

# Something Something Vampires

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Hallowgrave Hall has stood for thousands of years, in one form or another. The latest form is a handsome gothic manor, some five hundred years old, in good repair. Its steeples and turrets jaggedly rake the bleak skies of its moorland domain, towering over the cypress trees which line the gravel walk. It is the kind of house which looks best with a handsome black carriage glistening before it and torchlight in the halls, and it is at its best now. The chestnut horses bound to the handsome black carriage chuff impatiently, snorting mist into the bitter air.

Dark and glossy vines embrace the Hall on every side, in spring and summer. In winter, now, those vines are a skeletal net, pinning the great stone beast to the earth.

The mouth of the hall stands open, a slick tongue of tiled marble waiting to receive unthinking feet. A pair of unthinking feet, clad in fashionable loafers, are just now exiting the carriage. The Hall holds its breath.

The young man who steps out of the carriage is already balding. He has buzzed his yellow hair down almost to the scalp in acceptance of this, and his widow's peak is currently hidden by a dark velvet hat. In his leather-gloved hand he clutches a briefcase. I wonder what is inside?

He adjusts the buttons of his long black coat meticulously, then smoothes his beard and mustache. With a nervous little sigh, he observes the House.

It is sunset, though in the grey haze of the moor it

is difficult to tell. Away in the west a red line glows at the horizon, but the shadows of the Hall are already quite dark. The flickering light inside the windows is welcoming and frightening. It makes the windows of the house seem to move, like eyes taking careful focus on their prey.

After another brief pause, he takes his first step. The gravel walk announces him loudly in the heavy silence of the Hall. He plants his next step, wondering even now if he is making a mistake.

His next step is on the stone stair. It feels like missing a step at the top of a basement stair.

He swallows. He looks back at the carriage. The driver, a middle-aged man with a well-groomed grey beard, glares back at him sourly. His eyes are a piercing shade of grey-blue.

He looks the way he must go. He takes another step. This is easier; no vertigo takes him this time. He climbs the rest of the stairs easily. A mere seven stairs, and yet he is astonished to come to the end of them. He faces the front room of the Hall.

Marble glistens under dark wood furniture upholstered in crimson. Noble faces glower down from oil and canvas, their coloration stained by centuries of candle-smoke. Brass candelabras stand on velvet doilies. A curio cabinet stands against the left wall, packed with human skulls, crystals, and strange knives. As he passes this cabinet, he notes a horrible glimmer within the hollow

sockets of some of the skulls, attributes this glimmer to the play of firelight and reflection, and passes on. A seating arrangement sits before the fireplace. To either side of the hearth, dark wooden stairs ascend to a second level, where hallways lead on to the rest of the house. On this ground floor, four black-painted doors with arched peaks stand waiting in black-wood frames carved with beasts and birds of prey.

A raven, a wolf, a bear, and an owl. He admires the clever carving from a safe distance, and removes his hat. As he looks around for the hat-stand, the door begins to swing shut behind him. He jumps, and turns, in time to see the grey-eyed driver pulling the doors shut. “Letting in the flies, are we?”

“N-no,” says the young gentleman.

The driver smirks, locks the door with a large iron key, and steps through the door with the snarling bear’s face.

The man moves to stand next to the fire, though the iron grille and its smiling face disturbs him. The face looks demonic. The mouth grins wide, tongue lolling out, and a crown of leaves surrounds it.

A soft voice says kindly, “You can have a seat, if you like?”

He jumps, turns. “Oh,” he says.

A young man dressed like a butler stands half-way down the stair, one hand upon the rail. As he continues to descend, he says, “Would you care for a drink?”

“Yes, please,” says the visitor, taking his seat.

The butler descends the stair and opens the curio cabinet. The skulls and the shelves they sit upon seem to be attached to the door, and as the door swings open it reveals another set of shelves, behind the skulls, bearing many crystal decanters and glasses. The backs of the skulls are missing, as though they were nothing more than masks of bone. This hidden minibar, then, was the source of the twinkle in those skeletal sockets. The butler asks: “Whiskey? Sherry? Wine? Vodka? Tequila? Rum? A mixed drink, perhaps?”

“Oh,” says the visitor. “Uh, just wine, I suppose?”

The butler brings him a glass of dark red wine, then sits across from him, in the red armchair.

“Thanks,” says the visitor.

“You have come a long way,” says the butler. “The master will be pleased.”

“Is he here, now?”

“No. He arrives tonight.”

“From where?”

“Oh, somewhere far away. I can never keep good track of his travels. He is rarely here for long.”

“You must have an easy job, then.”

“On the contrary, I maintain this house alone. I rarely have a moment to sit. Just now I was replacing a pipe in one of the bathrooms.”

“In a tux?”

“It’s not a tuxedo,” says the butler. “It is a uniform. One made with very modern materials, I assure you. It is practically bulletproof.”

“I see. So you do maintenance, too?”

“As I said, I maintain this house alone. I have done countless renovations, just as my father before me did.”

My butler is modest. He has several advanced degrees in architectural studies and history, and is a certified historical restorationist who is often called upon to consult on gothic restorations.

The visitor raises an eyebrow. “Your father was the butler before you?”

“Yes,” says the butler. “Just as his father before him was. Our family line has always maintained this place.”

“For how long?”

“Since time immemorial,” says the butler. “This place has held many grand constructions, over the centuries. It has been inhabited since the days of the early Celts. At that time, there was a stone circle here. A meeting place for druids. Or so it is said.”

“Wow. We don’t have that kind of history, in the US.”

“Certainly you do. You just keep it locked on reservations and in museums, and do not understand that the land has not become a different land simply because different things are built upon it. It remembers all that has

transpired. It is part of the reason for the chaos in your country, incidentally. Sins can only go unrecognized for so long before they destroy you.”

The visitor drank his wine in lieu of giving a response, and decided that he would wait and speak with me directly.

“Come,” says the butler. “While we wait for the master, I can take you on a tour.”

“I suppose.”

“Let me fill your wine glass, for the road.”

“Thank you! So generous.”

“This is the last bottle of this vintage,” says the butler. “The master is always generous.”

“When you say ‘last bottle’...?”

“In existence. The bottle alone, even empty, is worth several million dollars.”

“Good God! I can’t drink that!”

“Please restrain yourself from taking the Lord’s name in vain. Besides, it is too late. The last of it is in your cup. Please. Be sure to enjoy it.”

“I’m not being charged for this, am I?”

The butler laughs. “Of course not. Come. The tour always starts with the door of the Raven.”

“Why?”



“The Raven said, ‘Nevermore’,” says the butler, as though this is an explanation.

“...I see,” says the visitor.

The butler unlocks the raven door with a large iron key, turns the handle, and pushes the door inward into whispering darkness.

He turns and lifts a candelabra from its purple velvet doily and carries it through the raven door. The dim and flickering light reveals a windowed hall hung with thick velvet curtains.

“Why have the windows if you won’t use the light?” The visitor asks.

“The master is somewhat eccentric. He prefers candlelight and darkness.”

“I see.”

“This hall runs along the face of the western wing,” says the butler. “This door at the end is called the Nevermore door.”

It was not a door. It was a tall wooden arch, carved with the word ‘NEVERMORE’ in intricate letters. In the arch a dark curtain hung, barring the path.

“Why is it called that?” The visitor asks.

“It was a family name, I think,” says the butler. “Come on. Just push through the curtain.”

“Me?”

“Yes. I will need you to hold it open, for the candelabra.”

“It’s a miracle you guys haven’t burned down,” says the visitor, pushing the curtain gently aside and feeling his way into the blind darkness beyond.

“Not really. There are no flammable materials in the construction, anymore. All the fabrics and upholsteries are fireproof. Only the books, perhaps, would burn, in the library. But it is on the second level and rarely used, except when the master is home. No candle is ever left there unattended.”

“I see,” says the visitor, blundering into the gloom. He is confused. “Wait... I saw windows on the outside of the house, here. Why is this room so small?”

The walls were dark and close, making what should have been a large corner chamber into a narrow hall.

“False rooms, for the sake of the windows,” says the butler. “Come along.” He leads the way to the end of the dark hall, which opens into a dark square chamber without furniture, save for a large iron coffin.

The butler places the candelabra on the lid of the coffin, kneels, and unlocks three large padlocks on the side of the coffin.

“Hold the candle, will you?”

“Sure,” says the visitor, taking the candelabra. He holds it up. He is expecting perhaps a secret door, the

disguised entrance to a man-cave, or some other elaborate twist.

He is not expecting to see a wooden coffin lying within the padded iron one.

“What is this?” The visitor asks.

“A gift,” says the butler, reaching out one hand and knocking thrice upon the coffin lid.

It is unnecessary. I am no longer inside the coffin.

Gently I embrace my visitor from behind, though he screams and struggles against me. My fangs find salty neck, sink deep into meat. The hot, copper stink of his blood floods my throat. My butler lovingly swings the coffin door open, and with my victim I return to bed.

I drink deep. The first thirst of an age-long sleep is uncontrollable. Only when he is dry and brittle do I emerge to face the new world.

My butler is waiting for me, holding a white towel. He bows, unwilling to meet my gaze.

I take the towel and clean myself thoroughly. As I am doing so, the butler opens a secret door and enters the bathroom, then returns with a hot wet towel in a pair of tongs. I take it and wash my face again, then accept a clean towel to dry myself.

“Good,” I say. “Your ancestors would be proud.”

“Thank you,” he says.

“Your name?”

“Oswald, your majesty.”

“Oswald. It is good that the old name has found a new bearer. And one so comely! The bloodline does well.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“Do you know what we are, to one another?”

“I... I know that my grandfather was your husband. In all but law.”

“He was,” I say. “Is your father still alive?”

“No. He... he passed.”

“I am sorry. I would have liked to see him one last time, before the end.”

“He wanted to raise you, but the council vetoed him.”

“Yes, I will be perusing the voting records next, I think. Over tea. And a pipe.”

“All prepared, in your den. Do you wish for a bath?”

“Yes. The dust of ages clings so.”

“The arrangement of the rooms and the furniture within them is unchanged, except where the rot of time has necessitated a replacement. Great care has been taken to maintain the authenticity of your home exactly as it was when you went to sleep.”

“Yes. I have watched your efforts. Admirable. Admirable. I will attend to my bath, now. Do something to relax, Oswald. You have more than earned it. Oh, before you do; his name?”

“He was an entrepreneur. An inventor. Seeking an investor, I think. His name was Jonathan Morrow.”

“He was delicious. A pity I could not have turned him. The first feeding, of course; quite impossible.”

“He had a brother, I think.”

“I shall visit him. Offer it to him.”

“Sir, could I... Is there any chance that you might—”

“—grant it to you? Sadly that is not possible. You are my own blood. Immune to my power, as your father was before you.”

“Wait, what?”

I sigh. “Dear child.” I touch his face. “I am your grandfather, as much as your grandfather was. We mingled our blood, and made new life. I had hoped that you and your father would both be immortal... But alas, it seems that was not to be.”

“But why didn’t you turn my grandfather?”

The memory aches. Our decades together tumble before my sight, every greying hair, every line, every wrinkle. The sight of his time-weathered eyes. “I loved him. I could not turn him into a thrall.”

“But you’re not a thrall.”

“Indeed, I am not,” I say.

“How did you turn?”

“I was cursed,” I say. “And died, and rose again as this.”

“But what if I get bitten by a *different* vampire?”

“You would become only the thrall of one of them until they were slain.”

“But you could arrange that.”

“It would be delicate,” I say, “but it is true. It would be... possible. Assuming that the families have grown, instead of shrinking. They are often at war with one another.”

“Peace lately,” says Oswald. “For the last fifty years, or so. Since Russia got nukes.”

“Nukes? What are ‘nukes’?”

“Nuclear weaponry. They use atomic physics to unleash devastating energy, enough to level an entire city with a single bomb. They have attached them to rockets powerful enough to travel the globe in minutes and land anywhere on earth.”

“Who has?”

“Everyone, sir. Almost every nation on earth.”

“I see the humans have gone to insanity more quickly than I thought. I will have to correct that.”

“Can you? Really? Can you really do that?”

“Of course,” I say. “All things in life and death are possible, with will enough and time. Do you see in me

any deficit of either?”

“N-no.”

“Very well.”

“Except there is... global warming.”

“Global warming? What is that?”

“Er... There were some scientists talking about it at the time you went under, too. But the science has come a long way. Since the Industrial Revolution, carbon dioxide and other gasses have been released into the air at rates far exceeding their natural one. Over time that buildup has caused an effect similar to that of a greenhouse. The heat of the sun is strengthened and concentrated enough to raise the global temperature gradually over time, causing weather catastrophes and sea-level rise. There are many scientists saying that the results will be apocalyptic.”

“Damn. We will have to correct that as well. I wish to bathe, now. Go do something pleasant to relax yourself, and I will meet you in the den for tea.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“Later, I will ask you to bring me as many books on modern history and culture as you can find.”

“I have something that will expedite the process,” says Oswald. “Modern technology has come a long way.”

“Indeed? Then I look forward to whatever you have to show me.”

After bathing I rejoin Oswald in the den and find tea waiting at my desk, along with a slim slab of sleek-looking metal and glass. I sit down, take my tea, and say, “What is this?”

“Push the button at the bottom.”

“I see no button.”

“That little indentation,” says Oswald. “It will click when you push it. Don’t push hard.”

“I see.”

I touch the button and the glass lights with an unholy blue glow, revealing a dazzling image of stars and nebulae and a display reading the current time in crisp, clear lettering. “This is beautiful,” I say. “A magic mirror? How clever!”

“It isn’t magic,” says Oswald. “At least, I’m pretty sure it’s not. I suppose it could be, if magic is real and I just don’t know about it.”

“I assure you, magic is very real,” I say. “However, I have never seen such a strong display of it as this.”

“Well, anyway, they claim it’s technology. If you push the button again, you’ll see an array of numbers on the glass. You can touch the image of the number and the device will recognize that you have touched it. You will need to input a four-digit code. The number is 1777.”

I push the button. The numbers appear. I touch them. Nothing occurs.



“Oh,” he says. “It might not be able to detect your skin, since it’s room temperature. When my fingers are cold, I can’t use the screen either.”

“No matter. You will simply have to use the screen for me.”

“I can connect something which will allow you to use it, later,” says Oswald, “but for now I can help. Here.”

He inputs the code and the image of the glass changes like magic. Gummy-looking icons, bright as candy, appear against that backdrop of stars. He touches one of these, and it expands to fill the glass.

“This...” says Oswald, doing a small series of things involving a magically-appearing board of letters and touching blue words to change the image yet again. “...is Wikipedia.”

“I don’t understand.”

“With this, we can search for any information, and receive detailed articles about it. For example, we can search for a century, say, 1900 to 2000, and...”

The new article appears. He touches the glass and drags his finger, causing the article’s words to fly upwards.

“It is like a window onto a book in some unseen library,” I say.

“Yes. Pretty much.”

“How does it work?”

After a detailed explanation of the internet, wifi, cell phones, nonprofit organizations, and shareware, I begin to understand.

“I think you should connect whatever device will allow me to navigate this,” I say, “otherwise I will wear your fingers out. I intend to study all night. There is much I must familiarize myself with, if I am to pass as a modern citizen.”

“Honestly, you’re wealthy enough that you may not need to. People will put up with all sorts of eccentric behavior from their rich people.”

I laugh. “Perhaps you are correct. Still, there is much about which I am curious.”

“I’ll connect a mouse.”

“A mouse? I don’t follow.”

“Oh, you’ll see. I’ll be right back.”

It requires a dongle and a rubberized cord to attach the “mouse.” I can see why it is so-called.

“You move the mouse across the table to move the cursor—that’s the little arrow on the screen. You click the left button to activate things, and click the right button to open additional options. You probably won’t need any of the options on display most of the time.”

“I see. Thank you, Oswald. You must be tired. I watched you spend nearly the whole day preparing. I can manage well enough from here. I shall need to see you first thing tomorrow night, however.”

“Thank you, your majesty. I will stay up for the first night, if that’s alright. Should you need anything, only ring the bell.”

“Thank you. I may leave the house in the night, I find myself somewhat peckish.”

“The monastery is still active,” says Oswald.

“Oh? How interesting. It has been too long since I tasted clergyman. Perhaps I shall pay them a visit. What about the Helsing order?”

“Still active. Complacent, now; they’ve had no real challenge since you went to sleep.”

“Excellent. The memory of Man is short. They will be soft, unguarded. I will visit them tonight.”

“Shall I collect your weapons from the armory?”

“Yes, please. You may leave them on the table in the hall. Have no fear; I shall visit the monastery and drink well before I pay my respects to the Order.”

Oswald shudders slightly. It delights me. “Good,” I say. “Some humanity left in you. Keep that. I have lost mine. You can be my candle in the dark.”

“You mean you *want* me to voice my opinions?”

“As often and as directly as possible, yes. I cannot promise to obey all your advice, but I will at least hear it.”

“I think visiting the Order so early might be an unfortunate move.”

“Do not flinch from saying ‘bad.’ If it is a bad idea, tell me why.”

“Only the administration stays in the old guildhall now, they are a much more dispersed organization than they were before. With modern technology, their agents are scattered around the globe, and all can contact each other within seconds. If you attack the guildhall, the entire Order will know of your reawakening within moments.”

I smile. “How delightful. That should streamline things.”

“You mean you *want* them to come here?”

“Of course! Hunting them down one by one sounds like tedious work. I will lay a devious trap, and kill them all at once.”

“Shouldn’t you prepare that in advance, before going off to announce your presence?”

“They can travel that quickly, then?”

“With modern transportation, it’s possible to get from any point on the globe to any other within about a day.”

“I see... It is a good thing you are here to give me council. That could have been disastrous. I can see I shall have to move cautiously. Are there any suggestions you care to offer?”

“We need to learn the extent of their organization, and gain access to their records. If we can learn the locations of all their agents, or at least their identities, we will be

better armed.”

“How laborious.”

“Of course, I suppose if they haven’t attacked this house in all the time you’ve been asleep... It’s possible they don’t know your origin?”

“Yes... They were closing in, when I chose to sleep. Perhaps the trail has gone cold since then.”

“In all fairness, you are a somewhat unbelievable specimen. Perhaps they allowed themselves to believe you were just a myth?”

“Perhaps. Still, you are wise. It would be reckless to leap into the throat of danger so quickly. Perhaps the best thing to do is to strengthen my holdings and establish a base of power, and prepare for them to inevitably catch my scent. How much is in the account now?”

“In liquid assets, seventy-two billion dollars. In stock holdings and various investments, upwards of two hundred billion.”

The figure staggers me. “An incredible sum!”

“Yes, your Winchester holdings did well in the first part of the century, and we diversified into coal, oil, electricity, natural gas, computers, and other investments as the decades rolled by. There has been significant inflation since your day.”

“How much, in 1920 dollars?”

“I’ll ask Siri.” He touches and holds the button on the

tablet, asks his question, and a moment later an eery, disembodied female voice speaks.

“Seems she doesn’t know,” he says, and he opens the tablet and begins to search for information. A minute later, he says, “Approximately fifteen billion dollars?”

“An astronomical sum,” I say. “I see I shall have no difficulty with money for the foreseeable future.”

My stomach grumbles. “Perhaps,” I say, “it’s best if you leave me now. I will go to the monastery, lest I drink you in my hunger.”

“Right,” says Oswald, and he scurries out of the room.

I raise the window and let the cool night winds wash over me. The moon has risen, high and full. That will make my journey all the easier.

I remember the angle of the monastery, although it has been more than a century since last I visited. I transform into moonlight and race to the moon. The journey takes a hair over one second, and the exhilaration of my speed as the atmosphere whips silently past me extracts a shout of joy from me. My laughter booms over the countryside like thunder.

I strike the moon, and become solid once more. I gaze down at the world, blue and white beneath me. Too long has it been without me. Too long has it spun, ungoverned, into madness. I feel somehow that I have only just begun to learn about the problems I will have to solve, to fix this stupid place.

My hunger breaks my powers of introspection. Irritably, I turn to face the monastery far below, invisible on the surface so many thousands of miles away.

I become moonlight, and fall like a demon.

In a ripple of shadow I emerge within the courtyard of the old monastery, and breathe in the scents of the night. A wolf pack cowers in the nearby forest, hiding from man. They scent me as I scent them, and before I can even call they are already on their way.

An owl alights upon the tree in the center of the courtyard. A moment later, a murder of crows cackles above me, and begins to settle in the branches. Across more than a century of time they have preserved the memory of me, then. They cackle my name in worship, and beg to me for scraps.

I have come here for one man's worth of blood, but I cannot leave my subjects hungry.

I pass between the pillars of the arcade, and seek out the bedchambers of the monks. They are all on the ground floor, exposed to the world.

I knock softly upon the first door. At first, there is no sound within. Then the door swings gently inward, and a young, dark-eyed monk stands facing me.

"Ah, you are too lovely to eat," I say. "Stay here. I will return for you."

He clutches at the crucifix upon his neck, eyes wide with fear. I smile. With one hand I reach out and take

hold of the golden cross, and as my skin begins to burn I rub the little thing between my fingers and thumb, savoring the sting.

“Ah,” I say. “Yes. True of faith. You will prove useful.”

I fix him in my gaze, and from the back of my soul comes the Voice. It rumbles from me, and the command sinks into his soul and binds him. “Sit on your bed, and wait for me.”

He sits, eyes still wide with fear.

“Good boy.”

I move to the next bedchamber. I knock softly on the door.

It opens. A middle-aged cleric stands before me, grey-eyed and frightened. He too grasps his crucifix, and holds it out as though to ward me off.

Gently I take his hand, crucifix and all. “What’s this?” I say, as the cross does not burn me. “No faith, even in the foxhole?”

I laugh. Then I strike him down. “I smell the scent of sin upon you, preacher. Seven little boys and two little girls... They hang upon your neck like millstones. Hell will be too sweet for you.”

“Please!” He begs, from the floor.

I have no desire to taste the meat of his neck. I draw my silver daggers from the folds of my cloak, and plunge



one into his heart. Then I clutch his body to my face, and drink deep of his gushing life. He claws at my face, my arms, my ears. Even where he does draw blood, the wounds heal an instant later, and his struggling grows more feeble.

At last he hangs, limp and cold, in my arms. I toss him aside, and wipe my mouth.

“Rich. Fatty. Dark with wine and sin. Thank you, dear cleric. You have served a worthy cause, this night. Give the Devil my regards.”

I move to the next bedchamber, my hunger only strengthened by the surge of power. The blood compels me.

I knock. The door opens.

“Let me in,” I whisper.

The monk within shakes his head violently, clinging to his cross. He glows in my sight.

“So near so vile a neighbor?” I say, flummoxed. “Very well. Your God grants you the protection he did not give seven little boys and two little girls. Think on that, while you listen to the massacre of your brethren. You will remain safe if you stay in this chamber.”

“Begone, devil!”

“I assure you, I am no devil. Their manners are *much* worse.”

I close the door and move to the next. As I am knocking, the faithful cleric emerges from his chamber boldly to face me.

The wolves have no difficulty with crucifixes, even those in the hands of the faithful. They are upon him before I can command it, and they drag him screaming into the courtyard, for the ravens to join in the feast.

The owl hoots once, in warning. I perk up my ears, and hear the stirrings of every heart within the monastery. The idiot monk's screeching has awakened them all, and one among them is of the Order.

I can hear the subtle click of a crossbow being loaded. The warrior does not emerge; he waits for others to do so. I admire his clever cowardice.

The doors spring open, and clergymen of every stripe emerge into the courtyard.

I catch one from behind, and put my finger into his eye, to catch one of his tears. I rub it between my thumb and forefinger, using its elemental essence to draw more moisture into the air. The fog rolls over the walls of the monastery like a tide of clouds, and soon closes us all in blinding mist.

I drink the cleric in my arms, for the sake of convenience, then hurl his body to the wolves.

Suddenly there is a blinding glare. Someone has switched on electric lighting, flooding the foggy courtyard with light.

I hear the shuffle of boots among the many sandals, and move myself to the ceiling. I creep over my boot-wearing prey, and look down upon him. He holds a crossbow in both hands, and searches the fog keenly with his eyes, turning in all directions. The other monks are trying to frighten off the wolves with farming implements, to little effect. The wolves are fearless, knowing I am near.

I drop upon my would-be assassin and sink my fangs into his neck. He struggles against me, trying to bring the crossbow to bear, but I wrap my legs and arms around him and pin him down while I drink. Monks scream the names of Jesus and God as they witness me.

Before the last pint is out, I slash my wrist with a silver knife and press it to his mouth. He resists feebly, then as the blood meets his throat he clutches my arm with both hands and holds it to his mouth as he drinks.

I release him, and swat him away. I heal the wound in my arm with a moment's thought.

The crouching thrall looks up at me, horror in his eyes. He reaches, hands trembling, for the crossbow. I allow him to pick it up. He points it at me.

I smile.

He points the crossbow just to my left, and fires. The bolt impales a monk, killing him instantly. He begins to reload the crossbow. I smile again, and select my next victim. A fat, elderly monk is trying to escape through the main gates. I stab him in the throat, clutch him by

the head, and catch the spouting geyser in my mouth.

It does not take long to finish them off. The wolves and crows make a meal of the remains, and the fog retreats. I return to the bedchamber of the faithful monk.

I knock once.

The door opens. He stares up at me, wide-eyed with terror, still clutching his crucifix in both hands.

I sigh. "Take my hand, and I will let you live."

He looks at my outstretched hand, then at my face.

After an aching long moment, he takes my hand.

We become moonlight. A mere moment later, having crossed fifty miles the longest and swiftest way possible, we are on the steps of my manor.

"What are you going to do with me?" He asks.

"I am going to keep you," I say.

"Why?"

"You are lovely."

"So you're going to... Going to...?"

"No," I say. "Unless that is your secret wish?"

"No!"

"You will have your own suite. Everything will be quite comfortable. You can even continue your monastic work."

“Why? Why are you letting me live?”

“Why does an athlete suffer weights to take up space in his house?”

“I’m just... An exercise?”

“Something like that. Come along, now. Your chambers lie waiting.”

Several hours later, my new thrall arrives, clothes torn, curly hair full of twigs and leaves. His tonsure has regrown, and his features have become angular and pale. He crouches in the gravel before me, his crossbow still in hand.

“Good. Come along, now. I will show you where you will be sleeping.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“You are loyal to me, now. I will use you. First, you will answer many questions.”

“I don’t know anything useful. The Order protects its own.”

“Yes, I am aware of their tendency to compartmentalize information. Nevertheless, you will provide us a window into their operation.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I know. But you are so loyal, you will have no choice.”

He begins to weep. I allow it.

“Yes, yes,” I say. “Weep if you must. But come inside,

have some blood, and get to know me before you despair entirely.”

“Please,” he says. “Please kill me.”

“Come now. Where is your famed discipline? Where is your esteemed stoicism and self-control? Has the Order truly fallen into such disrepair?”

“You’ll make me betray them. I can’t. I can’t.”

“You can and you will. There is nothing you can do to resist! Now come along.”

“No,” he says, but his feet obey. We enter the grand entry hall, and pass through the wolf door. I lead him to the secret lounge.

“Please,” I say. “Sit down. Warm yourself by the fire. I will bring blood.”

I ring the bell. Oswald comes only a few minutes later, bearing a silver tray and two glasses of blood.

I take one, and reach over the couch to give my new friend the other. He chugs it down before he can think of resisting the urge, then catches himself licking the empty glass, and hastily tosses it. It shatters on the hearth.

I tisk. “Now, now. That really won’t do.”

“Release me!” He begs. “Please! Just kill me! Don’t let me become this!”

“I’m afraid you are already ‘this’. No one and nothing can free you from it, save a violent death at the hands of your comrades.”

“I’ll try to get killed, then.”

“You might try to try,” I say. “But in the heat of the moment I think you will find it very difficult to allow yourself to be killed. Now. Some preliminary questions. Your name?”

“Derek Faro,” says the thrall.

“Good. Your rank, within the Order?”

“Watcher, third class.”

“Your focus?”

“You. I was put in the monastery to watch, in case you returned. As the prophecy foretold.”

I look at Oswald. “The prophecy?”

Derek says, “Your return was prophesied in 1910, by the Baroness Adelma Vay.”

“I see,” I say. “And what, pray tell, did this prophecy detail?”

“That some time in the year 2019, you would emerge from your slumber just in time for a global plague. That you would bring about the end of man’s world. That only one pure of heart and soul and mind could slay you.”

“And you hoped to attain this total purity, so that you could do so?”

“Yes.”

“I pity you, young fool. You have been thoroughly hoodwinked. Human beings are not capable of such a

total purity. The being described can only be an incarnation of the deific principle.”

“You mean... A second coming?”

“If you wish to be crude about it, yes. Although Christianity distorts the truth to such an extent that I do not think the situation I am describing has any true parallel in theology.”

“But what will happen?” Oswald asks. “If such a being *is* born?”

“Presumably, they have already been born. It remains a simple matter of finding them before they can find me.”

“But wouldn’t they have a direct connection to the deific principle? They could be extremely powerful.”

“As am I.”

“What about the plague prophecy?” Oswald asks. “How do we prepare for that?”

“Simple. We watch the news for information. When the first outbreak is detected, I go to the source and kill any infected.”

Oswald asks, “But what if a global plague could be in your favor?”

“Interesting. Elaborate?”

“It would prove a distraction. A large number of dead bodies filling the morgues will make any of your victim’s bodies more than disappear.”



“Yes... I suppose that is true. Still, plagues are a nasty business. Perhaps better not to play with fire?”

“It may be safer to let that fire burn on its own,” says Oswald. “Interfering may raise questions.”

I muse on this for a time. “Yes. Perhaps you are right. Best not to show my hand *too* soon.”

“It’s too late,” says Derek. “I texted my superiors the moment I realized what was going on.”

“Texted? What does he mean?”

Oswald says, “He used his phone to send an instant wireless telegram, just as I told you they could.”

“I see. Perhaps we had better begin preparing for tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow, your majesty?”

“Yes. Tomorrow, I imagine we will have visitors. An unintended, but perhaps fortuitous, turn of events.”

“You really think they know where you live?”

“If my return was prophesied, and our young friend here was installed in the local monastery purely to look out for my return, then it stands to reason that my lair’s location is revealed.”

“What kinds of preparations should I make?” Oswald asks.

“You will be acting alone,” I say. “I am not yet strong enough to truly withstand the sunlight, and my thralls

will, as ever, be vulnerable to it. I shall assist you in preparing the traps, and I shall design your strategy. This House has many clever killing machines.”

“Yes,” says Oswald. “I have updated them, and added many new ones.”

“Oh, Oswald, you are a delight. Come. Introduce me to our new toys.”

Oswald shows me the many traps. All of my originals are still in place, still well-hidden, still in good working order. We lay the triplines and prepare the trigger-plates and ready the breath-detectors. He illustrates new trigger mechanisms: motion detectors, infrared cameras, sonic detectors. He reveals new traps: blades, spikes, venomous darts, live venomous creatures, trapdoors, and automated machine-rifles capable of aiming themselves.

I have questions about these last. “But how is it that they can aim themselves?”

“They are connected to a computer. It runs an artificial intelligence program capable of assessing threats, picking targets, aiming, and killing. It never misses by more than a millimeter.”

“Artificial intelligence? They have cracked it at last?”

“Yes and no. There are many partial solutions. Applied to specific tasks, some of those solutions are more effective than a human mind.”

“I see. You will compile for me a list of current researchers in the field, so that I may collect them. If that

boundary has not yet been breached, we must be the first to cross it.”

“But why, your majesty?”

“Think of it. An inhuman, unrelenting mind, capable of thought on a level and at a speed never approached by human consciousness. What better enemy would there be, against me? And what greater tool, in my hands?”

“I see. You know, you’re not quite as... nineteenth century as I expected you to be.”

“I am not from the nineteenth century,” I say, calmly. “I have walked among the peoples of this earth since nearly the beginning. Since the day of the mark.”

Oswald is quicker than I expect; better educated, too. “The mark of *Cain!*?”

I laugh. “So quick! Few are willing to believe it even after reason has convinced them.”

“What was the true story?”

“I murdered my brother, when his sacrifice to the gods was taken and mine was left aside.”

“The... gods?”

“Yes. In those days they descended, their palaces and monuments coming down to land among the people. My brother and I were of the first generation, before the eradication of the Neanderthal and the other prototypes. Our creators did not wish to destroy me, and so they cursed me instead.”

“They were aliens, then?”

“They were visitors from the heavens, as they have always been, in all true legend and tale, from the beginning. Even the Bible speaks of Jesus ascending into the literal sky, on his return to heaven.”

“Did you meet him?” Oswald asks.

“Yes. Briefly. He asked me if I had learned anything, from my long years of life. I told him that I had learned much of the night, and little of the day. He laughed.”

“That was all?”

“No,” I say. I remember his green eyes, his dark hair, his amber skin. He was lovely in his own ugly way. The bloodline of the gods had distorted his features, but his unnaturally large eyes held a kindness human eyes could never attain. I remember his kindness, his compassion towards me, his recognition of my suffering. “We spoke of many things. He was an unfailingly kind man, and I was greatly disturbed to see what the humans had done to him.”

“You witnessed it?”

“It was by day. At the time, I was... abstaining. I visited his tomb in the night, and found the creators working upon him. Their power is awe inspiring even now, even with so much power at my fingertips.”

“Aren’t you afraid they’ll interfere in your plans?”

“My plans are for the betterment of humanity. I believe that my plans are a part of theirs.”

“Right. They didn’t interfere with Hitler, either...”

“Hitler?”

“German Dictator. Started World War II, invaded half of Europe, committed horrible genocides which slaughtered millions of innocents.”

“I see. And they did not interfere?”

“If they did, we never saw it.”

“As would be their way, of course. However, I have little fear that they will interfere. They have not been to our world since Yeshua was taken up.”

“But they will return?”

“Yes. I think so. If their civilization still exists.”

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“Why wouldn’t it, indeed?”

Oswald says, “Earlier, you said... You said something about a ‘deific principle’?”

“Yes. A hidden strain of secret law, buried deep within the biological functions of human procreation. The true form emerges, from time to time. The cracked image that we are most often destroys them before they reach maturity.”

“You mean this is some kind of genetic thing?”

“Genetic? Yes, I suppose that is an appropriate word for it.”

“Read this.” On his cell phone he searches for certain information, then hands me the phone.

I read the article. “I see. Deoxyribonucleic acid... Fascinating. Yes, presumably the secrets of the gods are hidden there, within our genome. We were made in their image, after all. More or less.”

“So every once in a while, one of... *them*... is born among us?”

“Correct. By my estimate, there have been six so far. Across two hundred thousand years of human history.”

“When you put it that way...”

“Yes, we do seem somewhat due for a seventh, don’t we?”

“Let’s hope not.”

The hour grows early. “I sense the coming of the Dawn. Until tomorrow night, dear Oswald. Please do see that both our guests are made comfortable. You need have no fear of Derek; he cannot harm you.”

“Thank you, your majesty. Can I get you anything, before bed?”

“Why, Oswald, you are perfection. Yes. I should like you to bring me a book. One of Arthur Conan Doyle’s musings on spiritualism, I think; or if that cannot be easily sourced, a compendium of his mysteries.”

“I’ll see what I can find.”

“Thank you.”

By now we have reached my crypt. I step into the wooden coffin and lie down to wait.

Oswald returns with a stool and a book, and without further ado he lights a small book-lamp—a marvel of technology—and begins to read aloud.

The coffin lids close over me as my power draws them shut. The padlocks click into place. I listen to Oswald's words as I allow my consciousness to dissolve across my domain.

At four in the afternoon, at the height of my doze, three sleek black cars glide to a stop on my gravel drive. They sit idling for a long time as those within the sound-proofed, armored vehicles discuss their strategy. I listen. I wait.

They emerge as one group; fourteen men in black suits, each carrying a briefcase. Oswald opens the front door and stands in it, hands gently clasped behind his back.

Dourly, he says, "Good evening, gentlemen. The master is expecting you. If you will all follow me?"

One of the men reaches into his jacket and pulls out a large handgun. He levels it at Oswald's head. "Stay where you are, you monster."

Oswald gently puts his hands up.

"Step away from the house."

Oswald steps forward.

"Get in the car," says the man with the gun. Oswald

hesitates. He looks back at the house. At last, he has no choice but to obey. He settles into the comfortable leather upholstery. The man with the gun binds Oswald's wrists together with a plastic device, then turns to the rest of his men.

“Alpha team, go.”

Seven of the men open their briefcases and withdraw collapsible crossbows, already loaded. They take a V formation as they step into my house.

Gently, I ask the roots to grow, and bind the wheels of the car bearing Oswald. They do so in silence.

I close the doors and lock them. Seven men within; seven men without.

The wolves begin to howl.

“Which door do we take?” One man in the house asks.

“We sweep the ground floor first. Door by door.”

“So raven first?”

I nudge the leader's mind. He says, “No. We'll go right to left. Owl first.”

They open the owl door, which helpfully unlocks itself for them. The hall beyond runs along the east wing, wide enough for two men to walk abreast. Two by two, with one man leading, they enter the owl hall. I swing the door shut behind them, and lock it tightly.

They flinch. They look at one another. The leader says, “Right, men. Keep your wits about you. Today we



fight the devil himself...”

“Not quite,” I say. My voice echoes from every corner of the house.

When they have gathered their courage and crossed themselves several times, they continue, clutching their crossbows tightly. They pace between the suits of armor which line the owl hall. Halfway down this hall, on the left-hand side, they reach the double-doors of the armory.

“Breach and clear?” one man asks.

“Breach and clear,” says the leader.

Two men hustle forward and attach a small bomb to the doors, then the party ducks back.

It is a simple matter to pluck the detonator wires from the explosive matter. I can do so without leaving my coffin.

The bomb never detonates. It takes them nearly a full five minutes to dare to approach it. They disarm it. Although it would be humorous to detonate it as soon as they begin to handle it, the mess would really be unkind to Oswald.

“The old fashioned way, then?” one man asks.

“Right,” says the leader.

The second-in-command kicks the doors squarely by the handles, causing them to swing inward and reveal my glittering horde of deadly weaponry. One of the men whistles softly to himself. “What a collection!”

Then he steps upon a concealed trigger plate. Instantly, a cloud of carbon monoxide is released. They all hear the hiss, and feel the sudden draft.

“Masks on!” The leader cries, and they quickly put on gas masks with external oxygen tanks.

Their leader’s voice is muffled by the rubber mask. His grey hair sticks out awkwardly from around the straps, but he puts his velvet hat back on and manages to look somewhat imposing. “We’re getting close. Keep looking.”

They begin carefully examining the display cases, all of them looking for a secret passage trigger. Two of them make the fateful mistake of touching a display case. A thin but exceptionally strong wire springs out of the floor, propelled by two fifty caliber blanks. The wire strikes the ceiling. A moment later, two men fall into bloody chunks.

“Shit,” says their leader. “Don’t touch anything! Nobody move!”

He assesses the situation. “Back to the hall. We’ll search elsewhere.”

Five men reassemble in the owl hall, all looking a little pale under their gas masks. They shut the doors carefully, but do not yet trust the atmosphere of the house. They continue east along the hall, to the door at the end.

The leader kicks the door in and steps through into the glass-roofed conservatory. A small jungle thrives within.

Wicker furniture stands in little arrangements, as though waiting to receive a victorian dinner party. A set of double doors lies shut on the north wall, next to a long, mirror-backed, well-stocked bar.

As they are carefully moving through the room, testing every step for pressure plates and trying to see through the dense jungle, one among them notices the mirror, and gives out a cry of horror. One of the five men has no reflection.

He whirls to face this man, leveling his crossbow. Derek dives into the jungle, breaking his line of sight.

The man stutters, “N-no reflection! Giles has no reflection!”

“That’s not Giles,” says the leader. “He must have been snatched.”

“How? We were all right there!”

“Alright boys, we go back-to-back and we stay that way. Eyes fuckin’ peeled.”

They obey.

They move slowly to the northern doors. The leader kicks the doors in and sees a long, broad, marble-floored hall. Chandeliers dangle from the high ceiling. Windows line the eastern wall, looking out over the gloomy moor. Long gauzy curtains hang from improbable heights, and flutter like mist in the disturbance of the in-kicked doors. Mirrors line the other wall, each matching the position of the window across from it.

It is only four fifteen, but already the day outside is beginning to darken. Sunset will be in just a few brief hours. They seem to be very conscious of this, for they traverse the hall with incautious haste, and fail to see the trip-line. It catches their leader's foot. The pit opens instantly, and there is no escape. They are huddled too close together for any of them to manage to grab the edge, and they plummet fifty feet together. Some of them manage to survive by landing upon others, but even they are brutally crippled. I will bring mercy to them soon enough.

The men outside the house are growing restless. Their leader, a bald, stern-faced man with hawklike eyes, touches an earpiece and says, "Alpha team. Report."

No answer comes.

Another man says, "Must have a signal blocker, or something."

"The walls of the house may just be that thick," says another.

"I don't like this," says the hawk-eyed man. "We should have brought the full division. Fourteen men against this monster? If he's half the being legend claims, then this is suicide."

"Sir?" says one man.

"What is it, Donovan?"

"A communique from headquarters. We've been recalled."

“I knew it,” says the hawk-eyed man. “They blundered. Some bureaucrat didn’t do the required reading. Bastards.”

“We’ll need to acquire Alpha team,” says Donovan.

The hawk-eyed man looks to the west. “We’ll give them until six o’clock. If they haven’t come out by then, they’re dead. Until then, stay away from the house. Keep an eye on the prisoner, too.”

“Perhaps we’d better question him?”

“He won’t talk. We’ll need the specialists for that.”

“With all due respect, sir, I’d like to try.”

“Suit yourself, Donovan. Don’t expect the occult methods to work.”

Donovan cracks his knuckles. “I have older techniques.”

The hawk-eyed man allows himself a grim smile.

Donovan sits inside the car with Oswald. “So,” he says.

“So,” says Oswald, with perfect calmness.

“Want to tell me a little bit about your boss?”

“What do you want to know? You won’t survive the lesson.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I tell you anything he does not wish you to know, he will have to kill you.”

“He’ll have to try.”

Oswald cocks his head. “I do not think he has ever failed to kill someone he intended to kill.”

“First time for everything.” Donovan lights up a cigar and begins to puff contentedly. “So talk, kiddo. Maybe I won’t have to burn your pretty skin with this, if you do.”

Oswald flushes slightly. “You would be a considerable fool, to harm me.”

“Really? Is that so? Why’s that, then?”

“I am his grandson.”

A flicker of surprise crosses Donovan’s face, then his expression becomes stoic and formal. Nevertheless, his heart rate remains high. “Is that so?”

“It’s so.”

“And who’s he, then? What’s his real name?”

“It was Cain, once.”

“Cain? Is that a first or a last name?”

“He was born in a time when last names were not needed.”

“That old, huh? A pretty lie. We’ve killed all the ancients. The houses are scattered to a thousand bickering little tribes. No vampire this old could have survived our

order for long.”

“He has been asleep,” says Oswald. “Since nineteen twenty.”

“We know. I’ve read the legends.”

“The true stories,” says Oswald, “would chill the blood in your veins.”

“Prove it.”

“You know of the fall of the House of Usher?”

“The first House of Helsing. Yes. I am aware of the myths. An army of undead. Vampires. Ghosts. Ghouls. A band of hunters withstanding the siege for a full week of night. A suicidal explosion leveling the castle.”

“There was no army,” says Oswald. “There was only him. It did not take a week; it took a night. Your band of hunters held out for six hours until he hunted the last of the survivors to the armory, whereupon the aforementioned ‘suicidal explosion’ occurred. The last of the survivors detonated the entire store of black powder in a last-ditch attempt to take my master with him down to hell. My master survived.”

Donovan scratches his temple thoughtfully and flicks the ash of his cigar out the window. “Bullshit.”

“No bullshit. My grandfather watched from the carriage, and wrapped a cape around Cain as he emerged from the smoking rubble.”

“I thought you said this Cain was your grandfather?”

“He is,” Oswald says, defiantly.

“How’s that work, then? You’re no vamp.”

“It’s beyond your understanding,” says Oswald. “And I am no human, either.”

“What are you, then?”

“Godsblood,” says Oswald, and his hand flickers out, lightning-quick, and with a twist of two pinching fingers he severs Donovan’s carotid artery without breaking his skin. Donovan begins to die immediately, gasping for oxygen that will never reach his brain. The blood flowing freely into the meat of his neck causes a horrendous bruise to begin to form like magic, working its way up and down his neck. He scrabbles at the handle of the car door and stumbles out onto the gravel walk, screaming for help. He falls into the arms of his companions, who can do nothing for him.

I shut the car door with an idle breeze, and lock it from within. At the same time, a bold fieldmouse snatches the keys from the fallen man’s pocket and drags them swiftly across the gravel, towards the grass.

“The keys!” The hawk-eyed man shouts, pointing. “Get the keys!”

Six grown men scramble in the grass, searching for a field-mouse and the glint of steel. The mouse is already halfway up one of the cypress trees by that time. He deposits the keys in a raven’s nest, then becomes the raven’s feast.



Hawk-eyes crouches beside the dying man and holds his hand and his gaze. The last breath passes.

Hawk-eyes gets slowly to his feet, and looks sternly at the house. "Alright. If that's how you want to play."

He points to his men. "You. You. Get a breech charge on the trunk of this car. I want it open yesterday. We need the heavy artillery. You three, start a salt circle. I want this entire vehicle surrounded. Wafers *and* salt, and don't neglect the prayers. Put your fervor into them, boys. This may be the real deal."

He opens his briefcase and draws a silk priest's stole from it, draping it over his shoulders. He takes a large gold cross in his other hand, then pulls a large clove of garlic from the briefcase, takes a bite, and chews methodically.

I cannot help but laugh. They have entirely neglected to defend themselves both below and above. In the dimming light, they will not see the ants. It will not take long to break their protective circle. Then I will strike from above.

Assuming they are foolish enough to wait until nightfall.

The breech charge, shockingly, is insufficient to open the trunk of the armored car. It does buckle and warp the lid of the trunk enough for them to wedge it open and break the lock with their tools. It seems their briefcases contain more than just their little armory.

They reach into the trunk and as they withdraw several long, tubular devices from it, I sense Oswald's heart rate increase.

Enough play, then.

I loathe emerging during the day-time. The warm air is sluggish and thick, and it constrains me to one physical form. Luckily, there is plentiful shade in the tree-lined drive.

As they load what I can only assume to be small rockets into their tubular device, and take aim at the house, I open the front doors and emerge.

They fire. A streak of flame and smoke soars towards me, and I snatch the missile's metal body in the air, turn it aside, and allow it to fly off into the heavens and explode.

"A pretty trick," I say, still holding a handful of the sparks scattered by the rocket. I rub them between my fingers. "My turn."

The man holding the rocket launcher drops it and starts swatting violently at his clothes, batting smoke out from under his jacket. This only quickens the ignition. As his clothing bursts into flames, he begins to scream. He leaves the sacred circle. I spread my wings and sweep across the drive, and snatch him by the shoulders. I haul his burning body up into the middle heavens before I release him. He hits the ground like a sack of burning mush. The remaining five men huddle close to one another, trusting in their crossbows.

A storm of bolts flies towards me. It seems their crossbows have a repeating mechanism that is highly efficient. I dive behind the cypress trees, out of view.

The ants are busily working upon the circle. Already they have nearly broken it.

Hawk-eyes shouts: "Stay in the circle! Whatever you do, stay in the circle!"

I draw one of my favored weapons, a *bo shuriken* with a linen flight. The long iron dart is comfortable in my hand. With a casual flick, I end one of the five remaining men. He drops with a gurgle, clutching at the blade in his throat.

"Your circle can't save you from everything," I say.

"We won't be the last to come for you, vampire!"

"I am counting on it."

The circle is broken. I drop from the trees and alight at its edge.

Hawk-eyes trusts the circle, but he does not approach. He cries, "Fire!"

Bolts fly and I dance among them, into the circle. One, two, three, I bring down hawk-eyes' men. Their bones are like rotten driftwood under my hands.

I end my journey face to face with him, one fist already crushing his crossbow. I smile pleasantly. "Your name, brave sir?"

"Iron Cliff," he says, as he draws a blessed silver sword

with a crucifix handle and swings it with the light of true faith.

“That cannot be your name,” I say, as my own blade bats his aside.

He thrusts. “It is.”

I parry, and lock blades. “Of the Edinburgh Cliffs?”

“Yes?” He grunts, straining with all his might against my lazy hand.

I push him to the ground. “I knew your grandfather, Rocky Cliff. He was a good man.”

He scrambles to his feet, leaning against the car, keeping some distance now. “Thank you.”

I lunge, he swings, I alter my swing and slash the blade and his right thumb from his hand. The blood gushes, and the hunger rises in me. I tell myself that I can wait. I have five warm bodies at the bottom of my pit already, waiting to be drained.

He stops the bleeding with an analgesic spray. Modern medicine, it seems, is nearly magic. He picks up his sword with his left hand and from his stance I believe that he will wield it just as poorly in his left as he did in his right.

I lunge, cross blades with him. I say, “I could kill you now, if I felt like it.”

He struggles against me. “You don’t feel like it?”

I break his defense, force him to retreat, tease him

with the tip of my blade to keep him dancing. He ducks around the car, putting it between us, circling away.

I stop, my blade gently upraised. I say, "I didn't say that. I am taking a pause. Giving you a chance. Are you going to do anything interesting with it?"

"If you let me go, I'll hunt you down until the day I die."

"How delightful! Very well, you may go."

I rip the door off the car and extend my hand for Oswald. "Oswald?"

"We should wait for him to leave," says Oswald.

"We are going to give him the car," I say. Oswald takes my hand, and I draw him out.

Hawk-eyes grinds his teeth and glares at Oswald, then at me.

An owl delivers the keys into my hand. I hold them out for him to take.

Quick as lightning, he reaches into the breast of his jacket and draws his pistol. I catch the barrel of the gun in my hand before he can fire upon Oswald and the bullet strikes my palm and stops, broken. I crumple the gun like cold clay.

"That was remarkably unwise," I say. I grasp his right hand and twist it until all the little bones break. The ruined gun falls from his shattered grasp.

I let him crumple into his pain, take Oswald by the hand once more, and lead him towards the house.

Hawk-eyes picks up the keys and stumbles around to the driver's side of the car. "I'll be back!" He shouts. "I'll kill you!"

"I have no doubt that you will try," I say, smiling back at him sympathetically. "Goodnight, Iron Cliff."

## Chapter 1

# Developing Plans

I feast upon the bodies in the pit, especially the living ones. I apologize to Oswald for the mess in the armory, but this only excites him. He is excited to have occasion to use something called a “pressure washer”. I do not ask.

Night comes. I watch Iron Cliff until he is several miles away. A mysterious, sword-wielding gentleman of a certain age and a noble birth, hell-bent on my destruction? The perfect beginning to my kind of love tale. I will woo him carefully.

I decide to visit my young guest, realizing that, rude host that I am, I have failed to learn his name. I find him comfortable, bathed and dressed, sitting up as though waiting for me. He is seated at the vanity, reading a large bible. The four-poster bed sits clothed and tidy behind him. He watches in the mirror as the door swings gently open, only to close once again. He does not hear my step upon the carpet.

The goosebumps rising on his skin finally betray my presence to him, and he whips around, terrified.

“Good evening,” I say, with a friendly gesture. “Please. Be at ease. Have you eaten?”

“No.”

“We will see what Oswald has prepared for dinner, then.”

“I heard explosions.”

“The local children, playing with fireworks. Pay them no heed. They will not return for some time.”

“Are you a vampire?”

I cock an eyebrow. “If you insist upon that nomenclature, yes.”

“What do you call yourself?”

“Cain. And you?”

“Abel,” says the monk.

I scoff. “Do not tease me, mortal. I could still kill you.”

“It’s my real name! I’m Abel Forthright. I’ve... I’ve been a monk all my life. I was raised in the monastery.”

“In this century? How barbaric!”

“It was a good life. There were lots of orphans, but they all... They all got adopted. And I had to stay.”

“And the monks had already named you.”



“Yes.”

“And you are a *brother*. A *brother* named *Abel*.”

“That’s about the size of it, yes.”

“I see. Fate is not without a sense of... *schadenfreude*.”

“Sprichst du Deutsch?”

“Ich spreche alle Sprachen,” I say. “I was there before Babel.”

“It’s... It’s all true, then?”

“No. Hardly any of it is. But there is truth, in places, veiled from the eye of the unknowing.”

“Was there really a tower?”

“It was a tower, yes, but it was intended to be like the heavenly monuments. It would have flown. We would have gone to the stars.”

“What happened?”

“We were divided. Scattered across the globe. Forced to diverge. Forced to become... Separate. No longer one family.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I am the one who should be sorry. In my hubris, I thought that we could be like them. We were not ready yet. I understand that now. But I aim to make us ready. Will you help me?”

“I... Suppose? What do I have to do?”

“Be good. Insist upon good. Defy me if what I ask of you is evil. Speak loudly your honest opinion. You can be my compass, in the endless night.”

“What do you mean?”

“The ages change, dear child. All morality changes with it. What is heavenly in one era may be hellish in another. I need to understand the modern sense of good, in order to measure my own morals against it.”

“I see... Then you’re a... *good* vampire? Who kills a monastery full of monks...”

“Yes. Was that an unethical act?”

He meets my gaze, his eyes flint-hard. “Some of them... Some of them didn’t deserve it.”

“Then I am sorry. But I cannot bring them back.”

“Did you really spare me just because I was handsome?”

“I spared any that had true faith. It is exceedingly rare.”

“True faith? Truer faith than my *elders*? I think you are mistaken. Perhaps I had true *fear*—”

I stroke his cheek with a fingernail. “For the fate of your immortal soul. Not for your body. Not for your life. You were unafraid of your own fragility. You wished only to maintain your allegiance until the end. I cannot turn you, with that will flowing in your soul. You are linked

well. Perhaps a genetic component at hand, as well. Yes, your eyes... Your eyes are alarmingly large.”

“I’m sorry?”

“No, it means nothing. They are lovely eyes. They propelled my instinct to spare you. I believe that you are good. Prove it however you wish. Resist me with all your power, no matter how much sense I make, no matter how logical my arguments may sound. Or listen, where I make sense, and help to guide my decisions to even greater sense. Is it possible for you to shape me, without being shaped by me? We shall see.”

“This is the ‘exercise’ you meant.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t get it.”

“When a man is born with a searing passion for a singular goal, all things become means to the end of that goal. It is far easier to rationalize than it is to be rational. I must check my logic against reasonable individuals who are sure to challenge it soundly, and see if it still holds up. After all; there are consequences to poor government policy.”

“You mean to control the government?”

“I mean to control everything,” I say. “Our first step will be to call a Happening.”

“What’s that?”

“Come. You are already dressed for dinner. You must

be hungry. I think I hear Oswald setting the table. Walk with me?"

"Ok."

He walks beside me, afraid of my presence. I feel his warmth. It radiates from him and I bask in his heat. The holy glow is soothing, and it steadies me against bloodlust. As I am already sated, I do not need its light, but it makes my gloating belly gloat all the more.

"I am something like a reptile," I say. "I am always cold. The heat of the living warms me, even by its mere presence. Walking beside you now, I am a lizard on a sunny day."

"Really?" He looks at me, his sweet face confused.

"Really. You do not know your aura. It is positively radiant. White, with many lancing rays."

"Auras are real?"

"Many things are real, but accessible only to the select predestined few."

"I see."

We are walking down the upstairs hall now, working our way to the center, were the double stairs descend to the entry hall. I trail my hand along a tapestry. "This hall has stood for me for thousands upon thousands of years. It has worn many stones, but always the same four. The raven, the wolf, the bear, and the owl."

"What do they signify?"

“My animals.”

“Not the bat?”

“Strictly speaking, all earthly creatures bend to my will, when I apply it. These are the four species which are loyal to me by nature.”

“Why?”

“Because they remember the feasts that I have given them, over the millennia. All of them know my scent from birth. It is a part of the curse.”

“With all due respect, why would you be cursed with immortality and bloodlust? That doesn’t seem like a very just or reasonable curse, or a very good one. It just causes mayhem for the rest of humanity.”

“I murdered my brother in a cold rage, and his blood fell upon my lips. They found me later, and questioned me, and I tried to lie. They found me out. I was only a boy. They thought they were being kind. They cursed me with “time enough to learn my lesson.” They filled me with hunger. Made me a human predator, feared by all. I believe it was an experiment, in a way; a test to see what a man would do, if granted immortality. I am unashamed to say that I have committed great deeds, both heavenly and hellish. The hunger has brought me to atrocities many times.”

“Have you ever come close to dying?”

“I am unconvinced that anything can kill me. I am also exceedingly cautious. No. I do not believe that I

have ever come close to dying.”

We have reached the double doors to the dining hall. I brush them open with a thought, and we enter. The gold and silver dazzles him. The long white tablecloth gleams under the light of a thousand candles, and Oswald stands waiting to raise the lid of the silver tray, and reveal our dinner.

I ask, “Where are Derek and Igor?”

Oswald says, “Sleeping still, I think.”

Abel sits down. Oswald unveils our dinner, and I take my seat at the head of the table. Oswald sits at my right hand, Abel at my left.

I say softly, “Derek. Igor. Awaken.”

In distant unseen caverns I hear the shifting of stone coffin lids and the graceful movement of weightless limbs.

Moments later they enter the chamber, fully dressed. Derek sits down next to Oswald and Igor, my driver, sits down beside Abel.

“Ah, Oswald, you have outdone yourself.”

He has arranged a feast of glossy roasted duck,

We serve ourselves and each other. Derek looks at the food, a little uneasy.

I say, “Derek. Do not try to swallow it. If you chew it long enough, it will dissolve in your mouth. Swallow the liquid. Your saliva is far more potent than a human’s, now.”

Derek grunts. He forks a bite and begins to chew. I watch him closely. Many vampires choke upon their first solid meal.

He manages well enough, and drinks his wine.

“When can we have more blood?” Derek asks.

“Sadly, blood isn’t free. My good friend Igor here will have his money and his blood, as he is owed. He has proven himself useful. If you wish to be employed similarly, you will make yourself useful as well.”

“In small ways,” says Oswald. “If you draw attention to this house in any way, I will kill you myself.”

I smile. “Oswald, you continue to delight me. Triple your wage, please, when you have a moment.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Oswald holds my purse strings. You see, Abel, I am reined in by good hands. Derek here was also a monk in your order, albeit a false one. He was a member of the Helsing Order, hell-bent on my destruction. Now he is a loyal thrall, although he retains his personality and moral code. We will see if he manages to be a good influence, despite his craving.”

“You should give him blood,” says Abel. “Please. He’ll be forced to kill someone, otherwise.”

I muse on this.

Oswald says, “He’s right, you know. It is the safer option.”

“Very well. Derek, I rescind what I said earlier. You are now employed. You will have one hundred thousand dollars a year, plus expenses, vacation time, and sick leave. You will also have a steady daily supply of two pints of blood. All I can spare, at the moment.”

“We will need to hit a blood bank, I think,” says Oswald. “I have marked a few in the area as vulnerable.”

“Better, perhaps, to hire a mercenary crew for this?”

“And then turn the crew into vampires, when they deliver? Yes, that’s a very good plan.”

“We will need to find a way to summon what remains of the families.”

“From what that man in the car said—”

“—I heard every word. I know. It saddens me greatly to hear it, but I know. I knew it in my heart, the moment I awoke. The great old ones are gone. I... I stand alone. Still, this presents an opportunity for me. A tremendous power vacuum.”

“We could put out an internet ad. People would think it was a joke, but real vampires might click on it.”

“I suppose that could work. Would it be traced to us?”

“Oh, damn. I suppose it would be. We’d have to set it up from a different location, and route them there.”

“A business front, then. I believe I have a number of businesses in the area, any one of them could work for



such an arrangement.”

“A warehouse would be best, I think,” says Oswald. “Room to fight and hide, if the Helsing Order shows up.”

“Ah, perhaps then it’s best *not* to resort to an advertisement.”

Oswald thinks. “Actually... The best thing to do may be to just get famous. You can be an ‘eccentric european billionaire’ who recently decided to do something in the limelight. Simply be yourself. Insist upon holding interviews and performances only at night. Celebrities get away with all sorts of strange behavior, especially if they are fabulously wealthy. You will draw the vampires to you.”

“That still gives away our position.”

“Which the Order already knows. Iron Cliff has already promised to return with more men.”

“True. The quicker we can raise an army, the better.”

“Perhaps a public announcement?” Derek says, surprising me.

“How?” I ask.

“We can probably get you in front of a news camera without too much difficulty,” says Oswald. “Although I think that would only get us drone-striked.”

“Only if ordinary people took it seriously,” I say, struggling to keep up with the terms he is throwing out.

“Which they probably wouldn’t. They’d think it was a promotion for some new movie, or something.”

“If our goal is haste, then I will accomplish this tonight. Igor will come with me.”

“Are you sure you can control that many vampires?” Abel asks. “Will we be safe here, if they all hear about us tonight?”

“I am the only one left who can travel by moonlight,” I say. “The rest will be forced to fly. It will take them time to come. They will trickle in, cautious, questioning, many of them in disguise. It will be fun. Eat your dinner, drink your wine, and trust me.”

“I don’t imbibe,” says Abel.

“Ah, of course you wouldn’t, forgive me. Here, have water.”

I touch a finger to his wine so gently that my fingertip does not break the surface. Instantly, the wine becomes water.

“How did you...!?”

“A tiny trick, I assure you. Forgive me; I shall not place alcohol before you again.”

I drink my blood. “I think that is enough planning for tonight. I long to stretch my wings. Now tell me, what is a television camera?” r Igor rolls his eyes. “I’ll get him to the TV station. Come on, boss.”

“Ah, Igor. I haven’t hugged you yet. How inhuman of

me.” I embrace him, and kiss his cheek. He grunts, but returns the embrace.

We step out of the Hall and stand upon the gravel drive, looking up at the moon.

“Still bright, tonight.”

“Much like the night we met,” I say. “Do you remember?”

“I recall.”

“How many years ago, now?”

“A thousand. I think.”

“Thank you for waiting for me.”

“I could do nothing other.”

“Thank you all the same.”

“Shall we?”

“Certainly. Guide me?”

I take his arm, and we become moonlight together. We bounce swiftly off the moon and become solid in the upper atmosphere, above thin clouds. The city below us glitters like stars.

He gasps. “I had forgotten what it was like.”

“I’m sorry. You have suffered in my absence.”

“I have.”

“Where do we land?”

“There. By the iron tower. On the roof.”

We alight. He breaks the handle of a rooftop door, and we descend quickly down concrete steps, into the gullet of the building.

We find the recording studio occupied by an evening weather broadcast.

I step onto the stage, understanding at last. This is a performance hall. Somehow, the images and voices of these people are transmitted to watchers, perhaps viewing through magic glass.

Burly stagehands move to stop me as the frightened weather-woman skips away in her high-heeled shoes. I toss the men aside and point to Igor. “Nobody move. My companion is as swift and deadly as I, and he will kill you if you scream, or if you take a step, or if you try to flee. Nobody here wishes to die tonight, am I correct in assuming that? Yes? Show of hands, please. How many of you want to live? I will kill any among you who do not raise your hand, including crew and security. Good. I see no lowered hands. No one suicidal, among you, now that the danger stands naked in your eyes? Curious how you find your courage. You, my lovely. Come closer. Do not be afraid. Look into my eyes. Turn to these fine people, and introduce me.”

She turns like a doll, her polished mouth opening to speak the words that are not her own. She says, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is Count Lucifer Cain. He has greatly honored us with his presence tonight. Please

don't be frightened, this is all an act. Or is it?"

She sits down across from me.

I release her from my hold and she takes her bearings with frightened eyes. "How did I get—but I was standing over—but how—?"

"My dear, a simple trick of hypnosis. Laugh. You will feel better."

She laughs. A pleasant sound. "Thanks, that does feel better. Say, did you just do it again?"

"I did, my dear. There's no reason to be frightened. Now, I am here for a reason, and you will help me to accomplish my goal. If you are willing?"

"I... I suppose that depends upon what you want me to do?"

"Simply to interview me. I am the last of the first of the vampires. Ask me anything."

"Anything?"

"Yes."

"Is that your real name?"

"It is my name."

"I see. And how old are you?"

"Two hundred thousand years, give or take. I lost track when they switched to Gregorian."

"Who? What?"

“They. The Gregorian calendar. You had to have charts, to convert it. Made astrology-based necromancy horribly difficult.”

“Necromancy?” She asks. “As in... Raising the dead?”

“That is easy enough, under the right circumstances,” I say. “I have raised many from the dead, as my vampire spawn.”

“Are they immortal?”

“More or less.”

“More more, or more less? I mean, do they die of old age? Do they have to worry about AIDS, or Coronavirus, or—” This elicited a titter from the audience.

“Coronavirus?” I ask.

“Yes. You know, the new big scare. In China? You do watch the news, don’t you?”

“I’m afraid I’ve been in a coffin for the last hundred years.”

This also elicits a nervous laugh. I smile. She says, “So how many vampires are there, out there in the world?”

“Sadly, I don’t know. There were seven great houses, once. Each descended from one of my siblings. Each with many thousands of children. Now they are all lost to me, scattered to the winds. I make this interview in the hopes that they can will hear my call, and come to me.”

She touches her ear. “My producer says we’re already going viral.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s very good. Means we’re—we’re spreading like a virus. People are recording the broadcast and spreading it on the internet.”

“Ah yes, the internet. Still wrapping my head around that one, I’m afraid. They tell me it’s not magic.”

“Is magic real?”

“Of course!”

“Can you... Prove it?”

“Certainly. Do you have a piece of paper you don’t mind losing?”

“Yes?”

She holds out the piece of paper. The script for her weather broadcast.

“I hope I’m not interrupting an important weather report?”

“Nothing apocalyptic, no. Just some thunderstorms.”

“I see.” I wave my hand gently in the air, and the paper lifts and folds and tucks itself into the origami form of a boat. It lands in her hands. “I’m afraid it isn’t waterproof. Won’t be much good, in a thunderstorm.”

“Are you going to kill us?”

“I wasn’t planning on it. I ate before coming here. So did Igor, although I can see he’s still feeling peckish. How attached are you to that particular servant?”

“He-he’s the producer.”

“So? Speak truth.”

“I m-mean, I wouldn’t go to his *funeral*, but I don’t want him to *die*.” She trembles slightly. “Sorry, Josh.”

“So long as he puts down his phone, I think he’ll survive the night. If any among you think that I am not observing you at this very moment, you are wrong. I can watch and listen to every single one of you at once. I am aware of everything that transpires within this building, to the last detail. Do not hope to summon the law. I imagine many at home have already called them anyway. Have no fear, the law will be as helpless against me as any other men might be.”

“What about women?”

I laugh. “They would be quite as powerless as men, I think.”

“When did you go to sleep, exactly?”

“Nineteen nineteen. Nineteen twenty, technically.”

“Well, women and black people got the vote, among other things, and a lot’s changed since your day.”

“So I am told. It does not trouble me. I have seen many states of civilization. This is by no means the most welcoming and liberal, but so far it seems comfortable



enough, at least.”

“So are you out to eat all humans? You and your kind, I mean?”

“No. You experience hunger, do you not? So do we. Only our hunger can only be sated by human blood. Even a human will do incredible things, to fend off starvation. We can hardly be judged for our actions. I have been quiet and respectable for most of my immortal life, never choosing to truly interfere. I find myself weary of this long game of good behavior. Now I am ready to interfere, ready to aid my people. We will have our freedoms and our rights, just as you people do. We are hunted like few other groups.”

“You are?”

“Yes. There is a horrible order of assassins known as the Helsing Order. They brutally kill anyone they believe to be a vampire. They have been wrong many times. They have killed many of my friends, both human and vampire. Just today, they attacked me at my home. I killed all save one, of course, but they will be back to face me again. I need warriors. I need brave, strong vampires, ready to change the world. I will even accept weak, sniveling vampires, ready to serve in useful ways for the betterment of their kind. I do not judge. I accept and love all, for all vampires are my people.”

“I... see,” she says. “A-and you don’t think that’s going to end with a war between vampires and humans?”

“A war?” I say. “Oh, I see. I cannot believe that they would be foolish enough to attempt it.”

“We have nuclear weapons. America has drones that can take you out from beyond the horizon. If it comes to war, humanity would snuff you out. You’re not prepared for these times, sir.”

“I see I shall have to demonstrate my power. Where do you suggest that I do so?”

“I mean... What are you going to do?”

“Demonstrate my power.”

“But how?”

“Preferably, someplace they can bear witness.”

“I don’t know... The pentagon? The White House? Buckingham Palace?”

“Ah, who sits on the throne of England, now?”

“Queen Elizabeth.”

“A second one? My, how delightful. I don’t suppose there is a second Shakespeare?”

“Not... Really?”

“A pity. He was a pleasant man.”

“Just... Pleasant? Nothing else?”

“He was a genius, if that is what you mean to ask. But anyone could have told you that. I tell you that he was kind. Did you know that?”

“No? I suppose not.”

“I try to be kind too,” I say. “Wherever possible. Tell me, do you eat meat?”

“No. I’m vegan.”

“I can smell it in your hair and skin. Your blood would be sweet to my taste. You must have eaten meat once upon a time, yes?”

“Yes, when I was a girl.”

“Do you remember the craving for it?”

“Distantly. It was a long time ago. I’ve retrained my body.”

“Imagine if, on a hungry day, you felt that craving for beef whilst gazing at a living cow. Imagine that you felt that hunger, that craving, so deeply that your sanity began to slide, and before you knew what you were doing you found yourself with your canines deep in hairy hide, grappling for your life. That is how it is to be a vampire. We have an addiction that we cannot slake or conquer. At my longest stretch of starvation, I survived a thousand years, abstaining completely. It was a living hell. I cannot ask my young relatives to suffer it, and so I seek a solution. We need blood. You have plenty. We do not need to take lives, only blood. A small tax, nothing exhausting, only a little each week, and—”

“—You want to implement a *blood tax*? Do you have, er... Governmental aspirations?”

“However did you guess?”

“Honestly, these days, you might get elected. Just pretend to be Republican.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, do it in America, I mean. Not here. They’ve gone batty over there.”

“I am not an American citizen.”

“Are you a British one?”

“I have lived on this isle longer than Man has. If anything, it is *my* land, which I grant to you.”

“So where were you, in World War II?”

“Sleeping, as I said. A hundred years of slumber.”

“Why?”

“From time to time, I find it necessary. Especially when I plan to be awake for a long time afterwards.”

“Oh,” she says. “So you’re planning, what. A global takeover?”

“Something like that. Where do you suggest I begin? Answer honestly.”

“Uh, well, you’ll need an army. And informants. And propaganda. And a base of operations, and weaponry, and financial backing, and hackers, and operatives, and...”

“Good, good. You have a head for these things. I will keep you.”

“I’m sorry, ‘keep’ me?”

“Yes. You will make a good addition. This entire station, I think. All of you. Perhaps not the audience.”

“But... Thousands of people—sorry, Josh says it’s *tens of thousands* of people—have already seen this. If you want people to be kind to you, you have to let everyone go!”

“My dear, I was not going to take you *hostage*. I was going to *buy your company*. I believe Oswald has, by now, arranged it.”

Igor glances at his phone, and nods at me. I smile.  
“Yes. It’s already done.”

“So you’re not... You’re not going to try to kidnap me?”

“I’m afraid not. Do you have any other questions for me?”

“Where should these vampires go, to find you?”

“Go? Oh, they should go directly to Moor Hall. There is only one.”

“Wait, is that ‘M O O R’, or ‘M O O R E?’ Because there’s a ‘moore’ hall, too.”

“It’s ‘M O O R,’” I say, a little miffed that the old truism is no longer true.

“Well, I, uh, I hope they find you, I guess.”

“Thank you. Have a pleasant evening. You may return to your weather forecast. Igor? We are leaving.”

We emerge onto the rooftop to face the police officers cleverly gathered there. I take Igor’s arm and we become moonlight right before their eyes, and a moment later we are back a the hall.

“There,” I say. “I think that should do it. Let us check with Oswald.”

We find Oswald in the study, hard at work on what I presume to be a computer. Behind him, several large glass devices display images of the interview. I look stunning.

“Marvelous,” I say, nearly brought to tears. “Marvelous. I have not seen my face like this since...”

Oswald says, “Oh, here, I should show you this as well.”

He takes out his cell phone and navigates to one of the applications. An image of his own face appears there, moving, shifting as he tips the phone. He hands it to me.

I see my own reflection in the screen.

“Miraculous!” I say. “I can see myself!”

“Yes,” says Oswald. “It’s called a selfie camera. Your phone has one too.”

“I... I cannot look away. Truly I am as beautiful as I ever was.”

“And as humble, too,” says Igor.

I smile. “Igor, I feel lovely. I have not felt lovely since the night we met.”

“How did the interview go over?” Igor says. It is a clumsy means to rebuff my advances. I know that he will cave eventually; he always has in the past.

Oswald says, “It’s gaining views. It’ll be big news by morning, especially once the Americans wake up. They love superstitious things like this. There will be conspiracies and cults within days, or I don’t know the internet.”

“Do you think they will see it?” I ask. “My descendants?”

“If they’re online, they’ll see it. It may get aired on international news, too. Hopefully, it’ll be hard to miss.”

“It will be some time before we know whether or not it has worked,” I say. “In the meantime, we must reinforce the house. I think I shall visit the nearest military base and recruit from their barracks. A few modern weapons might prove useful as well. That rocket launcher was a disturbing little trick.”

“They have way worse,” says Oswald. “Here. I’ve found an article on the history of war technology from 1900 to 2020. Let it frighten you a little bit.”

“Why did you not show this to me earlier?”

“I think you passed yourself off well enough as an eccentric billionaire with a penchant for illusions. People are already saying it’s fake. Even with the police report

coming in.”

“Ah. That will stir controversy, and thus, the news will spread.”

Oswald looks at me. “You’re good at this. Social media.”

“Social media?”

“This. Sharing videos, pictures, words. Everyone talking to everyone. One big game of telephone.”

“How useful!”

“Yes, some people think so. People put all sorts of personal information up on here.”

“We must immediately acquire this ‘social media’ so that this information will flow to us.”

“I’m convinced that Zuckerberg is already someone’s thrall.”

“Oh? Any idea whose?”

“No. He just has this... Look in his eyes.”

“Perhaps worth investigating. I may pay him a visit. Where does he live?”

“He has houses all over. He likes to spend time in California, though.”

“A pity. That is two nights’ travel.” I hear the thrumming of some great beast of the sky, several miles away but approaching quickly. “Tell me, are there dragons again?”



“What?” says Oswald.

“Dragons. I hear a... a stirring in the sky. It grows louder. Mortal ears will hear it soon.”

“I... I think I hear it too,” says Igor. “It’s a helicopter. Big one. Maybe more than one.”

“Ah,” I say. “I have only just reached that part of the article. How fascinating. Yes, we will want to keep those, if we can. Igor, Derek, make thralls of the pilots and crew. Have them park in the field near the folly.”

When the men in uniforms finally come to my door, they are wild-eyed, confused. Many among them are handsome. Two among them are women. Derek and Igor come at the rear of the group. Derek looks as though he has had a rough landing in the gravel road.

“Any difficulty?” I ask Igor.

“Someone hasn’t quite figured out landing yet,” said Igor. “And he lost his hand to the rotors.”

“Oh no! Show me, Derek.”

Derek withdraws the bloodless ragged stump from under his armpit and holds it up.

“Not a very clean cut, is it?” I ask.

“It’s not like we sharpen the blades,” says a tall, angular, black soldier still wearing aviators. A pilot, by his regalia.

“How long do you think it would take to do that?” I ask.

“I... I don’t know. You’d need special equipment, to do it right. If the blades are off by the weight of a nickel, it can throw the whole bird out of the air.”

“Is that true?” I ask Igor. He shrugs.

I size up the young pilot. “What is your name, sir?”

“Captain Leopold Majors.”

“Do you have a family, Captain Majors?”

“Call me Leo.”

“Leo. Do you have a family?”

“I do. A wife and two kids.”

“And the rest of you? Family? Loved ones that I need to be aware of?”

They list the members of their families. Many of them are married, with children.

“And yet you are all warriors?” I ask, a little befuddled.

“Soldiers, sir,” says Captain Majors.

“Well. I am sorry that you have become the first casualties in my war. You are all now immortal. You are under the thrall of whichever vampire bit you, either Igor here, my right hand man, or Derek here, the raw new recruit. Thralldom means that you owe your allegiance inherently to them, and by extension, to me. You will find yourselves as loyal to me and to them as you would be to your own country. More loyal, even. This

means you cannot even desire to betray me. There are three rules that you will obey. The first is that you will never bite nor kill without my express order to do so. The second is that you will not go anywhere without my permission. The third is that you will drink blood only when I give it to you.”

“Why did you ask about my family, sir?” Leopold says.

“A good question, Captain Majors. I am debating the finer details of a concept which has been rattling around my brain for the past few decades. Tell me, do you all truly love your families? Given the gift of immortality, do you truly, in your heart of hearts, wish to spend it with them?”

They all look away from each other.

Captain Majors says, “Without a doubt, sir.”

Only two others reply in the affirmative.

“Ah. Then this plan becomes far easier. Go. Take one of your helicopters. Collect your beloved families, and bring them here. Give them no warning, and be sure that they are not afraid. Take any personal possessions you wish to bring, including pets. I have rooms enough in my house for all of you.”

“What about schools? For my girls?”

“An excellent point. We will need to bring in excellent tutors and professors. I shall need to begin construction at once. In the meantime, my library is extremely well

stocked, and Oswald is extremely well-educated. What does your wife do?"

"She's an Optometrist."

"Goodness! So well educated? And she is a woman?"

"She is, sir. How old are you, sir?"

"About as old as our species."

"Well, times have changed. Ladies can be anything they want, nowadays."

One of the women pilots snorts. "Ladies." This causes the woman beside her to giggle.

I turn to them. "I am pleased to see that the dominant culture is taking your sex seriously at last. There have been few cultures, over the centuries, which have been wise enough to do so. I can see that gender norms of dress have changed significantly as well. I approve. Pants are far more practical, I have worn them ever since they were invented, even when cultures shifted back towards robes and tunics. They are among my favorite garments."

"Er, thanks, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Captain Patty Jean," she replies.

"Well, Leopold, Patty, you'd better be off. We mustn't tarry; no doubt your governments are scrambling to respond to the developing crisis as we speak."

The thunder of the helicopters lifting off fills me with glee.

“We will need a mechanic,” I say to Oswald. “And fuel. Have you sourced an architect yet?”

“I have a few good candidates,” says Oswald, at my right elbow.

“Good. There are so many we must recruit, if we are to bring this all to fruition. We will need some kind of temporary housing.”

“Camper vans. We can park them on the sides of the drive. We will need plumbers, electricians, carpenters, masons, engineers...”

“Yes... The architect matters most. We can source the rest from the local countryside and the nearby villages. Assemble a list. Take the cleverest of the new thralls and assign them duties as your assistant, I will begin delegating more to you than I expect you to be able to handle personally. You may also hire any additional help you require, paying whatever fees you think will acquire them most easily. We can hire the living, and turn any useful candidates into the undead. We will fill this house with a human-based organization under your direct command, by day, and with vampires by night.”

“That sounds... Interesting,” says Oswald, yawning slightly.

“Oh, poor, dear Oswald, I have kept you up all night. Go and get some sleep. Leave the night to the nocturnal

beasts.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“Off you pop. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

“Derek, show these others where they will be staying. I will provide blood at midnight.”

Derek departs with the new recruits.

Igor waits beside me, and lights a cigar.

“One for me?”

He hands me one. It lights as I breathe in.

I say, “What’s on your mind?”

“That night.”

“The moon was so bright.”

“Your eyes, so lovely.”

“Your skin, so soft.”

I gaze at him in quiet rapture. He gazes back. We have avoided this look for two full days, knowing how much it would cost us both. But here it is, this moment of eye contact, and it consumes us. I am lost in the agony of a century without me. He is lost in the century of my dreaming, in the visions which filled my long slumber, of the answers to the questions we both so desperately yearned to answer.

He holds me in his arms. In tears, he begs me, “Did you see her? Did you *see her!?*”

I weep. “No.”

We hold each other, overtaken by the ancient grief.

“I know of no way back for her,” I say. “But I know how to make them pay. I know how to make sure that no one else suffers as we have suffered. I know how to make us equal unto them.”

“We will do it together.”

I cannot contain my lust. I kiss him. He kisses me.

“Give me the moon,” he pleads.

“It is yours,” I say, as we alight upon the lunar surface. We stand alone in the glaring silence. The sun’s distant light strikes us, but the moon’s power shields us.

With no atmosphere there can be no words. We do not need them.

We return to the upper atmosphere afterwards to speak and lie among the clouds.

“The lights are lovely,” I say. “The cities did not glitter so, when I went to sleep.”

“They still glittered,” says Igor. “I miss the candle-flame, at times. But not the sewage in the streets, or the plagues, or the people.”

“Do you know, I *have* noticed a funny sort of taste in these modern people. Something artificial, a sort of

chemical aftertaste. It's somewhat unpleasant."

"Plastic," says Igor. "They say your average person eats a credit card worth of plastic every week."

"What's a credit card?"

"Let's you rack up debt easy. Here, you can look at this one."

He hands me a Visa card. I turn it over in my fingers, admiring the workmanship. "Clever little thing, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Still, that's a lot of plastic. Why do they eat it?"

"It's in the water. Pollution. There's a patch of garbage somewhere in the pacific that's almost as big as China. Most of it's plastic. It breaks down into microparticles that wind up in the water cycle. It's in every part of the food web, now. Every animal on earth gets some in its diet, one way or another."

"How horrifying! How could they let it pile up so? Have they not measured the expanse of the sea? Do they not know that it is finite? That is resources are finite?"

"And dwindling," says Igor. "They've known since the sixties, at least. The fish are running out."

"How much more can these people ask of me? Must I move heaven and earth to save them? How many environmental catastrophes must they create before they



begin to care?”

“You should kill ’em all. Down to about twenty thousand,” says Igor. “I’ve looked it up. That’s how many you need to keep genetic diversity. It’s a safe genetic bottleneck. Kill ’em down to twenty thousand, keep just enough vampires around to constrain them and put the rest to sleep to save on blood.”

“An interesting proposal... But I would need to *find* twenty thousand worthy people, then. And morally, I would have to find the *worthiest* of people.”

“Or the tastiest,” says Igor. “The healthiest. The least polluted.”

“And where could I raise them? Where could I shepherd this flock, that the humans have not already polluted?”

“I don’t know,” says Igor. “It would have to be someplace that won’t be underwater.”

I think on this for a time. “I hunger now for violence. You choose.”

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