crúac dots to her effective Herd Merit, as most everyone around her all but begs for her attention, stumbling into vulnerable positions with a subconscious prayer to prostrate themselves on her altar. This can raise her Herd above five dots. Any character she feeds from gains the Raptured Condition (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 305) directed at the sensation, and her, not any absent God.

Birthing the God (•••••, Creation •••••)

Target Successes: 15

With this ritual, a member of the Circle opens himself up to the creative force of the Crone. His coven convenes, and each contributes Vitae and body parts as a sacrifice. The body parts can come from anywhere, from anything, but must be connected as part of the ritual. The sacrificed body parts must be enough to build a full, roughly humanoid form. The coven determines the god's name, with each participant contributing one word to the epithet title. With the name, the blood, and the body, a thing exists where there was none before. Each such "god" is different. Some patchwork abominations, some strange amalgamations of

numerous features, some otherworldly beautiful. No matter the form, these monsters are alien and unsettling.

For every Vitae contributed, the god receives one dot the Storyteller can contribute to Attributes or Disciplines. Ritualists must possess the Disciplines. This includes only the basic Disciplines available to every vampire, and Crúac. Alternatively, Celerity, Resilience, and Vigor can be given freely. For every three Vitae, it gains one effective Blood Potency. Each participant offers up a single Skill they possess, which the resulting god then possesses. The ritualists do not lose this Skill. The god enters the world with Vitae depending on its effective Blood Potency, and can spend Vitae as if it were Kindred. It exudes an aura that's functionally identical to the vampiric predatory aura, but any Kindred witnessing it knows that it doesn't face a Beast, it faces something else entirely. Determine its derived traits like Willpower normally. It cannot learn additional Disciplines, nor can it learn Devotions. However, if destroyed or otherwise banished from earth, it can be "recreated" by the same ritualists with improved capabilities. For every five Vitae spent creating the god, it has a level of Size. Under normal circumstances, the god has an indefinite lifespan. It loses one Vitae per day, and can replenish it by devouring flesh. Causing one lethal damage restores one of its lost Vitae. It quickly falls apart into nothingness if it loses all Vitae.

Once crafted, the god rapidly grows inside the ritualist, and bursts out of him. This causes the ritualist a level of lethal damage per level of the god's Size.

The creature has no compulsion to obey or even respect the participants. The primary ritualist himself receives the 8-again quality on any Social rolls on the god.

Only the vehicle for the god's birth needs know this ritual. Participants, however, must each have at least one dot of Crúac.

Mantle of the Crone (•••••, Creation •••••)

Target Successes: 10

As with Mantle of Amorous Fire, the Acolyte must dance herself into a trance during the entire casting of this ritual. She must spend a point of Willpower to rise from the exhaustion. Once cast, the ritualist takes on the bearing of the Crone, of the unknown that exists at the pit of every soul, of the creation that seeks to grow and consume, of the pain that inspires curiosity. For the remainder of the night, every character that witnesses her gains the Primeval Truths Condition (see p. 184). Her touch causes one aggravated wound per turn to any character she touches. A character brought to wound penalties in aggravated damage by this effect gains the first dot of Crúac, if they do not already possess it.

By touching an inanimate object and spending a point of Willpower, she can rouse the object to life. It effectively becomes an animal of similar intelligence to a small lizard, and mobility limited by its form. It cannot become differently mobile, but can move itself in vague accordance to its shape. It may be subject to the Animalism Discipline, and dies within one night, as its body gives out and falls apart.

Invictus: The Ties that Bind

The First Estate fancies itself the status quo. It teaches its members how to protect the Masquerade at all costs, because without the Masquerade, the Invictus loses its greatest claim to power. On the other hand, they focus heavily on taking advantage of and enjoying the fruits of being on top.

Merits

Members of the Invictus have access to the following Merits. Unless otherwise noted, they have an additional prerequisite of Status (Invictus) • or higher.

Courtoisie (• to •••, Style)

Prerequisites: Composure •••, Socialize ••, Weaponry ••

Your character specializes in the “polite duel,” as polite as stabbing another person into torpor can be. With Courtoisie, your character can demand a foe’s attention, and guarantee the fight occurs within bounds of honorable protocol. Duels with Courtoisie tend to be social affairs as much as physical, as participants taunt and threaten their opponents into fatal mistakes.

Effect: Courtoisie may only be used with hand-to-hand weaponry. Your character gains access to the following abilities at each level:

Establish the Duel (•): The foundation of Courtoisie establishes the duel. Choose an opponent. If the opponent engages your character by attacking, the duel is established. Your character is trained to fend off other opponents with rapid, shallow swipes. Any other character coming within hand-to-hand combat range suffers one level of lethal damage from your character’s defensive strikes. Add her Weaponry to her Defense against characters other than the chosen contender. Your character loses this benefit if she attacks another character.

Value of the Spoken Word (••): Your character can leverage taunts, teasing, goading, threatening, and otherwise speaking to create openings to harm her opponent. If she engages her opponent socially, she may substitute her Expression, Intimidation, Socialize, or Subterfuge Skills for either her Athletics or Weaponry in combat, or her Presence for her Strength, her Manipulation for her Dexterity.

Demanding Attention (•••): With mastery of Courtoisie, your character can insist an opponent engage, to the exclusion of other concerns. So long as he’s not threatened by outside attacks, he must engage your character. Your character’s stance guarantees his injury if he does not. If he flees, attacks another character, or otherwise disengages from the duel, Demanding Attention takes effect. He immediately takes lethal damage equal to your character’s Socialize, and is knocked to the ground. If he does not spend an instant action standing, his physical actions are at -2 dice, and his Defense is at -2.

Crowdsourcing (• to •••)

Prerequisites: Contacts •, Resources •••

Your character is an expert at networking, and gathering together resources for the covenant’s consumption. In times of need, the First Estate bands together to achieve great things and your character is at the heart of that majestic storm. She knows just the right numbers to call and just the right accounts to make magic happen.

Effect: Your character can act as a hub for Invictus resources. With an hour’s effort and a point of Willpower, you may make a Manipulation + Academics roll. Every success allows one Invictus character to transfer a dot of one of the below Merits to another.

This can increase a character’s effective Merit level above five, by a number of dots equal to your character’s Crowdsourcing level. For example, with Crowdsourcing ••, characters may increase their Resources to seven dots temporarily. These monumental levels of influence allows for one massive effort.

Shifts from Crowdsourcing last for one action. Then, those Merits are lost. The original owner loses access to them for the remainder of the story.

Crowdsourcing can shift dots of Allies, Contacts, Haven, Herd, Resources, and Retainer.

Information Network (•)

Prerequisites: Contacts •, Invictus Status ••

As a member of the Invictus, your character has support to investigate, maintain, and motivate her connections.

Effect: Every Contact your character counts as a Skill Specialty related to the information he provides. However, she may only use that Specialty when utilizing information gained from the Contact. If she loses the Contact for whatever reason, she also loses the Specialty.

Moderator (• to •••••)

Prerequisites: Computer •••, Contacts • (Online), Invictus Status ••

Your character moderates part of an Internet communications network for the First Estate. This carries with it access, privileges, and worldwide connections.

Effect: Your character has advanced access to the network. She can access information, telecommuted assistance, and investigative aid worldwide. Once per story, she can use a dot in this Merit as a dot in Allies, Contacts, or Library. The utilized Merit cannot be local, and is limited by its Internet-based access.

One Foot in the Door (••)

Prerequisites: Not a member of the Invictus

Your character is not a member of the Invictus, but maintains close ties and supports the Unconquered's efforts.

Effect: This Merit affords a handful of effects:

- Your character receives a +1 bonus to all Social interactions with Invictus members, as if she had a single dot of Covenant Status.
- Once per story, she can draw on a dot of *Allies: Invictus, Contacts: Invictus, Herd, or Resources*. This should come at the cost of a small favor.
- If she ever formally joins the Invictus, she sheds this Merit and adopts two dots of Covenant Status, becoming greater than an average recruit does.

Noblesse Oblige (•••)

Prerequisites: City Status •••

Some Invictus lead because they're power hungry. Your character leads because she feels it's her inherent responsibility to do so, as the superior Kindred. The one most suited to lead must bear that responsibility, she believes. This sense of responsibility reaffirms her sense of identity. She believes herself less a vampire, more an embodiment, and a personification of leadership.

Effect: This Merit must be tied to an official position within her domain. Your character may shed a Touchstone of your choice. Replace that Touchstone with the character's political position for all intents and purposes. Losing the position would be identical to the death of a Touchstone.

Prestigious Sire (•)

Prerequisites: Mentor ••••

Invictus favor merit, but often, the concept of merit flows from sire to child; a prestigious sire would clearly choose only the best childer. Your character's sire is such a paragon. This affords her certain benefits other neonates might not receive. When she speaks, all but the ignorant listen.

Effect: When your character speaks, she speaks with the weight of her sire's words. When taking Social action with an appropriate character, she may add her sire's City, Clan, or Covenant Status Merit dots to her dice pool instead of her own. However, if she fails in the action, she loses this Merit (Sanctity of Merits applies). She may not repurchase the Merit during the same story, and then only after a major success outside her sire's shadow.

Social Engineering (••••)

Prerequisites: Investigation ••, Manipulation •••, Subterfuge ••, Wits •••

Your character is a master of digging up little private bits and personal information through manipulating associates, piecing together context, or baiting unintentional confessions.

Effect: With an hour's work, a point of Willpower, and a Manipulation + Investigation roll, your character can machinate a social engineering effort that reveals extensive,

damaging information about a victim. Every success offers one of the following:

- A ten-minute window of unpenalized, safe access to the victim's Safe Place.
- A damning piece of information that, when used, removes a dot from the character's *Allies, Contacts, Feeding Grounds, Herd, or Status*. The Merit is eligible for Sanctity of Merits.
- A +1 bonus to a Social roll against the victim, or -1 on one of their Social rolls. Another character can access the bonus or take advantage of the penalty if the information is shared.
- Knowledge of a weakness, including *Banes, Conditions, or other issues* at Storyteller discretion.

A character may only be subject to one Social Engineering effort in a given story. The victim's Safe Place and Anonymity Merits penalize the roll to use Social Engineering.

Tech-Savvy (• to ••••)

Prerequisites: Computer ••, Crafts ••, Science •, Resources •

Invictus members pride themselves in utilizing the best tools humanity has to offer. In the past century, technology has been an invaluable boon to Invictus supremacy. Your character spearheads these efforts, mastering technology and both utilizing and disseminating it to her covenant's benefit.

Effect: Your character has access to a surplus of modified and highly optimized technology. At any time, she can provide a piece of technology two Availability levels higher than her Tech-Savvy Merit dots with an hour's preparation. This item will function identically to a normal example, but you may split her Tech-Savvy dots among the item's dice pool bonus, Structure, and Durability. As well, the item offers the 9-again quality on relevant rolls.

Travel Agent (• to •••••)

Prerequisite: Contacts (Inter-City) •, Invictus Status ••

One of the perks of Invictus membership pertains directly to the Invictus' strength of organization. Your character has networked extensively, and can pull favors to make travel a more reasonable proposition.

Effect: Your character benefits from the following effects. She can also bequeath them onto another character.

- First, your character cannot be pursued or intercepted in inter-city travel unless the Skill, effect, or power achieves more successes than your character's Merit dots.
- Part of smart travel is never arriving empty-handed. When traveling, announce your character's intended receiver, be it a person, faction, or even a Court. Your character can bring a gift, rumor, or other item of value, which can be used as a one-time equipment bonus on any Social action when engaging with the stated receiver.
- Once per story, half your character's Travel Agent dots (rounded up) count toward *Allies or Contacts* dots in a city where she has newly arrived.

Oaths

These Oaths are available to Invictus characters that meet the prerequisites. Note that a character may have an Oath Merit, without having sworn the Oath. The Merit enables her to swear the Oath. If the Oath ends, she can swear it again if she possesses the Merit. Note that if both participants in an Oath decide, they can end the terms of the Oath prematurely. All Oaths must be sworn before a character with the Notary Merit (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 116).

Oath of Abstinence (●●●●●)

This rare Oath is considered anathema to many Invictus, particularly those with strong ties to the Lancea et Sanctum. Functionally, it spits in the face of the Curse, and denies the vampire's predation. The vampire swears to abstain from feeding, and so long as she maintains her Oath, she does not need to feed. However, this has kept ancient Invictus awake far beyond their years, as they can defy their need to feed from Kindred Vitae.

This Oath is a rare example of an Oath only sworn by a single character. Rumor is, it can be sworn without a Notary. The character benefiting from the Oath must purchase the Merit dots.

Effect: Swearing this Oath requires half the vampire's maximum Vitae, rounded up. Additionally, it costs one Willpower point per dot of the vampire's Blood Potency. The Willpower can be spent over the course of a full week. For example, a Blood Potency 4 Kindred would need spend seven Vitae and four Willpower to enact the Oath. Once the Oath is sworn, the character no longer needs expend Vitae to wake. She still spends Vitae normally, otherwise. However, if she imbibes a single point of Vitae, the Oath ends.

Oath of the Handshake Deal (●)

This simple Oath features as a foundation for many Invictus interactions. As the name suggests, it solidifies a handshake deal. Both participants offer a service or swear a prohibition. Both offer a collateral penalty for noncompliance. If they agree, the Oath takes effect.

As it can undermine social structures through the peculiars of its social collateral, some Invictus use this Oath to curry favor or infiltrate other covenants.

Effect: The Handshake Deal is binding. Both participants must purchase this Oath, which can be taught to non-Invictus. One participant must be Invictus, however. Each participant swears to a service, or swears to not commit a certain act. Each also offers up collateral, as represented by a Social Merit.

If one character breaks the Oath, the collateral shifts to the other character. Mark Merit gains in this way with a half dot, as they are not eligible for the Sanctity of Merits rule. The Merit shifts for an agreed-upon time, usually a month or a year, but sometimes permanently.

In the narrative, circumstances shift to suit the transfer. Contacts make connection with the new vampire. Allies

Oathbreaker

(New Persistent Condition)

Your character has broken an Oath, and the First Estate does not take kindly to oathbreakers. The covenant at large will maneuver to limit your character's influence and advancement. Mark two dots of Invictus Status, one Resources, one Allies, one Contacts, one Herd, and one Mentor if your character has those Merits. He cannot access the marked Merits so long as this Condition persists. Additionally, any failures in Social Actions among the Invictus are considered dramatic failures automatically.

Resolution: Risk Final Death for a member of the First Estate, and have either that member or the Invictus at large recognize the sacrifice.

Beat: When an Invictus character enacts retribution on your character, be it directly through punishment, or by meaningfully snubbing him in a social situation.

welcome her into their doors. The offering of collateral has to make sense in terms of the deal; for example, one character might give the other a sealed letter to a Contact.

If the recipient has the relevant prerequisites, she may purchase the Merit permanently while she has it; this doesn't prevent it from returning to the other character at the end of the terms, but it allows both characters to maintain the Merit.

Oath of the Hard Motherfucker (●●)

Prerequisites: No Invictus Status

Not every Invictus Oath comes down from on high. The Invictus is an inclusive organization, full of some of the most ambitious Kindred known. Some younger Invictus coterie even develop their own Oaths (which can be met with mixed response from their elders). The Oath of the Hard Motherfucker is a prime example. This Oath brings a new recruit into an Invictus coterie, and cements her role in the group.

Effect: The character swearing the Oath must bring a Status-bearing member of the Carthian Movement to torpor or Final Death as part of the Oath. Alternatively, they can assault another vampire who has violated this Oath in the past. This seals the Oath. Once she's completed the Oath, she gains her first dot of Invictus Status. She also gains a dot each of Allies and Contacts pertaining to her new role, and a dot of Resources. Choose two Skills pertaining to her new role; she gains the 9-again quality on those Skills. The new Invictus in this case is the vassal, and must purchase the Merit. The liege is the new coterie.

If she betrays the Invictus, or the role in her new coterie, she loses this Merit, and all the associated advantages. Additionally, her former allies are likely to use her as the target of another neonate's initiation.

Oath of Matrimony (.....)

This Oath binds two Kindred together in a powerful union, where their collective capabilities are shared, but they must maintain loyalty to one another or suffer grave consequences. Many Lancea et Sanctum see this Oath as a mockery of God's will. Invictus will often rebut that such a marriage is purely a political vehicle, and has no bearing on religious doctrine.

Effect: Two characters must purchase this Merit. One must be a member of the Invictus; the other does not. As part of the Oath, both characters must swear upon certain terms, both promising certain actions, and promising certain prohibitions. This is generally dictated by the terms of the political climate at hand; often, a ceasefire or other truce is part of the arrangement. Upon swearing this Oath, both characters enjoy a series of benefits.

- Compare both characters' Social Merits. If one character possesses more of a given Merit, the other receives a free dot in that Merit if possible. If the Merit does not exist in a single-dot variety, the character receives the full rating. This ignores the normal limitation for Status in multiple covenants (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 113). If both characters have the same Merit at its highest rating, refund one character's. If multiple such Merits exist, divide the refunded levels as evenly as possible.
- If one character has a superior Blood Potency to the other's, the lesser gains a dot of Blood Potency. If the superior character wishes, he can sacrifice additional points to "gift" the lesser additional dots. These are not refunded so long as the gift remains.
- Compare the characters' Discipline ratings. If one character possesses more of a given Discipline, the other receives one dot in that Discipline. This allows a character to potentially possess a Discipline for a bloodline to which she does not belong.
- Both characters are considered family, with blood sympathy at one-step removed (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 98).
- Both characters are considered under the effects of a third stage blood bond (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 100). This abolishes any other bonds, no matter the stage at the time the Oath was sworn. It prevents any other bonds from taking place.
- As characters increase in traits through play, reassess the couple's ratings, and adjust accordingly.

If one character breaks the terms of the Oath, he loses access to any traits affected by this Oath (from either side). His Blood Potency becomes 1. Any affected Disciplines fade entirely. Merits fade as well. The partner's traits do not fade, however; indeed, with Experience, they may be made permanent. He loses all Willpower points, and cannot regain them until the partner has forgiven his transgression.

This Oath can only end by way of a Notary, and both parties' consent. Or, in more common cases, by death do they

Marriage Across Lines

Rumors abound of the Oath of Matrimony occurring outside of Kindred/Kindred unions. Clearly, the Invictus would never sanction one of its members being beholden to a human (or werewolf, or *something else*), but all the Oath requires is two consenting adults and a Notary. To the Invictus, a sworn Oath is inviolate, and the other character becomes an honorary member of the Invictus with his gained Status dot. What effects would it have? Would a mortal character develop Disciplines or an ad-hoc Blood Potency? Would Blood Potency and a werewolf's Primal Urge interact? One thing's for certain; if such a thing occurred, it would be the stuff of many stories.

part. If the Oath ends, all traits return to their original levels.

Dots added by this Oath should be filled in with half-dots on the character sheet, to denote their source, and that they're ineligible for Sanctity of Merits. Dots lost by this Oath should be refunded via Sanctity of Merits, and may only return at a rate of one dot per story.

Oath of the Model Prisoner (....)

Say what you will about the Invictus. However, they (usually) treat their prisoners with some degree of honor, and Invictus imprisoned by others (usually) serve sentences honorably. Prisoners to the Invictus, even non-Invictus, may be taught this Oath. It guarantees certain protections, in exchange for an agreement of complacency and non-aggression. In these cases, the Invictus will take prisoners before a Notary as part of the process.

Effect: Once a character takes this Oath, he swears to be a model prisoner, which defends him from mistreatment. He's the vassal, and must purchase the Merit. The highest relevant authority (usually the Prince) is considered the liege. From that point forward, he cannot attempt to escape or bring chaos to his captors while imprisoned. If he wishes to do so, he loses a point of Willpower, and takes a single level of aggravated damage as charred lashes appear across his back. However, his captors cannot brutalize, torture, or execute him unless sentenced by an authority in the domain with City Status If they attempt to, they similarly lose Willpower and take aggravated damage. Additionally, the highest authority in the city takes a single level of lethal damage, and knows exactly why she's suffering it. Her lashes are not charred, but bloody and stinging. Lastly, she suffers the same damage for every day the prisoner is not offered minimal Vitae for sustenance (IE: one Vitae).

Note that this Oath is a rare exception: his captors do not have to agree to this Oath, if he has the Notary Merit and can stand as his own witness, or previously purchased the Merit.

Many outlaws and Carthians have sworn and maintained this Oath as a form of insurance against the powers-that-be.

When captivity ends, the character may shed this Oath under the Sanctity of Merits rule (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 109), or he may keep it in case he's imprisoned again.

Oath of Office (•••)

Prerequisites: City Status or Invictus Status •••

This Oath seals an Invictus into an official position. She vows to uphold the duties of office, and in exchange, she becomes more capable and focused.

Effect: The character swears the Oath upon taking a position, be it an Invictus position, or a neutral domain position. From that point forward, her position becomes an additional Mask for her. Determine exactly what this means, depending on the specific role she's sworn to. Additionally, when she spends Willpower in pursuit of her duties, she may substitute her Invictus or City Status (whichever is relevant) instead of the normal +3 or -2 afforded by Willpower.

Invictus take their positions very seriously; violating her Oath of Office is considered Detachment at Humanity 1. In this Oath, the highest-ranking city official presiding over her position acts as the liege. As vassal, she must purchase the Merit.

Oath of the Refugee (••)

In some domains, the very act of identifying oneself as Invictus is criminal or otherwise shunned. Sometimes, Invictus ideology forces a vampire to take actions, which would have him blood hunted. This Oath allows such a vampire to flee his home domain, and find safe harbor in a domain less hostile to the First Estate.

Effect: The Unconquered swears off citizenship in his home domain as part of the Oath. Once he's outside his former home, he becomes nearly impossible to pursue. Citizens of his former home lose successes equal to the vampire's Invictus Status on any actions to pursue or attack the Unconquered outside that domain.

Additionally, after one uncontroversial month in his new home, he may shed this Oath under the Sanctity of Merits rule, and take a single dot of City Status and a dot of Invictus Status in the new domain. This ends the protections afforded by the Oath.

This Merit doesn't require a liege, but still requires a Notary to enact.

Oath of the Righteous Kill (•••)

Prerequisites: Empathy •••, Invictus Status •••

In defense of the Masquerade, sometimes witnesses and offenders must die. Invictus ideology teaches that such a death should be contemplated, but never regretted. A character who has taken this Oath has taken it upon herself to weather the crimes of her covenant mates. She carries their emotional and spiritual burdens so they do not have to regret their duties.

While local Invictus know her role, she is in no way obligated to bear a given vampire's burden; she judges each case with her own ethics and discretion.

Effect: A character who has taken this Oath can act as a confessor of sorts; a character connects with her before killing or otherwise risking Detachment in the name of the Masquerade and the Invictus. Both characters spend a Willpower point, and the character with this Merit offers consolation, encouragement, and sympathy. When the other character commits the act, she bears the burden. She checks for Detachment as if she committed the crime herself, but she gains an additional die due to her separation from the affair.

For this Oath, the liege must be a member of the Invictus with equal or higher Status. Sometimes, the Invictus allow Lancea et Sanctum – or in even rarer cases members of the Circle of the Crone – to swear this Oath and act as confessor for the Estate.

Oath of the Safe Word (••)

With this Oath, two Kindred enter into a trust agreement. While mutually beneficial, either party can end the agreement in a remarkable, crippling fashion. If a power differential exists between the characters, the risks are higher for the more powerful Invictus, so this Oath is often used as a way to show trust to a slighted inferior.

Some Invictus have other names for this Oath, such as The Oath of Mutual Vulnerability.

Effect: Two characters must enter into this Oath willingly. Both characters must purchase this Oath. As part of the Oath, both characters offer up a single Social Merit they possess, of any dot rating. The other character receives that Merit; the original character retains use of it. Mark these Merits with half-dots on your character sheet, so they're known to not apply to the Sanctity of Merits rule. Additionally, either character can access the other character's Willpower pool at any time as if it were an extension of her own.

At any time, a character may end this agreement. The other character is immediately paralyzed, losing access to their Defense and actions for a turn. By spending Willpower, the initiating character may extend this for a turn per point. Note that since the agreement ended, she cannot use the partner's Willpower points for this purpose.

A character can only be part of one instance of this Oath at a time.

Oath of the True Knight (••••)

Prerequisites: Invictus Status ••

This Oath binds an Unconquered into service as a knight, tasked with defending the Invictus as a whole. She becomes bound to none, and must maintain neutrality in all her affairs. It empowers her to maintain that neutrality, and to take action in defense of her covenant.

Effect: The character may not be subject to another Oath tying her to a single vampire or a Vinculum (partial or full) when taking the Oath of the True Knight. If she attempts to ingest Kindred Vitae, the blood turns to ash in her mouth.

If another coerces, tricks, or forces her to take his blood, he suffers a level of aggravated damage. She can enter further Oaths once sworn, but not at the time of accepting the Oath.

Use of Dominate, Majesty, and other Disciplines that might mar her judgment, suffer her Invictus Status as a penalty.

When attacked by another Kindred, or a ghoul retainer, her Invictus Status applies as armor. This has no effect against mundane humans.

Lancea et Sanctum

Religion is two things to the Lancea et Sanctum; faith and organization. The Spear needs numbers, so it needs camaraderie. However, it brings those numbers with the raw force of its dark miracles.

Merits

Members of the Lancea et Sanctum have access to the following Merits. Unless otherwise noted, they have an additional prerequisite of Status (Lancea et Sanctum) • or higher.

Crusade (• to ●●●, Style)

Prerequisite: Occult ●●, Resolve ●●●, Weaponry ●●, character must have either Theban Sorcery ●● or Sorcerous Eunuch •

Your character has learned the fearsome fighting style of Lancea et Sanctum crusaders. It's designed to debilitate Kindred opponents, and to shut down other dark sorceries quickly.

Effect: This Style requires the character use a hand-to-hand weapon. Your character gains access to the following effects at each subsequent level:

Shield Against Sorcery (•): This technique filters a lost Theban Sorcery ritual into a practice a non-practitioner (even a Sorcerous Eunuch, see below) can use with a series of military motions. It renders the character's immediate area something of a "null zone" for sorcery. Your character must be armed to enact Shield Against Sorcery. Any magic targeting your character or any character within her Willpower dots in yards suffers her Merit dots as a dice pool penalty. This requires your character have full access to her Defense. If multiple crusaders use this ability, only the highest Merit dots apply.

Silence (●●): The voice is often the seat of sorcery. For this reason, crusaders train to strike for the enemy's vocal chords first. If your character targets the enemy's throat, she suffers no penalties due to the targeted attack. If successful, the attack silences the enemy, which may prevent him from casting spells or using some Disciplines so long as the damage remains.



A Hammer Against Witches (•••): With a well-timed strike, your character may interrupt a sorcerer casting a spell, using her knowledge of the dark arts to find a particularly weak opening. The victim must be casting a spell or ritual of some sort, or a Discipline using an extended action. Spend a Willpower point before making the attack. This Willpower point does not add to the dice pool. Make the attack roll at -2. If successful, the spell or effect is aborted as if it dramatically failed. Additionally, add the victim's relevant Discipline or sorcery level as an additional weapon modifier to the damage caused. Use the level of the ability he uses; not his highest potential level.

Flock (• to •••••)

Prerequisite: Herd (equal or greater level)

Your character not only maintains a Herd, he empowers, emboldens, and inspires them. Because of his predation, they see the glory and grace of God. They draw in additional followers, and achieve unbelievable things. Their blood carries this passion.

Effect: First, dots in Flock count as additional dots in Herd. This allows your character to have more than five effective Herd dots.

Second, the characters in the Flock always start a scene with a single point of Willpower. They will always use this in pursuit of their faith.

Third, the Flock's blood is potent and livelier than most mortals' are. When using the Flock as a Herd, the feeding vampire regains a point of Willpower.

Lairty (••)

Prerequisites: *Not* a member of the Lancea et Sanctum

Your character attends Mass, but has not formally joined the church. Perhaps she's an Invictus member showing support for the Second Estate, or she's a Carthian who never quite lost her faith.

Effect: Your character receives a number of benefits:

- Your character receives a +1 bonus to all Social interactions with Lancea et Sanctum members, as if she had a single dot of Covenant Status. She cannot learn Theban Sorcery unless taught by a member of the Spear. Even then, Lancea et Sanctum members would look upon her with intense scrutiny.
- Once per story, she can draw on a dot of Allies: Lancea et Sanctum, Contacts: Lancea et Sanctum, Herd, or Library. This should come at the cost of a small favor.
- If she ever formally joins the Lancea et Sanctum, she sheds this Merit and adopts two dots of Covenant Status, becoming greater than freshly baptized Kindred might otherwise.

Sanctuary (• to •••••)

Prerequisites: City Status ••, Lancea et Sanctum Status ••, Safe Place •

Because of your character's exalted status in the city and in the church, she's able to offer sanctuary to criminal refugees from the domain's authority. This Merit reflects the refugees your character currently protects.

Effect: For each dot of Refugees, your character shelters one criminal convicted guilty of a heinous crime, usually a violation of a Tradition. These criminals each count as four dot Kindred Retainers that may not safely leave your character's Safe Place.

Drawback: Your character is responsible for feeding the Refugees. Dots of Refugees act as a penalty to all feeding rolls you make for your character.

Sorcerous Eunuch (•)

Prerequisites: Resolve •••

Effect: Your character has been subject to a series of terrifying rituals and experiments, which affords him a near-immunity to sorcery. Any dice pool for a magical effect targeting your character suffers his Resolve as a penalty. If you spend a Willpower point at the time of the effect, instead remove successes from the caster's roll equal to his Resolve.

As result of this, he can never learn Theban Sorcery, Crúac, or any other blood sorceries.

This practice is often used on Lancea et Sanctum crusaders. Sometimes, this is used as a punishment on captured enemies. The ritual requires almost a month of captivity, and can be committed by any character with four or more dots in Theban Sorcery.

Stigmata (• to •••••)

Prerequisites: Humanity (three or more dots higher than the Merit) or mortal

Your character bleeds in an unnatural, holy way. Usually, this manifests at the classic wounds of Christ; on the brow, the wrists, lashes on the back, or a punctured side. However, some characters manifest this Merit from other places, sometimes in the place of another saint's deadly wounds. This blood carries the fire of divinity.

Effect: Each week, the vampire loses one Vitae per dot in this Merit. This loss is accompanied by a single level of lethal damage, as the body opens to release the blood. It occurs at times of great danger, spiritual rapture, or other dramatically appropriate moments. The blood does not create blood bonds, or cause Vitae addiction. It will still create ghouls, Embrace, or other effects of the blood. Those feeding from the blood gain the Inspired Condition (if mortal) or Raptured (if Kindred). Additionally, the vampire receives the 8-again quality on her next Theban Sorcery ritual during the same scene.

Because of the intense, divine experience of the stigmata, your character always starts a scene with Willpower points equal to half her Merit dots (rounded up), if she had less prior and currently suffers wounds from the Stigmata.

The vampire may force the effect by spending a point of Willpower.

Mortals: Mortal characters may develop this Merit as a Supernatural Merit. In these cases, the blood from their wounds fuels Theban Sorcery. Weekly, the character may manifest one lethal wound in a time of stress or high drama, producing one blood point. A vampire feeding from this wound gains the

8-again quality on her next Theban Sorcery ritual that night, and the Raptured Condition. The mortal heals her lethal wounds at twice the normal rate, healing one per day. However, if she currently has wounds from the Stigmata, she suffers a -3 wound penalty as if there was a wound in her final health box.

Vampire characters may have a Stigmatic character as a Retainer, under very rare circumstances. The Lancea et Sanctum highly values these individuals, and will not hesitate to take them away from all but the most pious and loyal members.

Temple of Damnation (• to •••••)

Prerequisites: Safe Place (equal or greater level)

Your character cultivates and maintains a temple to his faith. It is dedicated to his particular dogma, and supports his conception of what it means to be a vampire.

Effect: The Temple of Damnation promotes one key idea espoused by your character's brand of the faith. Any character's actions in support of that idea gain bonus dice equal to your character's Merit dots when occurring within the temple. For example, a faith that espouses resisting the Beast's violent urges would receive those dice to resist frenzy.

Additionally, those blessed within the Temple of Damnation can carry your character's divinity outside the church's walls. After participating in a religious service at the temple, a character remains blessed for a number of nights equal to the temple's Merit dots. During this time, your character may use Theban Sorcery rituals upon her as if he was touching her, no matter how far away she is.

Temple of Damnation must be keyed to a Safe Place Merit of equal or higher level.

Note: Like a Safe Place, a coterie may share a Temple of Damnation Merit.

Theban Sorcery Miracles

These are some of the rituals afforded Lancea et Sanctum members practicing Theban Sorcery.

Apple of Eden (•, Divination •)

Target Successes: 5

Sacrament: An apple, a drop of Vitae

This ritual has the sorcerer enchant an apple (or another pome), which carries with it knowledge and understanding, but also bears heavily on the mortal mind. It opens the world of the unknown, and once her eyes open, they may never close.

A mortal eating the apple experiences the following effects:

- The mortal gains dots equal to the vampire's Theban Sorcery dots, divided between her Intelligence and Wits. These temporary dots may take her above her normal limit of five dots. These dots fade by one every two days.
- If the character chooses to permanently increase one of the affected dots during that time, she may do so for three Experience instead of four.

- The character sees Kindred and other supernatural creatures for what they are. This effect lasts until the last bonus Attribute dot fades. This requires no roll. It also mimics the effects of the Clear-Sighted Merit (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 299). This also renders the character immune to the supernatural effects of seeing such a thing. For example, it renders the character immune to the Lunacy caused by werewolves.

- The character suffers a breaking point as her perceptions open. This breaking point is at -5 to resist. Every time the character consumes another Apple of Eden, this penalty reduces by 1, until there is no penalty. At which time, she can consume the Apple without suffering a breaking point.

- The drop of Vitae, invested in the apple, causes Vitae addiction and Vinculum as if it were a full Vitae. If the sorcerer invests Willpower, it may be used to create a ghoul.

A character may only be under the effects of a single Apple of Eden at a time.

Marian Apparition (•, Divination •)

Target Successes: 5

Sacrament: A piece of pure white cloth, stained with a single drop of menstrual blood

Contested by: Humanity

With the casting, the Sanctified blesses the sacrament cloth, which remains blessed until activated. The caster must activate the ritual by ripping the cloth in half. An apparition of Mary or another womanly saint or holy figure appears before the scene. Every single present character sees the image, and sees her as if she's peering into their souls with infinite empathy. This inspires fierce, spiritual guilt in present vampires. Kindred characters contest the caster's roll with Humanity. If they achieve fewer successes, add the caster's Theban Sorcery dots to their Humanity for the purpose of determining what constitutes detachment.

As a misunderstood side effect, characters casting Crúac rituals under the gaze of the Marian Apparition add the vampire's Theban Sorcery dots to their rolls. Some members of the Circle of the Crone who know of this ritual believe it's evidence of their righteousness, and that the Lancea et Sanctum's magic is but a bastardization of their ancient gift.

Revelatory Shroud (•, Divination •)

Target Successes: 5

Sacrament: A cloth shroud

With this ritual, the caster drapes a cloth shroud over an area or object. If successful, the shroud sullies, fades, and burns to reveal the face of the last person to touch the object or walk through the area.

Apparition of the Host (••, Divination ••)

Target Successes: 6

Sacrament: A holly switch

Contested by: Resolve + Blood Potency

With this ritual, the caster bathes a holly switch in oils and incense. The switch remains active for one month after casting. At any time, a character may snap the switch in half to let loose an apparition of avenging angels, who storm an area and chase a victim the breaker can see. The victim makes the contested roll. If the caster's roll beats the contest, the victim suffers the Frightened Condition (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 304. Mortal bystanders suffer the Spooked Condition (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 305) If the breaker is aware of the effect, and invests a point of Willpower when breaking the switch, the angels only appear to the victim.

Bloody Icon (••, Transmutation ••)

Target Successes: 6

Sacrament: The caster's own Humanity (see below), a statue of a saint

This ritual is a miracle reserved for the direst of circumstances. It offers blood in times of emergency, where the Lancea et Sanctum must but cannot access blood. During the Church's early nights, it allowed them to survive while held up in siege. With it, the sorcerer begs the Lord for respite and succor. In exchange, the Lord demands the vampire recognize what she is, and abandon her fetters to her past life.

Bloody Icon must be used in the presence of a statue of a saint. Once cast, the saint cries forth Vitae equal to the vampire's total successes. This Vitae will store for the rest of the night, and counts as Kindred Vitae for the purpose of feeding restrictions, but does not cause Vitae addiction.

During the casting, the sorcerer is assailed with imagery of her Kindred self. After the battery, once the statue leaks forth sustenance, the sorcerer loses a dot of Humanity. Later that night, the statue crumbles beyond recognition, and may not be used again.

The Walls of Jericho (••, Destruction ••)

Target Successes: 6

Sacrament: A horn

The caster blesses a horn, and scribes into it the name of a vampire. The vampire's Humanity must have one dot plus the vampire's Theban Sorcery dots or lower for the ritual to take effect. Once blessed, the horn remains empowered for seven nights. At any time during that period, the sorcerer may blast the horn to demolish any inanimate barriers between herself and the subject. With an instant action, roll Presence + Academics + Theban Sorcery. The sound rattles the object like an earthquake. Each success removes a point of Structure from any wall, vehicle, armor, or other physical barrier protecting the subject. A person touching an affected object suffers one bashing damage per success.

At the ritual's end, the horn crumbles.

Aaron's Rod (•••, Transmutation •••)

Target Successes: 8

Sacrament: A rod or staff

This ritual enchants a rod or staff. A holder may later spend a point of Willpower and release the object to activate the ritual. At which time, the object becomes a venomous serpent. By default, the serpent will do the activator's bidding. However, the caster may issue a command to the serpent when crafting the object. For example, she might tell the serpent that when activated, it'll attack Maxwell. This compulsion overrides the activator's will.

The serpent desiccates and deteriorates into nothingness at the end of the scene in which it was activated.

The serpent uses the following traits:

SERPENT

Attributes: Intelligence 1, Wits 2, Resolve 4, Strength 1, Dexterity 4, Stamina 1, Presence 3, Manipulation 1, Composure 4

Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Intimidation 2, Stealth 4, Survival 1

Willpower: 8

Initiative: 7

Defense: 6

Speed: 6

Size: 2

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Dice Pool
Bite	+1 (Poison)	4

Serpents possess a hemotoxin. It possesses a Toxicity equal to the vampire's Blood Potency. Each success on the Toxicity roll destroys one Vitae in Kindred, or causes one lethal damage to mortals. The effect causes one such wound per turn until it runs its full course.

Health: Equal to the vampire's Theban Sorcery dots

Blessing the Legion (•••, Transmutation ••)

Target Successes: 6

Sacrament: A full suit of armor, modern or archaic

This ritual blesses a group of crusaders, members of the Lancea et Sanctum or otherwise, with the endurance to carry out a dangerous mission. During the blessing, each crusader spends Vitae up to the sorcerer's Theban Sorcery dots. The sorcerer may expend her own blood in the ritual, but her blood will cause Vinculum on the crusader when used. This Vitae wells up in the sacramental armor (which the crusader must wear), staining it a deep crimson. At any time during the same night, the vampire may access that Vitae to heal wounds, above and beyond his normal per-turn expenditure. He can spend one of the blessed Vitae per turn. When expended, the Vitae first floods from the armor, bloating outward in an obvious, noticeable fashion, then absorbs quickly into the vampire's body, repairing injury. In most cases, it's a gross violation of the Masquerade, so it's reserved for times when the crusader faces only Kindred enemies, or will leave no surviving witnesses.

Six successes allow a single crusader to be blessed. Every two successes above that allow another. Once the final Vitae is spent, the armor falls to dust.

Miracle of the Dead Sun (●●●, Protection ●●●)

Target Successes: 6

Sacrament: A piece of pure silver jewelry

This ritual enchants a piece of jewelry, in order to be used later in time of great need. If successful, any Kindred character may be taught a short phrase to activate the object. The activating character sacrifices a dot of Humanity and recites the phrase. The jewelry tarnishes and falls apart. The vampire coughs up an inky blackness. Dark clouds consume the sun within seconds, darkened with the sacrifice of part of the vampire's soul. This blots out the sun completely for ten minutes per dot of the vampire's remaining Humanity. All vampires in the domain act as if it were night, with no penalties or harm coming from daytime activity. Slumbering vampires are roused to wake briefly. Unaware mortals rationalize the event as a freak storm, and indeed, rain falls heavily.

Pledge to the Worthless One (●●●, Transmutation ●●●)

Target Successes: 8

Sacrament: A person content with his life

This ritual is considered heretical to all mainstream Lancea et Sanctum creeds. It calls on the force of the devil Belial – the Worthless One – to gift upon a vampire his dark blessings. The subject of this ritual swears herself to Belial, and slays the sacramental mortal. She must consent to its effects for the ritual to take effect, but once it's taken effect, it cannot be ended by any known practice. Part of the oath requires the vampire pledge her immortal soul after her Final Death. This is largely academic, as no vampire knows what happens to a vampire after the Requiem's end. The pledge affords a number of effects:

- The subject chooses one of the seven deadly sins with which to ally: greed, pride, wrath, sloth, gluttony, envy, or lust. From that point forward, every Vitae she draws from a mortal in the throes of that sin is doubled. Characters not exhibiting those sins provide her half the nourishment; she takes only one from each two Vitae drawn.
- She gains the advantages of frenzy at all times, even while completely lucid.
- She cannot maintain a Touchstone.
- She exhibits one physical sign of damnation. This may manifest as cloven hooves, a third nipple, or any other classic sign of diabolism.
- She gains a familiar. This is a demon in an animal's flesh. It counts as a five dot Retainer, with three dots of Disciplines. She can see through its eyes, and speak through its mouth.
- Any member of the Lancea et Sanctum is honor-bound to destroy her if her pledge is uncovered.

Great Prophecy (●●●●, Divination ●●●●)

Target Successes: 8

Sacrament: A body part of a saint

This rite allows the sorcerer to enact a sweeping prophecy, predicting a great event in the near future. She makes the prophecy, which must meet certain criteria (detailed below). The Storyteller must interpret the prophecy, and enact it how he sees fit. This is not a prophecy in the “be careful what you wish for” fashion; things occur as the character sees fit. But how they come to pass is never truly expected. With the ritual, she writes the prophecy in silence, in a dark room, with no witnesses. She seals the prophecy, having not seen the final draft of what she wrote. If the ritual succeeds, the words, the written prophesy is enchanted. Then, she reads the words to the affected group to cast the prophecy.

The criteria for the prophecy:

- It cannot target a single character. It can target a clan, a bloodline, a covenant, a domain, or a family.
- At least one member of the targeted group must be present to hear the prophecy when first cast. If it's read to the unaffected first, the ritual fails completely.
- The prophecy must allow a way out, usually through a complicated, dangerous, or grossly undesirable task from one of the affected. It should not be directly deadly.
- The prophecy does not predict a highly specific phenomenon. It must be something that could occur in multiple ways.
- The event must come to pass within the next month. The character has no influence on when it happens.
- She may only have a single prophecy unresolved at a given time.

If the prophecy is beneficial, the Storyteller is empowered to add temporary Merit dots reflecting the benefits, up to the vampire's Theban Sorcery dots. They last for a month afterward, or until purchased and made permanent.

If the prophecy is harmful, the Storyteller may not directly kill the affected characters, but anything short of Final Death is possible. This can destroy a total number of Merits equal to the sorcerer's total successes, spread across the affected. If the curse needs dice pools, use the vampire's Intelligence + Academics + Theban Sorcery dice.

The Guiding Star (●●●, Protection ●●●)

Target Successes: 8

Sacrament: A full, hand-crafted star chart (requiring 10 successes on an extended Intelligence + Science effort), gold coins

This ritual enchants a visible star, and a collection of gold coins. Any character holding one of the affected coins intuitively knows the direction of a promised land, a safe place, a Sanctum, so long as she can see the star. When cast, the Storyteller comes up with a location within the same domain. Characters holding one of the enchanted coins always know what direction it is in, even if they've never been there. This location is particularly safe and abundant in mortal life; it acts as a five dot Safe Place, a five dot Haven, and a five dot Feeding Grounds Merit. Any character attempting to find those within or even the location

itself suffers -5 to any relevant rolls. Characters that have been to the sanctum forget its location once they've left, but if they possess a coin, they may use it to return.

The location remains bountiful and safe for one night. The sorcerer may spend Willpower points to extend its sanctity for one night each, indefinitely.

Apocalypse (•••••, Transmutation •••••)

Target Successes: Special

Sacrament: A text, at least three hundred years old

This ritual peels back the curtain of the Masquerade, across a wide area. The caster conducts the ritual in the center of the desired area. At the culmination of the ritual, the book used as the sacrament opens wide, hovers in place, and spews forth light for the duration of the Apocalypse. The basic ritual requires ten successes. This affects an area at a radius of a half mile from the center. Every five successes adds a half mile to the radius.

All vampires within the area are affected. They appear their

true age. They look the part of corpses, sometimes skeletons. They reek of the grave. They attract flies. In the affected area, Obfuscate and illusionary Disciplines fail.

At Storyteller discretion, this ritual affects other supernatural creatures in the area, revealing what they are.

The Apocalypse lasts for one week, ending the next sunset.

The Judgment Fast (•••••, Transmutation •••••)

Target Successes: 15

Sacrament: A table of rotten food

This massive plague curses the entirety of a domain for an entire month. From the moment it starts, until it ends, every single Kindred finds her ability to ingest and store Vitae limited. Any Vitae a character keeps in her body above her Humanity acts as mortal food. She cannot use it for any normal purposes, nor can she keep it within her system. Within an hour of drinking beyond her artificial fill, she vomits it up painfully. This regurgitated Vitae is completely worthless, even to the poor wretch who attempts to consume it.

Ordo Dracul: The Rites of the Dragon

Every member of the Ordo Dracul is expected to build and share a body of work. Most of the time, this means weak, impractical, and failed experiments. The covenant recognizes that failure is part of the scientific method. However, it exalts, celebrates, and publishes successes; these are some of those successes.

Merits

Members of the Ordo Dracul have access to the following Merits. Unless otherwise noted, they have an additional prerequisite of Status (Ordo Dracul) • or higher.

Independent Study (••)

Prerequisites: Not a member of the Ordo Dracul

Effect: Your character dabbles in the Order.

- Your character receives a +1 bonus to all Social interactions with Ordo Dracul members, as if she had a single dot of Covenant Status. Ordo Dracul characters are formally disallowed from teaching her the Mysteries of the Dragon, but it's been known to happen.
- Once per story, she can draw on a dot of Allies: Ordo Dracul, Contacts: Ordo Dracul, Library, or Mentor. This should come at the cost of a small favor.
- If she ever formally joins the Ordo Dracul, she sheds this Merit and adopts two dots of Covenant Status, becoming greater than a newly sworn initiate might.

Nest Guardian (• to •••••)

Your character has been entrusted with defense of a Wyrms' Nest.

Effect: The level of this Merit determines the level of the Wyrms' Nest your character defends. Your character never has to roll to access the Nest's advantages. Her attunement to the Nest gives her a bonus equal to her Merit dots on all perception-related rolls on the Nest grounds. Most Dragons tie this Merit to a Safe Place. This allows the purchase of Nest Merits (see below). A coterie may share in the cost of a Nest Guardian Merit, as if it were a Safe Place. Additionally, while on the grounds, Nest Guardian Merit dots act as Ordo Dracul Status Merit dots, if they exceed the character's Status.

Rites of the Impaled (• to •••, Style)

Prerequisites: Resolve •••, Stamina •••, Weaponry ••, Sworn •

The Impaled are a warrior subset of the Ordo Dracul that prioritizes pushing the Kindred bodies to extremes in order to become something greater. As their name suggests, this often takes the form of impaling oneself. Ordo Dracul with this Style ignore many of the limitations experienced by other Kindred.

Effect: Your character gains the following advantages at each level:

Passion Through Pain (•): Your character uses pain as a meditative force to focus and center her actions. Any time your character suffers a wound penalty, instead add that amount to all relevant dice pools.

Beyond the Pale (••): Your character does not suffer torpor when her last Health box is filled with lethal damage, unless she also suffers aggravated damage equal to her Resolve.

Action and Reaction (•••): Your character is an expert of using an enemy's momentum against him. When struck, your character may return with an equal and opposite reaction, in lieu of her normal action. To use Action and Reaction, your character must have an instant action still available in the

turn, and must be successfully attacked and damaged. Spend a point of Willpower when struck. When making a hand-to-hand attack, unarmed or with a weapon, you may choose to use the opponent's successes instead of rolling to attack. This ignores the opponent's Defense. The attack cannot be targeted; it must be a general attack to the opponent. It uses your character's weapon damage, not the opponent's.

Twilight Judge (•••)

Prerequisites: Ordo Dracul Status ••••

Your character is a Twilight Judge of the Ordo Dracul, a respected position trusted with rendering final judgments in internal debates. Multiple Twilight Judges can exist within a given domain; however, when one rules, the ruling is considered final.

Effect: Your character is empowered to adjudicate Ordo

Dracul debates and arguments. Her word is law within the covenant. Your character's judgment is sacrosanct. Any character defying your character's judgment immediately loses a dot of Ordo Dracul Status. Characters that lose their final dot of Ordo Dracul Status in this way are typically put to death to end their disgrace to the Order.

Because of her exalted position, your character cannot be denied mentorship in a Mystery of the Dragon if she requests it. In essence, this Merit behaves as a five-dot Mentor she can access specifically for Ordo Dracul issues. She may even determine an exception to normal prohibitions of heresy within the Ordo. For example, she can rule that a character is able to learn the Coil of Ziva (see p. 201), or she might allow non-Ordo Dracul characters to develop Wyrms' Nest Merits (see below). She may be the subject of such judgments; the Ordo Dracul does not consider conflict of interest or nepotism an issue.

Sample Supernatural Merits

Automatic Writing (••)

Prerequisite: Mortal only

Your character can enter a trance of sorts, in which she's temporarily overtaken by a spirit or ghost, and compelled to write mysterious things.

Effect: Your character must meditate for at least one minute. Spend a point of Willpower and roll Wits + Composure to enter the trance. For every success, your character writes a single statement or clue about something occurring in the area, or relating to a pertinent issue. The Storyteller provides these clues, and they may seem completely nonsensical. Characters may attempt to interpret the clues with Wits + Investigation or research efforts.

Drawback: If the roll fails, or the character does not employ a personal item of a local spirit in the meditation, she's haunted afterward. Any time she fails a roll for the next week, it's considered dramatic as the spirit intervenes in complicating and sometimes dangerous ways.

Laying on Hands (•••)

Prerequisite: Mortal only

Your character's faith or force of devotion becomes a wholesome force that heals the sick and mends injuries. However, she takes some of those injuries upon herself by proxy.

Effect: By spending a Willpower point, touching the sick or wounded, and rolling Presence + Empathy, your character may heal them. Every success heals two points of bashing damage, or one level of lethal damage. Three successes allows for a single point of aggravated damage.

Drawback: For every two points of damage healed (rounded up), your character suffers a single point of the same type of damage. Additionally, your character may heal diseases and other ailments. The Storyteller assigns a target number of successes between one (the common cold) and ten (flesh-eating bacteria). This takes an extended action, and the character suffers a minor version of the illness.

Numbing Touch (• to •••••)

Prerequisite: Mortal only

With numbing touch, your character's psychic gifts allow her to numb a person, rendering them sluggish and incompetent. With intense concentration, she can cause neurons to shut down.

Effect: This Merit has two effects. With the first, your character may numb with a single touch and a point of Willpower. Against an unwilling subject, roll Intelligence + Empathy + Numbing Touch, contested by Stamina + Blood Potency. If successful, Numbing Touch takes effect. An affected character suffers no wound penalties, and suffers a penalty equal to your character's Numbing Touch dots to all dice pools requiring manual dexterity or sensory perception. These penalties fade by one every turn, until gone completely. Alternatively, the character may focus her gift into a 'psychic weapon' by spending a point of Willpower, at a range of up to a foot from her hands or face. When the invisible "weapon" strikes an opponent, the character may spend an additional point of Willpower to lash out at the victim's nervous system. In addition to the normal effects of Numbing Touch – which do not receive a contested roll – the victim loses Willpower points equal to your character's Numbing Touch dots. If she has no Willpower points to lose, additional points become levels of lethal damage. This can be employed as part of an unarmed attack.

Wyrms' Nest Merits

These Merits reflect a relationship with a Wyrms' Nest. All Wyrms' Nest Merits have an additional prerequisite of the Nest Guardian Merit. Unless otherwise noted, all Wyrms' Nest Merit costs can be shared among a coterie.

Chapterhouse (• to •••••)

Prerequisites: Ordo Dracul Status •••

Wyrms' Nests are commonly used as the foundation for Ordo Dracul chapterhouses. Establishing a Wyrms' Nest chapterhouse with the proper rites allows all within to study and gather in peace.

Effect: Characters inside a chapterhouse are calmed and collected. Add the Chapterhouse Merit dots to any rolls to resist frenzy, or to end a violent course of action.

Additionally, subtract Chapterhouse Merit dots from all efforts to Lash Out within the chapterhouse.

Note: Only one character contributing to the Chapterhouse must bear the Status requirement.

Crucible (•••)

Prerequisites: Occult •••

The Crucible Ritual is one of the most important uses for a Wyrms' Nest. Once a Wyrms' Nest has been consecrated as a Crucible, members of the Ordo Dracul find themselves more capable of evolving into their Coils if they study on the Nest.

Effect: Characters evolving into a new Coil find it easier if committed on a Crucible. Characters learning Coils on the Crucible buy Coils of their chosen Mystery with two Experiences, and Coils of other Mysteries at three Experiences per dot. They develop Scales for a single Experience.

Feng Shui (• to •••••)

Prerequisites: Academics ••, Occult •••

Your character has mastered the complex mathematics and parapsychology sufficiently that she can arrange the items in her Wyrms' Nest in order to focus its ectoplasmic energies and benefit those within.

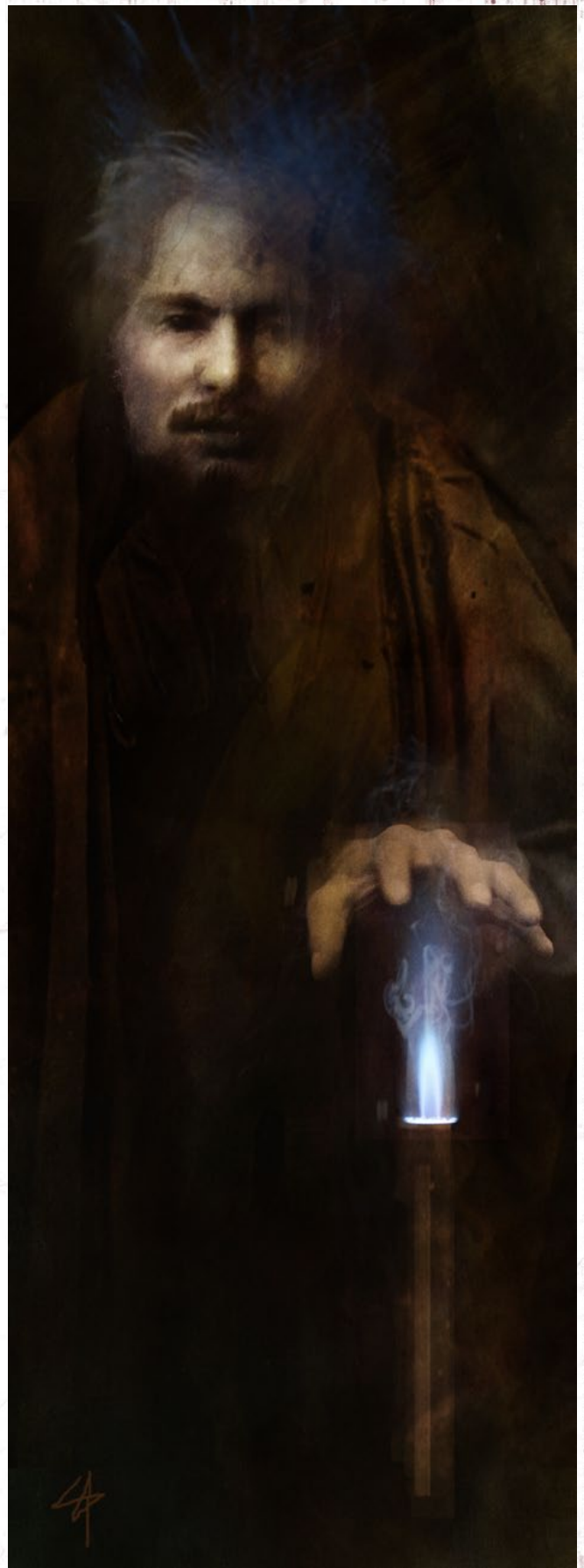
Effect: When taking this Merit, choose a single Skill. While in the Wyrms' Nest, characters may take your character's Feng Shui dots as additional dice when using that Skill.

Perilous Nest (• to •••••)

Prerequisites: Occult •••

Your character has secured a Perilous Nest. Usually, this means a haunted place. But other supernatural oddities may constitute a Perilous Nest. With her rites, she has harnessed these dangers to endanger only individuals meeting her defined criteria.

Effect: If a character meets your character's chosen criteria, the Nest lashes out to show him he is not welcome. This is different



for every Nest, but as a rule, doubles the owner's Merit dots to use as a dicepool to harass, assault, or otherwise imperil intruders each turn. Successful "attacks" can cause bashing damage to the character, or cost the character a Willpower point. He may resist the assault normally, depending on the variety of attack.

Mysteries

Here are two Coils and some Scales available to Ordo Dracul characters.

The Coil of Zirnitra

This ancient Coil is named after a Slavic dragon god of sorcery. Zirnitra's Coil is nearly extinct; to most Order sensibilities, it offers limited rewards and great risk. Functionally, it removes an oft-overlooked weakness of the Kindred condition: the penchant for developing mortal magics and psychic phenomena. Some Dragons have developed this Coil to regain the lost gifts granted to them by their heritage as part of a werewolf family. Some use it to recover the magics tied to their mortal bloodlines. Merits must still be purchased; this Coil allows that purchase.

Below, we've provided a couple of examples of such phenomena. However, you can find other Supernatural Merits in other **World of Darkness** books.

It's worth noting that this can cause unintended complications for a chronicle. Not every human Supernatural Merit will work well within a **Vampire** chronicle. Use firm discretion, and discuss each given purchase with your Storyteller.

Opening the Third Eye •

At this basic level, the Dragon develops the ability to learn mortal magics and psychic abilities. For every dot in the Coil of Zirnitra, your character may learn a single Supernatural Merit reserved for mortal characters. However, in addition to any Willpower or other costs, every such power's activation requires a single point of Vitae. Any failures with Supernatural Merits are automatically considered dramatic. This does still give a Beat.

Unleash the Mind ••

Your character may spend Willpower to activate Supernatural Merits without the normal limitation of Willpower in a turn. She can spend a point to activate a Merit, and spend Willpower to increase a dice pool.

Now, drawbacks do not always occur when using Supernatural Merits granted by this Coil. However, all failures are still considered dramatic failures.

Embolden Potential •••

Your character's blood attunes to her supernatural gifts, as they become more and more a part of her. She may spend Vitae to increase dice pools for Supernatural Merits, as if they were Physical Attribute dice pools.

Upon taking this Coil, Supernatural Merits cost one Experience less, to a minimum of a single Experience. This counts retroactively; the character is refunded one Experience for each Supernatural Merit she already possesses.

At this level, Supernatural Merits gained through Coil of Zirnitra no longer require additional Vitae expenditure.

The Dragon's Breath ••••

When your character spends Willpower to add dice to a Supernatural Merit dice pool, add her dots in Coil of Zirnitra, instead of the normal +3 dice.

At this level, failures with Supernatural Merits are considered failures, not dramatic failures.

Ascendancy •••••

Your character may push herself to extremes in the invocation of her forbidden arts. By suffering a level of unavoidable aggravated damage (Resilience does not assist), she can roll a Supernatural Merit activation as a rote action.

Additionally, your character is no longer limited in the number of Supernatural Merits she may possess.

Scales of Zirnitra

Dragons learning the Coil of Zirnitra may pursue the following Scales.

Grafting Unholy Flesh

Prerequisite Coil: The Dragon's Breath

Procedure: The Dragon must take a body part from another Kindred, psychic, or other supernatural creature. He must work quickly, and graft the body part onto his own form, letting his Vitae vitalize the tissue before it completely decomposes. The Dragon must know of a supernatural ability possessed by the subject, and choose a body part symbolic of that skill. This procedure may only take place on a Wyrms' Nest.

Outcome: The Dragon must spend a point of Vitae in order to fuse the body part with his own form. So long as the Dragon keeps the body part animate as part of his body, he gains access to the ability. Any costs aside from Vitae and Willpower costs must be paid with *both* one Vitae and Willpower per point of its normal cost. If the victim survives the surgery, she loses access to the ability so long as the body part remains detached. She similarly loses any ability to regenerate that part. The body part has Health Levels equal to its Size, separate the vampire's. If it loses all its Health Levels, it becomes worthless to the vampire. He may use this to affix a body part to another Kindred or ghoul.

Psychic Lobotomy

Prerequisite Coil: Opening the Third Eye

Procedure: The Dragon conducts surgery to remove a tiny part of the subject's brain, this being the part most prone to

psychic phenomena. While this causes measurable damage to the person's identity, it protects him from supernatural influence of his mind.

Outcome: The surgery causes the subject to lose a dot of a Mental or Social Attribute of his player's choice. The character loses access to all Supernatural Merits as well. Any power which would affect, influence, or read his mind suffer the Dragon's Coil of Zirnitra dots as a penalty to their dice rolls, and he adds those dots in any contested rolls he makes. This includes many applications of Auspex, Majesty, Dominate, or many psychic Merits. A vampire or other regenerating creature may heal this surgery as an aggravated wound.

The Coil of Ziva

This heretical Coil is named after a Slavic goddess of fertility, health, and life. The Dragon with Coil of Ziva rejects the things that make her a vampire, and clings hard to her Humanity. Most Dragons see this as a rejection of the Order, and the Brides' struggle to rise above. Some domains consider Ziva's Coil apostasy against the Order under the rationale of a sort of devolution to a primitive form, and execute known followers. Some domains simply do not speak of it.

Denying the Bane •

At this initial level, the character may shrug off some of the more heinous effects of her degeneration. Add her Coil dots to her Humanity for the purpose of determining the effects of her Banes. This includes her clan Bane. If this increases her effective Humanity to 10, such Banes do not affect her. This does not, however, affect the vampire's weaknesses to fire or sunlight. This doesn't affect the Ventrue clan Bane, however, Ventrue find particular benefits in the Coil of Ziva due to their challenging relationship with Humanity.

Buttress the Soul ••

The vampire is able to thrust forth some of the stolen life in her Vitae in order to defend against the ravages of the soul. When facing Detachment, she may spend Vitae, up to her normal per-turn limit. Every Vitae spent adds one die to resist Detachment.

Enliven the Anima •••

With this Coil, your character becomes resistant to the psychological stains of Humanity loss. She finds her soul's trials invigorating. Any time she'd suffer a Condition for Detachment, you may choose to spend a Willpower point to take Raptured instead.

Embracing the Banes ••••

With this Coil, the very essence of the vampire's immortality clutches onto the threads that keep her from the Beast. Those claws shield those threads from that which would destroy them.

Peculiarities of Kindred Wearing Human Flesh

To say The Mysteries of the Dragon are imperfect sciences would be a gross understatement. Shedding the Beast's Skin even more so. While it generally does what's expected, it commonly exhibits unexpected exceptions. For example, the vampire's heart may continue to beat for weeks after its use. In some cases, it's taken unexpected turns. Notably, if a vampire is impregnated in her human flesh, the body makes due to carry through to term. But what happens to these half-damned children?

Your character can sustain a number of Banes equal to her Willpower dots, not three.

Shedding the Beast's Skin •••••

The final spiral in Ziva's Coil has the Dragon literally shed her flesh, and with it, her vampiric nature. She spends three Willpower points to activate Shedding the Beast's Skin. Shedding the skin takes five turns.

Shedding the Beast's Skin lasts for eleven hours, minus one for each dot of the Dragon's Blood Potency. During this time, she becomes effectively human. Her heart beats. Her skin sweats. She can get hungry, and she can eat. Her sexual tissues may engorge if aroused, and may orgasm if pushed to that height. No doctor in the world could see her as anything but human. This comes with it a loss of her vampiric Disciplines, her ability to ingest, store, and expend Vitae, and her immortality. She no longer suffers a clan bane, or experiences blood sympathy.

At the end of the period, she becomes Kindred again. For nearly a half an hour, she undergoes the sensations and transformations of the Embrace again. This leaves her functionally incapacitated during this time. She can hold off the transformation for one minute for an additional point of Willpower. Once she's changed back, she possesses Vitae equal to her remaining Health Levels, or her previous Vitae, whichever is lower.

Scales of Ziva

A character with Coil of Ziva may learn these Scales.

Bleed the Sin

Prerequisite Coil: Buttress the Soul

Procedure: With this procedure, the Dragon bleeds a subject of all their blood or Vitae. With human subjects, this generally requires a dialysis machine or other technological assistance to keep the subject alive. This flow of blood carries with it the weight of their sin.

Outcome: The subject must remain effectively bloodless for at least ten minutes in order for this Scale to take effect. Reduce the subject's next Humanity, Integrity, or similar trait purchase by one Experience per dot of the vampire's Coil of Ziva.

Siphon the Soul

Prerequisite Coil: Enliven the Anima

Procedure: This ability acts as a sort of pseudo-Amaranth. The vampire drains a Kindred victim completely, and then continues to do so further. She spends Willpower and rolls Strength + Resolve as she normally would (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 101).

Outcome: Once the vampire has achieved a number of successes equal to the victim's current Humanity, she steals one dot of Humanity from her victim. He loses it; she gains one. She may only ever strip one such dot from a given victim. The victim only reaches torpor as result of this; the vampire may continue to feast to the point of full Amaranth. Regardless, the vampire suffers Detachment at Humanity 1 (possibly losing the stolen Humanity dot), and suffers the Tainted Condition.

The Curious Science of Wyrms' Nests

The Ordo Dracul pursues "Wyrms' Nests" as part of their traditional protocol. These are places where massive spiritual energy converges. Some call these "ley lines", "loci," or "verges," but regardless, these places are beyond the natural. Haunted houses, long-lost bastions of the wild, or places of extreme emotional resonance can become Wyrms' Nests.

Finding a Wyrms' Nest is largely up to the Storyteller; every Wyrms' Nest is unique, and thus fits different criteria. But in game terms, a Wyrms' Nest meets a few criteria:

- A Wyrms' Nest has a rating between one and five dots.
- A Nest's rating is tied to its Resonance, a general vibe, emotion, or idea it embodies.
- Supernatural phenomena occur at the Nest, flavored by the Resonance. For example, in a Nest of Abundance, plants might grow at alarming rates, overtaking those daring to sleep on the floor.
- The rating determines the relative strangeness of the phenomena. One or two dot Nests might appear as coincidences. Five dot phenomena appear downright miraculous.
- Dragons can manipulate the rating of a Nest by adding ambience, or inspiring aligning passions within the Nest's bounds.
- A Nest's rating determines the rough area it can take. A single dot Nest might be as small as a walk-in closet, where a five-dot Nest could comprise a large building or mansion.
- A location may have multiple Nests with different Resonances.

Experimentation on a Nest

The Ordo Dracul use Wyrms' Nests for many important rites, including the Crucible Ritual, which helps members evolve Coils more quickly. Some Ordo Dracul rituals may only occur within a Nest. For example, the Grafting Unholy Flesh Scale only works in a Wyrms' Nest. No matter how hard a member tries, the procedure fails when attempted outside a Nest.



*"They say to judge a man
by the company he keeps.
By this measure,
as by any other,
we are liars
and monsters."*

*- Getter Kahn,
Bishop of Filth*

Vampires gather under many banners. But five have endured the tumult of Western history better than any other. The Carthian Movement. The Circle of the Crone. The Invictus. The Lancea et Sanctum. The Ordo Dracul. Each has its fierce devotees, its jealous rivals, and its relentless enemies. Now, for the first time, the covenants speak for themselves.

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