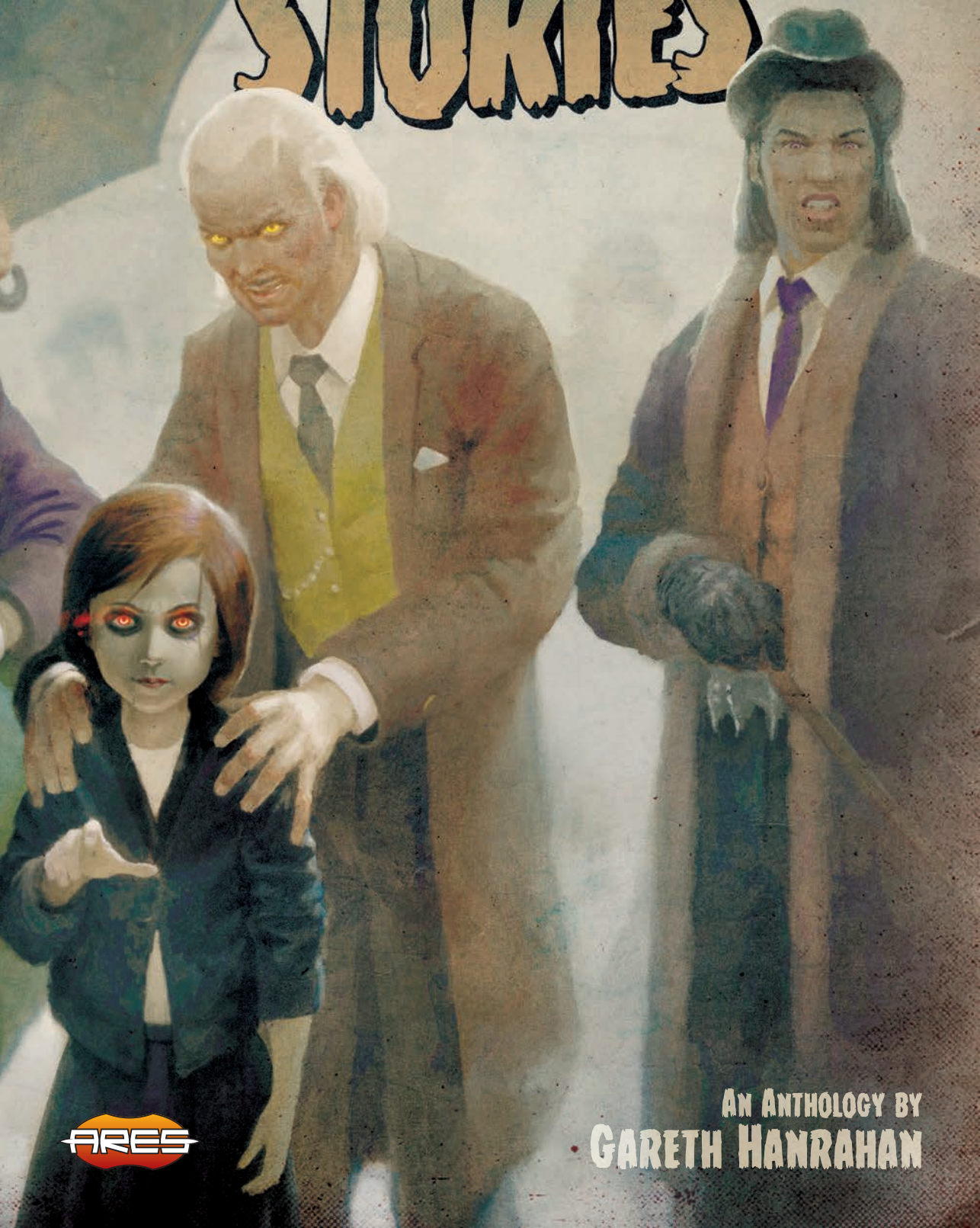


# MASTERS OF THE NIGHT STORIES



**ARES**

AN ANTHOLOGY BY  
**GARETH HANRAHAN**



*Six short stories written by Gareth Hanrahan  
Based on the the **Masters of the Night** boardgame designed by Nikolay Aslamov.*

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***Masters of the Night** is a game created by Igrology, produced and distributed worldwide by Ares Games Srl, Via dei Metallmeccanici 16, 55041, Capazzano Pianore (LU), Italy.  
[www.aresgames.eu](http://www.aresgames.eu).*

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# LASZLO

The pretty receptionist gave him a quick smile as she handed over the room key. “Breakfast is served from seven, and check-out’s at noon. Will you be staying with us long, sir?”

He wanted to say *I hope not*. Wanted to say, *god forbid*. Instead, he marshaled his own fake smile and replied, “I don’t know. It depends on how my meetings go. I’m here on business.”

“Sure. Well, there’s your key. You’re all set.”

The bellhop grunted softly as he picked up Michael’s bag. “What have you got in here, buddy? Encyclopaedias?”

“Bibles.” It was only half a lie, and he slipped the boy a dollar for his trouble when they got to the room.

Michael locked the door as the bellboy left, then taped a rosewood twig just under the spy hole. Hastily, he unpacked, reverently laying the tools of his craft across the bed. Bible, like he said. Guns, and ammunition neatly stacked next to them. Regular rounds. Dum-dums. Silver. Then the stakes, a half-dozen, all handmade and lovely to the touch, polished rosewood too. Binoculars. And in the side pocket, a slim folder of documents. A police-sketch of the target on top.

Laszlo.

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The target wasn’t hard to find. Laszlo wasn’t the most subtle member of the family. Michael picked up his trail down in the stockyards, where railwaymen and the boys from the slaughterhouses ran an illegal bare-knuckle boxing ring. Michael stopped to dirty up his suit, scuff his shoes, so he wouldn’t stand out, then plunged into the crowd.

The place was blood-hot, sawdust on the floor stinking of vomit and gore. It didn’t throw Michael. He’d seen worse in Europe, in the war. That was where he’d first heard stories of the Family. He hadn’t believed them then, of course. It was only later that he was initiated into the secret. It was strange to think, though, that Laszlo had been there too, across the Atlantic. The documents said that Laszlo was at least three hundred years old. There were accounts of un-killable generals and warriors in the chaos of the Thirty Years war, and the Inquisition guessed that Laszlo was



one of them, a bloody-handed monster feasting on suffering. No doubt he'd fed well in the recent war, too.

*Not un-killable. You just need the right tools. Pick the right battles.*

He studied Laszlo from across the room. A big man, hunched shoulders, long stringy hair. Hands like shovels. Laszlo seemed to be smelling the fight more than watching it, eyes downcast, nostrils flaring. Every time one of the boxers landed a good hit and drew blood, Laszlo would grin, like a wolf, showing his fangs. Shouting, sometimes, roars of violent pleasure.

What was he doing here? Michael scanned the crowd. The Family had minions – lost souls, led astray by the lure of money or power. Damned creatures enthralled by the darkness. Maybe some of the other roaring brutes in the crowd were Laszlo's servants. Maybe Laszlo was here talent-scouting, looking for the best bare-knuckle fighters to recruit as bodyguards. The Family were supremely powerful in the darkness, but things of evil could not endure the sunlight. Daytime, that's when they needed protection.

Daytime, that's when he'd come back.

Shouts erupted around him as one of the fighters went down, hard. Blood gushed into the air, a red fountain as one of the boxers had his face broken with a tremendous uppercut. The winner, a blond kid who looked like he was all corded muscle, was carried shoulder-high by the crowd. Delirious with victory, the kid swayed and grinned through his mask of blood.

Michael lost sight of Laszlo for an instant, and in that instant, the target was gone.

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The receptionist's smile was a little warmer the next day.

"Hey, how did your meeting go?"

"Good. Good. Still trying to set things up with the big client, though. I'll be staying for another few days."

"Sure thing. Oh, hey." She licked her finger, reached across the counter and rubbed his cheek. "You've got a little schmutz on you. Ketchup or something."

Blood spray from the fight. He found his smile, brought it up like a shield. "Thanks."

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That day, he looked for the lair. Laszlo, according to the documents, wasn't fussy. Other members of the Family would only sleep in deconsecrated churchyards, or luxury hotels, or places of supernatural power, but not Laszlo. For him, a ditch was enough. A cave.

A cheap boarding house down near the docks. Michael spotted the blond boxer from the stockyards sitting outside, smoking, his face a mess of bruises and bandages. Probably more guards there, too. Say four or five.

A revolver holds six shots. He could do it that way, if it came to it, but it'd be dangerous. Very, very messy. Maybe he'd get lucky. Maybe Laszlo would move during the day. Maybe there was some way to draw off some of the guards.

Michael waited and watched. The sun sank behind the new skyscrapers, turning the city's skyline to blood and fire as the light glinted off all the glass. It got cold quickly, and he huddled in his coat, remembering cold nights in Italy, in the war.







Around two in the morning, he saw Laszlo leaving the boarding house. Michael followed him through the streets. Laszlo reminded him of a stray dog, the way he loped along, long legs eating up the distance, skulking in the shadows. Sniffing to find his way. The target paused outside one building, looked around, his heavy brow furrowed with suspicion. Michael ducked into a side street to avoid being seen.

When he looked back, the street was empty.

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“Here. There’s a copy of the *Post* going spare.” The receptionist handed Michael the newspaper. “Late night last night?”

“Still trying to nail down that big client.” ROBBERY TURNS TO MURDER, read the newspaper headline. “Thanks for this.”

“I’ve been watching you,” she said, a devilish smile playing around her lips. “I don’t think you’re a salesman.”

“No?”

“I think maybe you’re a secret agent. You come and go at all hours. You’re always looking over your shoulder. And that was blood on your cheek the other night. So, what are you, Secret Agent Man? FBI? CIA? Or maybe you’re part of the Mafia – is that it? Are you a scary gangster?”

Michael held up his hands in mock surrender. “You got me,” he said, trying to make light of it.

“You’re Mafia?”

“Something Italian, anyway,” he muttered as he left.

Upstairs in his room, Michael read the newspaper. The victim was a dealer in antiques, rare artifacts from Europe. The place – the same building as last night. No suspects or motive for the brutal slaying, according to the newspaper. Were they stupid, Michael wondered, or was the Family already at work behind the scenes, more subtle members covering up for Laszlo’s brutally direct methods.

What had the dealer found? The Soulglass? The Funerary Urn? The reappearance of any of the relics was a bad omen, indicating the Family’s power was growing.

He couldn’t wait. It would have to be tonight.

---

Again, Michael watched and waited for his quarry.

Her shift finished at six.

“Can I buy you dinner?” he asked her, and she flashed him a big smile. Said yes. Said her name was Sharon.

She talked a lot once she got going. Anecdotes about hotel guests and their oddities, brushes with celebrities on the streets of the city, stories of life back in her home town, dreams and ambitions. She wasn’t going to be a receptionist forever, she swore. She was going to do something big with her life. She probed him, too, flirting, keeping the joke going. Pretending that he was a spy, or a criminal. Promising that she’d strip bare all his secrets.

Over dessert, he asked her for a favor.



The following morning, they drove over to the boarding house.

"Here? Your big client is staying in that dump?" Sharon's nose wrinkled with professional disdain.

Michael nodded. "He's, ah, eccentric."

"Well, you did say he was foreign. You sure about this?"

"I've got to do what I can to close the deal, right?"

"I guess."

He slipped out of the car, grabbed his bag from the bag seat, then moved around to the back of the building and waited in the alleyway. Close enough to hear Sharon's car drive around the corner, then backfire loudly, just like he'd showed her.

Michael closed his eyes and prayed.

He imagined Sharon getting out of the car, knocking on the door of the boarding house, giving them that bright smile. "Say, my car just broke down outside. It's the starter motor – happens all the time. Can some of you gentlemen give me a little push?"

*Now.*

Michael moved, breaking into a run. He kicked open the back door of the boarding house, swept through the rooms until – the blond kid charged towards him, fists clenched, eyes full of fury. Michael drew his revolver, leveled it, and the kid skidded to a halt, courage melting away at the sight of the gun.

"You can't come in here," roared the boxer.

"I don't need an invitation. Now sit down, over there!" Michael gestured with the gun. Every heartbeat here was a moment too long. He had to find Laszlo before the vampire woke. Still covering the young boy with the gun, Michael backed through the next door. His leg bumped against a low wooden box in the middle of one room. A coffin.

Thank God, he wasn't too late. Sunlight still flooded the room. The other guards were still outside, trying to get Sharon's car going. He had time. He'd done it.

He opened the coffin.

Empty.

"I smell her scent on you," said a voice from the darkness. "You brought her here, yes? How unfortunate for her."

Michael spun around. "This gun's loaded with holy bullets." A lie. The holy bullets were in his bag, along with the bone saw and the garlic. He'd come prepared to execute a sleeping vampire, not fight a waking one.

Laszlo smiled. "I can dodge bullets. By the time you pull the trigger, I will be gone – and she will be dead."

Michael moved the gun, aimed at the blond boxer instead. "What about him? I can kill him."

Laszlo frowned. "I like watching him fight. I would prefer if you did not kill him."

"Let us go, and I won't shoot him."

"You are already dead, friend," replied Laszlo, "but I have not had a good fight in a long, long time. Give me a good fight, and maybe she gets to live."

Maybe, just maybe, he could last two minutes with the vampire. Maybe that would be enough to buy Sharon's life. As he stripped off his jacket, he imagined her going back to the hotel. She'd find his suitcase in his room, find the Inquisition documents and the weapons. She wanted to do something bigger with her life. Maybe, he could buy her that chance.

"Come on, then."

Sharon parked the car down the street and waited. How long could a meeting take? She'd told Michael that she had to be back at the hotel by two.

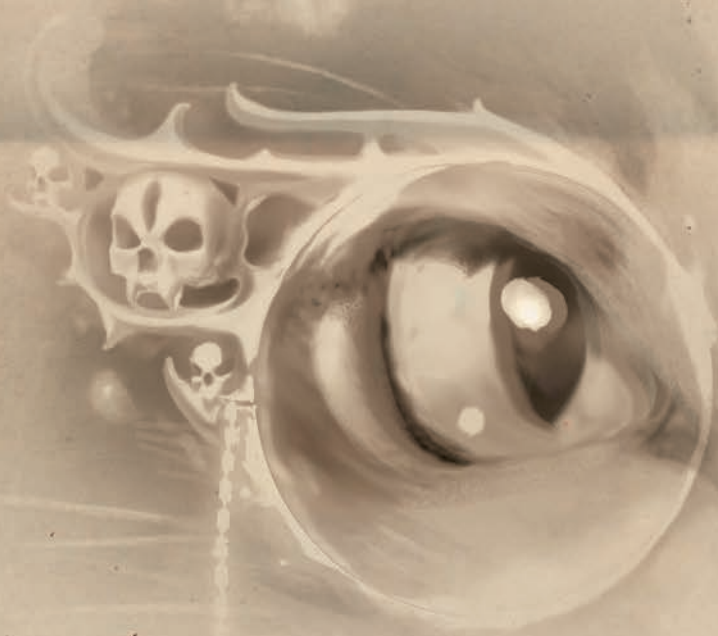
A knock at the window. "Your friend is not coming," said the man, "he said to go home."

"Where's Michael?"

"Forget about him, if you are wise."

The man turned and walked away. Sharon tried to follow him, but by the time she opened the car door and climbed out, he was gone and the street was empty.

Only a bloody footprint, right next to the car. A little schmutz on the face of the cold city.





# IMRE

Johannes put the phone down on its cradle. His hand shook. "It is confirmed. Our brethren have found signs that the Eldest is here too. All the known Family are in the city. For most of the others, we have descriptions, portraits, even detailed records. We know what to tell our hunters to look for. But for Imre..." Johannes sighed. "We are chasing a ghost."

"Everything we need to know is here," declared Abraham. "Have faith, my friend. We shall catch him." He opened his hands in a wide gesture, encompassing row after row of library shelves, the microfiche machines, the dusty scrolls in their glass cases. It included, too, the younger acolytes searching through the shelves, and the old curator who silently placed a plate of sandwiches on the table between the two scholars, then withdrew.

Johannes, shook his head. "Maybe. But there are such gaps, Abraham. Take this – it's an interrogation of Mikhail. One of the Family, captured in Vienna in 1917. He was encouraged to confess with the usual methods – fire, I think – before being released from his damned un-life. Now, this Mikhail was an acolyte of Imre, and... ah, let me quote:

*INQUISITOR: Your master, Imre – where did he come from?*

*MIKHAIL: Out of Egypt... the city of the dead in Cairo. He dwelt there for centuries. He was a priest of Anubis, god of the underworld... ten thousand years before your so-called Christ, Imre walked the earth, and learned secrets under the desert moon.*

*INQUISITOR: He is the eldest of your kind, then? The progenitor?*

*MIKHAIL: He has forgotten. His mind is like an overful treasury – he must cast out lesser treasures to make room for greater ones. What does it matter where he came from? He no longer remembers that himself. He has forgotten so he can retain other secrets.*

*INQUISITOR: What other secrets?*

*MIKHAIL: Yours! Yours, you fools! He will be the doom of you all!*

Abraham shrugged. "What do you expect?" he said, then bit into a sandwich. "Of course there are going to be lies and crazed ravings. We are dealing with the testimony of the Devil's spawn here. But there are more reliable sources. Look, here, in a history of the court of Rudolph of Prague, there is an alchemist named Aimery or Aimeric – the French form of the name 'Imre', mind you - who claimed to be immortal. He's said to have brewed an 'elixir of longevity', said to be the fabled *Rubedo* – the red stage of alchemical transformation, the final step before perfection.



Listen to this!

*That night, we went to dine at the house of Aimeric, who is rumored to have achieved a degree of bodily immortality. We were greeted by his servant, who ushered us into his dining room and served us fine wine and all manner of delights. Presently, we became aware that Aimeric himself had joined us and was in our midst, although none of us noticed him enter the room. He remained silent for much of the evening, listening keenly to all the talk. In time, the conversation moved to the study of scripture, and we discussed the topic of the Crucifixion. Now, Aimeric made several comments about the weather in Jerusalem that day, and the manner of speech of Judas Iscariot, that some in the company took to be proof that Aimeric had indeed found that which we all seek. Others, including Baresch, accused our host of boasting or even blasphemy. One turned to Aimeric's servant and said, "you, sir, are an honest fellow. Is it true your master was at the Passion of our Lord and is more than 2,000 years old?"*

*The servant replied, "forgive me, but I cannot say – I have only been in my master's servant some four hundred years."*

"Reliable sources" scoffed Johannes. "Occultist gossip and speculation, you mean. The anecdote about the manservant is lifted from de Plancy's *Dictionnaire Infernal*, and the Rubedo's a reference to cinnabar, I believe, not blood. You're chasing phantoms and seeing patterns that aren't there. It's folly! You know how these occultists and fabulists work – all lies and borrowings. It's in the reliable works and findings of our predecessors that we shall find our quarry, I think. Here's one of the oldest documents in the Order's collection – the by-laws of the Family, codified in 1365.

*It is forbidden to enter the domain of another of the Family without permission; the penalty for breach of this law is a forfeit of three parts.*

*It is forbidden to strike another of the Family in anger, except in a duel of honor; the penalty for breach of this law is a forfeit of five parts.*

*Those charged with the keeping of the law of the Family must be obeyed, and their word is the word of the law; the penalty for defiance of their edicts is a forfeit of between two and seven parts, as judged by Imre the Eldest.*

"So, he is at least eight hundred years old. Maybe Mikhail was right when he claimed that Imre came out of Egypt."

"More like at least 1200," said Abraham. "Imre is called the Grey Cardinal, and several times he's infiltrated the Church of Rome. We know he was a cardinal in Paris in the 17th century, but there are also accounts that a 'pale cardinal' instructed Pope Sylvester II in the year 999. It's well known that Pope Sylvester was a scholar of the occult, and some even say that his ascent to the papacy was orchestrated by sinister forces. Maybe this Imre has been manipulating all things, like a fat spider in the middle of a great web. Maybe he knows we're having this conversation!" He grinned, amused by the thought, and took another sandwich from the plate.

Johannes sighed at his companion's levity. "Out there," he said slowly, pointing a crooked finger towards the windows of the library, "our brothers and sisters are hunting for the Un-dead. Out there, they are scouring the streets, watching every port and railway station, looking for the members of the Family. Our order has nearly eradicated the plague of vampirism – we are on the threshold of victory, and we cannot let that blessed day slip through our fingers because we cannot identify our foe! We cannot – cannot." Johannes' impassioned speech was cut short by a fit of coughing. Abraham signalled to the curator to bring the older Inquisitor a glass of water.

As Johannes recovered, Abraham rose and spoke. "All right. Let's set aside the







unknowns, and focus on what we do know. Our quarry is commonly called Imre, Eldest of the Family. We cannot be sure that is his true name, or if he truly is the oldest of our foes. He is commonly called the Grey Cardinal, and it's said that he's patient and cunning. Now, unlike the other members of the Family, this Imre has not honed any particular supernatural gifts. He cannot bewitch us, nor is he especially strong or fast. He cannot call forth demons, nor divine the future, nor read minds. Maybe his old blood has turned to dust, and he's lost most of his vitality."

"We must not underestimate him. Imre has guided the Family for centuries."

"And the Family is nearly dead. Maybe this Imre isn't as cunning a foe as you think him to be."

"You denigrate the efforts of generations of our hunters, Abraham! If the Family has been diminished, it is because of heroes – like the ones who rely on us! We must find some clue that lets them identify Imre!"

Abraham sat back in his chair. "Are you even sure it's his name? I found the diary of a Jesuit scholar who guessed that 'IMRE' was a Satanic parody of 'INRI', and that it stands for 'Imperator Mortis, Rex Eternis'. The Emperor of Death is the Eternal King. Schoolboy Latin, but it's possible that we don't even know his name."

Johannes groaned. "I need answers, not more games."

"How about this?" Abraham picked up one document – the by-laws of the Family. "This mark at the bottom of the scroll – it's a Family sigil."

"All members of the Family have such a sigil," said Johannes slowly. "Each beast has its own mark. What of it? The vampire that drew that sign might've been dust for five hundred years."

"Or it might be Imre's sigil! We've never been able to identify Imre's sigil, have we? Maybe it's been lying in front of us this whole time, waiting to be discovered?"

Johannes shook his head. "A wild guess. We cannot send our hunters out armed only with a wild guess."

"It's better than nothing, surely?"

The old curator glided over. "Master Johannes? You are wanted in the council chamber. A telephone call from Rome, I understand."

Johannes nodded. "Keep working in my absence, Abraham. I must inform our brethren on the state of the hunt."

Abraham continued as instructed, rifling through endless folders of documents, rows of books. Page after page of microfiche scrolled by on the reader. The sigil was the key, he knew it. If he could find proof that the sigil belonged to Imre, then perhaps they could find other documents marked with that seal. Make more connections. He poured over photographs of the Family castles destroyed in the war, over books of symbology and demonology.

There were sigils in the dungeons of the castle of Istvan, drawn in blood. The greatest of the Family gathered there. The Eldest must have been there, Abraham thought.

"More coffee, sir?" The curator placed a cup at his side. Abraham took a sip without looking.

"I told that librarian to lose the scroll," muttered the curator. "But the man never listened."

"What librarian?" asked Abraham, absently, his attention focussed on the screen of the microfiche reader.

"A monk named Lucento, in the 15th century. A simple-minded wretch, which made him a useful tool, but hard of hearing."



Abraham tried to turn to face the curator, but his limbs refused to budge. His arms and legs were suddenly stiff, and his breath caught in his throat. He tried to call out, but succeeded only in producing a strangled gasp. Even his eyes were paralysed, locked on the screen. There was no reflection in the glass of the man who stood beside him.

“You’re not simple-minded. You were right about the sigil, but I anticipated that someone like you would try to find me that way long ago. I have planted many false signs over the years. I have layered lie upon lie. I wrote half the documents you read tonight, I think. Which half, I cannot recall. It’s so hard to remember all my names.”

The curator’s breath on the back of Abraham’s neck was cold and foul-smelling.

“Some of my younger kinfolk, though, have not been so careful. A hunter like you might uncover clues that lead to my kin, and that I cannot permit. The only question left to you, Abraham, is whether you wish to live or die. I have the antidote to the poison in the coffee. Serve me, lie for me, and you may live... for a little while.”

“N-n-no.” Abraham forced the word out of his paralysed larynx.

“You think, in your defiance, you have denied me a victory? Even now, my whisperers are at work, blaming Brother Johannes. He poisoned you out of jealousy, that’s what they’ll believe. That’s what they will record, in accordance with my desires. Who is Imre? I am the lie of your history. I am the shadow behind the glass. Child, I am older than the cities. All things are within my design.”

The vampire leaned closer still, and his whisper was like a cold wind blowing across a grave. “You will never stop us.”





# MILA

*Recording One.*

Do you mind if I record this?

Oh, it's a portable tape recorder. A Dictaphone. It's the cleverest thing, isn't it?

Well, let's begin. To confirm, your correct title is Countess Dolingen of Gratz, correct? I tried to look you up, but, well, we don't go much in for titles and graces here in the United States, so I may have misunderstood something. It doesn't matter, I'm sure. Tell me, Countess –

Oh, you're very kind. Tell me, Mila – you've made quite a splash since you arrived in town. Everyone's absolutely fascinated with you, but no-one really knows anything about you. So, can you lay a few rumors to rest for our readers? Is it true that you've signed with RKO Pictures, and you're going to be starring in a picture alongside Marlon Brando?

No? Well, I've also been told – cross my heart and hope to die – that you're secretly engaged and are here for a wedding that's going to outshine Queen Elizabeth's coronation, is that so?

Are you sure you won't put me out of my misery, Miss Mila, like the cat with curiosity, and just tell me why you're in town?

No? Well, then... can I be a little indelicate, Mila? There are other rumors, less pleasant ones, and I'm wondering if you'd like to comment on them. For example, is it true you sold a fortune in jewelry to an auction house the day you arrived? Is it true that you've got connections to organized crime? Is it –

I'm just asking some questions. You said I had fifteen minutes with the Countess – There's no need to manhandle me, you brute! I'll leave when I'm –

*Recording Ends.*

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Sarah Reed stared out the window of her twelfth-floor office and contemplated throwing something out the window. Her typewriter was the obvious candidate – big and heavy enough to smash the glass, and it would crash down in a nicely symbolic way, the way her career was about to crash and explode violently. Throwing the Dictaphone out was less likely to squash some unfortunate passer-by, and the Dictaphone was at least partially responsible for her present predicament.



Really, though, if anything in the office was going out the window, it was Sarah herself. Just as soon as she finished this cigarette, she told herself.

Wait – her office door opened, and a new candidate for defenestration entered.

“I don’t want to hear it, Eddie,” she snapped. “It’s this damn Dictaphone you saddled me with. It only recorded my half of the conversation.”

Eddie crossed the carpeted room and picked up the recording device. “From what I hear, it wasn’t much of a conversation.”

“I asked some questions.”

“Like a police interrogation.”

“The technical term, Eddie, is interview.”

“Sarah, I want you to understand that although I’m smiling and not shouting, I’m very, very angry with you.” Eddie’s grin grew manic. “We get you an interview with the most sought-after, most enigmatic, most attractive socialite in town. Do you give me a nice magazine profile for the Sunday edition? No. You give me nothing. You give me a pain in the neck.”

He tapped the Dictaphone off the table, then held it up and pressed record. “How do we fix this, Sarah?”

“Most attractive – but least photographed. I’m not sure she’d have given you your magazine cover.”

“What?”

Sarah pulled open her desk drawer, spilled a folder of research notes across the green baize. “Look. No photos of her. Not a one. Lots of people talking about her, writing about her, but not a single actual photo.”

Eddie sat down. Hit rewind, then play. “How do we fix this, Sarah?” said the tinny recording of his voice.

“I looked her up in various guides to European nobility. Nothing. Not unless you want to go back to the 15th century, and she’s definitely not from Germany or Slovenia. Serbia, maybe.”

“What are you saying?”

“There’s more, Eddie. Look, she goes everywhere with a pair of bodyguards, right? Two huge gorillas. Only on the night of the 21st, she attended the theatre, and she had only one bodyguard with her. That same night, a priest was murdered in St. Al’s church – and the only witness described seeing a ‘giant of a man’ running from the scene.”

Eddie cradled his head in his hands. “Sarah, Sarah, Sarah. What are you doing?”

“Here, look. I have receipts. Literal receipts. She sold a fortune in jewelry, right? Only some of the pieces are, look, this necklace looks just like one that vanished from a museum in Bucharest during the First World War. And this one I swear is the same one that’s in a 17th century painting called ‘The Devil’s Bride.’”

“So, what, Sarah, you’re saying she’s a crook?”

“I don’t know what she is, Eddie. All I know is, she’s not a magazine cover profile. She’s a page one headline once I figure it out.”

He pressed play again. “How do we fix this, Sarah?”

She took a final draw on the cigarette, then lit another. “Let me do my job. Let me keep digging.”

“It’s not up to me. It’s the boss. He’s enchanted with the Countess. He’s the one who arranged the interview. He told me to put my best writer on it. And now I’ve got to tell the boss that my best writer got kicked out of the interview after accusing the Countess of being an international jewel thief. Give me a cigarette.” Eddie leaned



back in his chair, took a long puff. "What was she like?"

"The countess?" Sarah shook her head. "Eddie, if you'd sent any of the boys from the bullpen, they've have been tripping over their tongues, she's so beautiful. Hell, half the reason the interview went so badly was that I had to get the questions out quickly before I fell for her myself. It's just that she's beautiful, she's..." Sarah paused, held up her cigarette. "She's like this – tall and pale, with fire in her eyes, and you feel yourself needing her once you smell her."

"Damn." Eddie let the tape recorder speak for him. "Fix this, Sarah. Fix this, Sarah. Fix this, Sarah."

So, she did her job. Dug deeper.

Mila was like a whirlpool. A magnet. Everything spun around her, and no-one who got close ever came back. Sarah would cultivate a source – a doorman at the hotel, a dressmaker, a cop – and they'd tell her a little about the elusive Mila. Then, suddenly, the source would have a chance meeting with the Countess, and after that, they'd shut up.

The jewelry line seemed the most productive. At least that was hard evidence, and couldn't be swept away by Mila's seemingly irresistible glamour. Before she got too close again, Sarah was determined to have proof that the Countess was a fraud.

A week spent asking questions and poking at catalogues led her to an obscure gemologist called Oscutio, a little old man who was an expert on medieval gem-cutting techniques. As Sarah ascended the narrow stairs to the attic workshop, the one thing she was sure of was Oscutio at least would be immune to Mila's charms – he was said to be extremely short-sighted, a lifetime spent looking through lenses and magnifying loupes. Anyway, she couldn't imagine the glamorous Countess ever climbing these filthy, narrow stairs.

"Mr. Oscutiv. About the Serbian piece, 15th century. Venetian-cut rubies?"

Silence. Maybe he was deaf as well as mostly-blind.

"Mr. Oscutio?"

She found the body slumped over a work-bench, and stifled a scream. The desk in front of him was ruby-red with blood. Fresh, warm blood.

"Oh hell. Oh no."

A figure charged at her from a shadowy corner of the workshop. Without thinking, Sarah grabbed a stool and flung it in the man's path, and he tripped over it. He shouted in pain, a curse – in what sounded like latin, of all things. His knife fell and went spinning away under a bench. The man cursed again and ran, shoving past her and down the stairs.

Being a good reporter, she searched the room before she called the police.

She left the knife where it lay, although she noted that it had already been wiped clean of prints.

There was a piece of paper in Oscutio's shirt pocket. "Sorry," breathed Sarah, as she reached under his blood-soaked collar and plucked the paper out.

Had he written these notes for her, or for the murderer? She didn't know.

*'Necklace of Blood'. Rubies cut in Venice. Vanished with daughter of Serbian noble, 1580.*

And that was it. Her last lead, vanished. Dead in 1580.







She typed up her resignation letter first, then picked up the phone.

"Hello, I'm trying to reach the Countess von Gratz. We spoke two weeks ago."

"The reporter," growled the brute on the other end of the line. There was a muffled conversation. Sarah strained her ears, but couldn't hear the third person at all. Just the brute complaining about Sarah, and then –

"The Countess wants to see you. Come over here at ten."

"No recording machines, this time?"

"It's broken," replied Sarah. "I'll just write everything down."

Mila smiled like the sunset. "When I was a little girl, there were thieves who stole deer from my father's forest. He could not catch them, until finally he recruited the best of them, the cleverest of the thieves, and made him warden of the wood."

"A poacher turned gamekeeper."

"Yes, yes. That is the phrase in English. My father put the thieves on wooden spikes – stakes, yes?" Mila licked her ruby lips at the memory.

"When was this?"

"Oh. Long ago." The inhumanly beautiful woman reached out and gently took Sarah's pen from her fingers. Clasped Sarah's hand instead, Mila's cold elegant fingers intertwining with Sarah's. "I do the same. I find the best and the cleverest and I make them mine."

"That's... that's not how this works."

"Yes, it is. You are clever, Sarah. I think that if you had only a little more time, you would find out exactly what I am. So, before that happens, I take you for my own. Ask your questions."

"Is it... is it warm in here?" Sarah's thoughts, normally quick as lightning, felt like they were drowning in honey. "I mean, are you here to be a movie star?"

"Cameras cannot catch me. Nor mirrors – nor, I think, your clever machines. Ask another."

"Are you here for a wedding?"

"A ceremony. Not a wedding. Something greater."

"Are you... connected to organised crime?"

"I'm part of the Family."

"And who are the Family?"

Again, the perfect smile. "Say it."

"Vampires."

"Clever girl. Now, who do you serve?"

"...you."

"The man you saw at the jewellers, he was an inquisitor. He hunts me. You wouldn't let anything happen to me, would you?"

"I'd die first," said Sarah. An image sprang into her mind, of her throwing herself through the window of her office back at the newspaper, of falling to the streets below, and she knew that as long as she dragged that inquisitor down with her, she'd die happy. She'd die for her mistress.

"Good. Use all your skills to find him. Expose him. Bring him down." Mila's fingers withdrew. "I own your newspaper now. They will provide whatever resources you need." A third time, that perfect smile, consuming Sarah's soul. "Fix this, Sarah. For me."



# NEVENA

Nevena sank her teeth into the man's throat, tasting the delicious moment of release as her fangs penetrate the jugular vein. She pressed her lips to the wound and drank deep of the man's life, until his body went limp and light. She let him fall to the ground, quite dead.

"Hey!" said his ghost.

She ignored him and wiped her lips with her glove.

"Hey!" he said again. "I say, you, ah... I mean, you can't just do that." He gestured to his own corpse, his ghostly hand fading in and out. "You just killed me."

Nevena had business elsewhere. She turned her back on the ghost and slipped out of the alleyway, joined the teeming crowds of the city's streets. She was careful not to touch anyone – physical contact triggered her psychometry, giving her brief psychic glimpses of the lives of those she touched, and mortal lives were of little interest to her any more. To her, the Un-Dead were the only people who could really be said to live – the mortals around her were all ghosts, but some were a little warmer than others.

And some ghosts, it seems, were more persistent than others.

"Come back here!" shouted the ghost. Only she could see or hear the shade. "You can't just go about *biting* people and then running off! I'll... I'll sue!"

"Go away, little ghost," sighed Nevena, "go away and be eaten by the Kindly Ones."

"What?"

"They will come for you. You will see them as figures in grey, hooded and cloaked. Long ago, I bargained with their masters – the souls of those I kill are theirs to claim. In exchange, I am favored in the spirit realm. You, little ghost, are the coin of this realm. Now go away and wait."

He didn't go away. As Nevena made her way across the city, the ghost pursued her. At first, he harangued her, demanding she explain his murder. He shouted at her, pleaded with her, tried to grab her (his hands passed right through her). He prayed, he tried desperately to attract the attention of passers-by (succeeding only in making a few of them shiver, and sent dogs barking), he wept.

It was only when he hit on singing that it gave her pause. The ghost belted out



tuneless renditions of hit songs by Sinatra and Tony Bennett, and vampires have inhumanly keen hearing.

"Little ghost," said Nevena. "You annoy me." Vampires are inhumanly fast, too – in an instant, she grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, and her pale hands were able to hold his ghostly form. She shook him. "What is your name?"

"Jeffrey Polder!"

"Jeffrey Polder," she repeated, weighing each syllable with her tongue. The name sounded strange in her accent. "You annoy me, Jeffrey Polder."

She dragged him through the crowd. A few people shot confused glances at the pale woman's odd hand gestures as she grappled the wriggling ghost. Nevena ignored them; she scanned the streets of the city until she spotted a little churchyard, where a grey figure waited among the gravestones.

"This one is yours," she said to the specter. "His blood is on my hands and on my lips. By the compact, he is yours, Kindly One."

"She killed me!" protested Jeffrey Polder.

The hooded figure nodded. "Yes. By the terms of the compact, you are forfeit to us. But I cannot yet claim him. He is too tightly bound to the mortal plane."

Nevena hissed in irritation. "Then tell me, specter, where I might find a Weaver."

The grey-clad spectre extended an arm, pointing towards the train station. "There."

"What was all that about?" demanded the ghost.

"It means you have unfinished business that keeps you bound here more strongly than other ghosts," snapped Nevena. "Troublesome wretch!"

"Well, shoot, lady, I'm not too happy about being stuck following you around either. Maybe you shouldn't have killed me!"

"I kill as I choose," muttered Nevena. "Now, be silent. There are fates worse than death in this place."

She led him into the cavernous concourse of the train station. There, squatting in the middle of the vast space was a... a *thing* for which Jeffrey Polder had no words. Part spider, maybe, part frog, part elephant, but everything about it was wrong. It seemed to boil away at the edges, rippling and condensing, eyes bubbling out of its ectoplasmic flesh. He tried to scream, but Nevena clamped her hand across his mouth.

"Silence!" She hissed into his ear. "Do not offend it."

"What is it?"

"A spirit. And I am favored among the spirits. Stay here, wait, and I will help you move onwards when I am done."

She left Polder there, awkwardly haunting a newsstand. He hid behind the magazine rack as she crossed the concourse towards the monster. Fates worse than death, she said, and somehow Polder could believe that. He knew, on some instinctive level, that if the monster saw him, it would not merely *devour* him, it would assimilate him, make him part of it or bound to it, for all eternity.

Nevena stood in front of the monster. To a living witness, she appeared to be madwoman standing in the middle of the waiting hall, talking to empty air. Only the ghosts could see the truth.

"I demand an oracle," she proclaimed. "Reveal where my enemies hide. Show me their faces. Tell me their names. Give me the taste of their blood."







The spirit uncoiled, a limb – tendril? Tentacle? – unfurling and reaching out to touch the vampire. Nevena's eyes blazed with hellish light for an instant. "I know them," she whispered to herself.

A line of telephone booths waited at one side of the concourse. Nevena entered one of them. Curious, Polder followed her over. She closed the door in his face. He took a deep breath, then stepped through it.

"You don't need to breathe, either," said Nevena as she sorted through a pile of coins. "Stupid little ghost. The memory of lungs. The memory of a voice. Memory holding you here to annoy me. Which one of these coins is it?"

"Lady, I don't want to hang around here with that... thing! Let's get out of here!"

"Help me, and I shall lay you to rest. Now, which coin, little ghost?"

"That one. A call costs a nickel."

"Nick-el," she repeated. She dug out a scrap of paper from her purse, dialed a number. "Laszlo? Good brother, listen. I have names here. Inquisitors, hunters all. You will hunt them for us, yes? I shall meet you there. Leave some for me." She recited a list of names and addresses, then hung up.

"You said you'd help me," said Polder.

"Soon. Soon. You will guide me, first."

---

Downtown. Polder guided her through the streets to the address she gave. He began to notice things he couldn't see before – strange figures in the crowds, ghostly faces staring out of windows, smaller monsters like the thing from the train station, and they bowed down to Nevena as she passed. Once, through a gap in the skyscrapers, he glimpsed a bloody sigil blazing across the night sky, like a whole district of the city had been marked.

"What's that?"

"My brother's work," said Nevena proudly.

"The same one we're going to see?"

"No. Ishtvan. It will not harm you, little ghost. It is for the living, not the dead."

"Where did you come from, lady? What did we ever do to you?"

She hissed in irritation. With blinding speed, she pressed her thumbs on the ghost's eyes and pushed – *And he saw. Inquisitors hunting the vampires with stakes and crosses, with burning torches. Then guns, cannons, the old castles blasted into rubble, thieves and brutes digging up the hidden crypts. Vampires screaming as the fires caught them, the sunlight scorched them. The few survivors fleeing, hiding, growing every more desperate. Vampires who had been queens and seers, kings and knights, now hiding in sewers, feeding on rats. The hunters getting closer and closer, the vampires ever fewer and fewer* – "That is what you did to us," said Nevena. "Now, we are here."

A giant of a man emerged from a nearby doorway. He licked his hands, sucking the blood from between his knuckles. "Sister Nevena," he growled. "I found them, just where you said I would. I left two alive for you." He paused, then sniffed the air. "Something is here, yes?"

"A little ghost. Pay it no heed."

Laszlo looked around, his massive head craning this way and that, but his gaze passed over Polder without seeing the ghost. "I have more work to do. Good hunting, sister." He vanished in a blur of speed.

Nevena ascended the stairs, Polder tagging along after her like a neglected dog.



Inside was a scene of gore. Blood dripped from the ceiling where some unfortunate victim had been smashed against a doorframe. Other limbs lay scattered, torn from their sockets with tremendous force. Polder looked around in horror, but he couldn't muster a really visceral disgust. Once, in the factory, he saw a man get his arm trapped in the machinery, and even the memory of that sight made him vomit when he still alive. Now, he felt cold and detached.

*I really am dead*, he thought. His phantasmal shoes left no mark on the bloody floor.

In an upstairs room, they found two alive. Barely alive – Laszlo had broken their legs, hung them up on hooks like carcasses in a slaughterhouse. One was unconscious, the other muttered a desperate prayer as Nevena entered. She killed them one by one, and for an instant Polder glimpsed a grey figure in the room with them, flashing in and out like frames in a movie.

"Those I kill are tribute to the spirits," repeated Nevena.

"But they're not hanging around like me."

"No. Let us find out why you linger, little ghost."

"I think I have a good idea." Polder dug his hand into his pocket – dug the memory of his hand into the memory of his pocket – and pulled out the ring.

"I was going to propose, see. You killed me on the way to her."

---

Polder let the vampire through the streets of the city, to Melinda's house in the suburbs. The same path he'd planned to take, all those hours ago, when he was alive. He'd been nervous then, so nervous he hadn't noticed the pale woman who followed him.

Now, he wasn't nervous at all. Just very, very cold. He stood there on her little patch of lawn clutching the memory of the ring in his hand, and it felt heavier than the real thing. An anchor, holding him here.

"So, what – how do we do this? Do you... do you tell her I'm dead?"

"I cannot enter her house uninvited," said Nevena. "But I have other gifts." The vampire exhaled a cloud of bluish mist that drifted across the lawn. When it touched Polder, it flowed into him, filling him as though he were a mould, or maybe a balloon, a vessel for the blue mist that now conformed to the remembered shape of his body. He was visible again, real again, for a moment.

"Melinda?" he called.

A light came on. A face in the window, and then she was running out the door, shouting, weeping. "I was so worried," she said, "but –"

Nevena's fangs flashed blue, and she leapt at Melinda, knocking her down. Polder desperately tried to grab at the vampire, but he was only visible – he still had no physical form. His hands passed harmlessly through Nevena as the vampire feasted on Melinda's life.

"Why? Why?" he cried.

"A kindness," said Nevena, releasing the lifeless corpse, licking her bloody lips. "This city will belong to the Family, and all who live here shall be ours for eternity. Go, little ghosts. Slip out the door before we seal it shut forever."

For an instant, grey figures flickered in the driveway. Once, twice, and then only Nevena remained.



# ISHTVAN

If nothing else, the sergeant thought, no-one could say they did not have plenty of warning.

They'd heard plenty of stories from the locals. The castle's haunted, they said. Monsters live there. The lord of the castle is a devil, a *wamphyr*, Un-Dead. The castle's built atop a gate to hell, and no-one who goes there ever returns.

After two nights in the castle, the sergeant believed it all.

But now he was out. He was out in the sunlight and fresh air.

He walked down the grassy slope towards the general's tent, and for a moment he let himself believe it was all a nightmare.

---

*Three days ago.*

"Sergeant," said the general. "The locals tell me that some of their kinfolk were taken to that castle. Take a dozen men and search that ruin. If anyone is inside, make them leave. If they refuse, tell them that I intend, in the name of the Kaiser, to level the castle with artillery if needs be."

A foolish man might have made a joke about the general being scared of ghost stories about ghouls and monsters. An impetuous man might wonder aloud why someone wanted an apparently abandoned medieval castle of no particular strategic significance destroyed. A paranoid man might suspect the general's mysterious advisors of having some ulterior motive. A superstitious man might fear to cross the threshold of that foreboding castle. But the sergeant was none of those things, so he held his tongue. He saluted and turned smartly on his heel.

"Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir?"

"If for any reason you fail to return within three days, I shall commence firing regardless."

---

A dozen men entered the castle, under the sergeant's command. He tried not to take their number as an omen.



At first, they thought the place deserted. The outer buildings had clearly been abandoned for many years, and left to fall into ruin. Hollow windows like eyes stared down at them as they crossed the first courtyard. Ravens croaked on the battlements, and showed no concern at the presence of the soldiers.

Then, they started to find the horrors.

A prison – empty now, manacles bolted to the walls. Cage after cage. How many unlucky souls had been dragged out of the villages in the valleys below, and brought here to this lonely gaol? And where were they now?

In a crumbling tower, the topmost level open to the sky, they found a room scrawled with strange sigils and runes that seemed to spin and churn. Not even the strongest of them could stay in that room for more than a few minutes without feeling sickened, and when dusk fell, the stars visible from that tower were unlike any seen from Earth.

In the keep, they arrested two servants, an old man and an old woman. Both of them fought like devils when the soldiers dragged them out of the kitchen, clawing and scratching, but in complete silence. When the sergeant tried to question them, he discovered that neither of them had tongues.

The first night, they camped in a magnificent library on the second level of the keep. Thousands upon thousands of books, bound in strange leather. The soldiers opened a few of the books, and quailed at what was written there. They tore the cursed pages out of the books, and stacked them in the fireplace, and soon a fire roared in the grate, driving away the unholy chill of the castle.

One by one, they slept, apart from the sentries. The sergeant claimed a heavy armchair next to the fire, and tried to rest.

---

He woke to find a man standing by the fire. Tall he was, and pale, so pale that he seemed to be made of smoke. His eyes, too, were blazing sparks, red as the flames of hell. He was dressed in fine clothes, and in his hand he carried a cane topped with a silver skull.

“I am Ishtvan, the master of this place. I see you have made yourself at home here, already. Had you not detained my servants, I would have them cook you up such a feast as you cannot conceive. I have plenty of meat in my larder.” The man smiled, and the sergeant could sense a great flood of fury, deep and cold as the blackest ocean, dammed up behind that smile.

The sergeant wondered what sort of meat might be in that larder. He thought of the tales of kidnapped villagers, of the row of cages near the gatehouse, and the thought was like a lead weight in his stomach. “I have been ordered to ensure that this castle is evacuated,” said the sergeant. “In the name of the Kaiser.”

“Oh, I think you’re here on behalf of someone else. Men who want to destroy me, and my work.”

“What work is that?”

Ishtvan drew himself up. “The great work. I studied at the Scholomance, in the devil’s school under the lake. I delved into tombs in Egypt and Mesopotamia. I have conversed with the lords of the abyss, and seen what lies on the other side of the fire. I am on the verge of triumph. They will not stop me. You, certainly, will not stop me.”

“Is that so?” said the sergeant. He reached forward, his hand passing through the smoky form of Ishtvan, and he grabbed a burning stick from the fire. “And if I set fire to this library, will that stop you?”



The smile faded a little. The dam cracked, a little. "Leave at dawn, and I shall spare you," snarled Ishtvan, and he was gone.

---

Dawn turned the sky blood-red.

"Sir," said one of the soldiers, "we've found no sign of any captives. I doubt there's a living soul in this ruin other than those two." He pointed over at the two silent servants.

"Keep looking," ordered the sergeant. "But keep four men stationed in the library at all times." The library was their leverage. As long as he held the library, as long as he held all those books hostage, they were safe.

In the mid-morning, they found the stairs. The whole mountain peak appeared wormed with tunnels, chambers and passageways carved into the rock. The soldiers brought two sets of remains about that ghastly underworld, and laid the cloth-wrapped bundles on the cobbles of the courtyard.

"Show me," ordered the sergeant.

"It's... it's vile, sir," said the corporal. The corporal was a veteran of many battles; he and the sergeant had slogged through shell-blasted muddy fields, waded through the guts of comrades exploded by artillery or torn apart by machine gun fire, and even his hands shook as he unwound the sheet. Scorched flesh. Twisted bones. A skull that might once have been human, but appeared to have *melted* and *reformed*, the tattered flesh clinging to it bearing signs of the same unholy transformation.

"How deep," asked the sergeant slowly, "do those tunnels go?"

"I can't say, sir."

Maybe deeper than any artillery bombardment might reach.

"Keep looking."

---

They found horrors in the tunnels all afternoon. The men would go below for a few hours, then return, gasping for air, desperate for sunlight, shaken and pale. Ravenous, too, as if they had been gone for days. They spoke of chambers in the depths, of temples to unknown gods, and laboratories, where things in jars whispered to one another. Whispering voices in the darkness, luring them deeper. Crypts and quiet tombs.

Strangest of all, the accounts of each man differed. One by one, they'd report to the sergeant – he felt like a confessor – and tell him what they saw down there. Each of them described different horrors. He did not know if each man had truly seen different things, or if they'd been down there so long they remembered only a fraction of their experiences.

That evening, he set six men down.

Only three came back.

And only two were still alive.

They laid the corporal's body down next to the misshapen horrors. Neither of the survivors could recall how he'd died; in their confused accounts, they just suddenly became aware they were dragging a body with them through the labyrinth.

Time to leave.







“Bring these bodies to the library,” ordered the sergeant. “Then set fire to the place. Burn it all. We’re leaving.”

From a corner of the courtyard, a strange sound. The two servants, gasping and choking. After a moment, he realized they were laughing without tongues.

“Should we...” asked one of the soldiers, his rifle aimed at the ghastly pair.

“No. Just the dead.”

---

It all went to hell.

The corporal came back to life when they brought his corpse to the library. He sprang up, the fires of hell burning in his eyes, horns of bone bursting from his scalp. Clawed hands tore out the throats of the two men carrying him. With supernatural speed, he rushed forward and slammed the great doors of the library shut, crushing the foot of a third soldier who failed to get clear in time.

They retreated to the courtyard. The gates of the castle were shut, too, and a ghastly symbol scrawled across them in blood. No matter how hard they tried, they could not force them open.

They were trapped.

---

The second night, the survivors took refuge in one of the ruined towers. It was a small room, but there were few of them left, and they could hold out there against the things that roamed the courtyard, against the demons that crawled out of the earth. The sky above the castle was a churning purple, like the whole mountain had been plunged into the depths of the ocean and they were all drowning.

Five men left. Five men and the sergeant.

“Sir,” said one of them, “there’s someone out there.”

---

The demons howled and hissed, but did not attack the sergeant as he left the refuge. He crossed the courtyard, marching with all the dignity he could muster. A braver man might not have shaken so visibly. A cleverer man might have found some other way out. A wiser man would never have come here. But the sergeant was none of those things.

He saluted. Ishtvan smiled, and this time there was mirth behind the smile.

“Your man has found a new vocation as my librarian, it seems,” said the vampire, bowing. “My work shall continue. Tonight, through my demonic arts, I can make a handful of mortals into my servants. On a night to come, though, the whole world shall be mine.”

“The enemies you spoke of – they’ll stop you. They’ll hunt you down.”

“Oh, they’ll try. But they’re scared of me. They sent you in here, didn’t they, instead of coming themselves.”

“They have cannons. They’ll level this cursed place from a distance. I am a simple man, sir. I know nothing about demons or ghosts – but I have faith in the artillery corps of the Royal Hungarian Army.”

Ishtvan clicked his tongue. “When do they start firing?”



“At dawn on the third day.”

“Well then,” said Ishtvan, raising his cane. “There is a saying – welcome the coming, speed the parting guest. You should go, sir, and quickly.”

“My men?”

“Oh, they shall die horribly. Devoured from within or without. Set alight. Eaten. Drained of blood.”

“I won’t leave them to such a fate.”

The tip of the cane was sharp as a knife. With a flourish, Ishtvan carved a sigil on the sergeant’s throat.

“Oh, I’m not sparing you.”

---

At dawn, the sergeant alone departed the castle and made his way down the hillside to the army camp below. He made straight for the general’s tent. The general was there, cloistered with his advisors.

“Sergeant? What have you to report?” demanded the general.

“A message for you, sir,” said the sergeant, and then the sigil set fire to his blood, and soon there were no living men in that tent or on the hillside.





# AGNIESZKA

The city was as cold as a tomb tonight.

Julia drew the threadbare blanket around herself and shivered. She was wearing her coat beneath the blanket, but it wasn't enough. Maybe she could take the blanket from the other bed opposite. The landlady said that there'd be another guest staying tonight, but there was no sign of anyone.

Moonlight came through the cracked panes of the little window like spears of ice. Julia's breath misted in the air. No, she'd have to take the other blanket. Surely no-one else was going to arrive at this hour, and she'd freeze to death without it. The only thing that held her back was the thought of stepping onto the bitterly cold floor.

She had to risk it. Julia unwrapped herself and crept as quietly as she could to the other bed. The old floorboards creaked, and someone in an adjoining room muttered a drunken curse before going back to snoring. What an awful place this was! The blanket was a horrible thing too, full of holes and probably infested with lice, but at least it would provide a little warmth.

Just as Julia lifted the blanket off the other bed, the door opened. A young woman – a girl, really, younger than Julia – pale as the moonlight, stood there on the threshold.

"May I come in?"

Julia awkwardly dropped the blanket back on the other bed. "Of course, of course. Sorry, I was just... I was..."

"Is it cold in here? You take it. I don't feel the cold." The woman crossed the room and sat down on the bed. Julia took the blanket and retreated to her side of the room, conscious of the girl's eyes, staring at her.

"Well, goodnight."

"I'm not tired. I want to talk," said the girl.

"I'm sorry. I'm terribly tired," said Julia, but even as she spoke, she realized she wasn't sleepy any more. The shock of the cold, probably. *It would be polite to make a little conversation, I suppose, she thought, and the poor thing is probably more scared than I am. Why, she's just a child. What's she doing here on her own?*

Julia sat up, wrapping the blankets around herself to trap what little heat her body still retained. "But I should introduce myself. I'm Julia."

"I was born Agnieszka," said the girl. "Agni is easier for you, I think."



"Are you all right, Agni? This place isn't really for unaccompanied girls. It's not safe."

"No-one here wishes me harm. Why, are there dangerous people here? Violent men?"

Julia shivered. "Maybe. It's a cheap place near the docks. You get all sorts of people here."

Agni nodded. "A place of violent men. Good. I will come back here and make friends with them." She nodded to herself, then fixed Julia with a cold stare that seemed to go right to her heart. "Tell me of yourself, Julia. What sort of person are you?"

"Oh, I'm just... it's a misunderstanding, you see. My name's Julia Winters. I came to the city to visit an old family friend, he used to run a hardware store, but he's moved away. And then my purse got stolen, and all my money and my train tickets were taken. I'm only here for a night or two until my husband wires me money for the train fare -"

"Liar!" said Agni, laughing with delight. "None of that is true. I smell your lies, Julia. You have no wedding ring on your finger. Tell me truth."

*It's not a lie, Julia wanted to reply.*

*It's none of your business.*

Instead, she told the truth. It all came out in a rush - how her father was a drunk who beat her, how she'd planned for months to run away. How she'd befriended Kelvin, a clerk, in the hardware store who did business with her father. They'd exchanged letters in secret, and he'd promised to give her a place to stay - but when she'd gone there, Kelvin had turned on her, tried to make her... told her to...

"They were cruel to you, so you ran," Agni said as if it was the most natural, ordinary thing in the world. "Why lie?"

"Well, it's - it's shameful, isn't it? I should have, I don't know, found some way to make it all work. And now I'm here, all alone, with no money and no friends and I don't know what to do!" Julia wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. Maybe it was so cold they froze in her eyes before falling.

"People were cruel to me, too," said Agni, quietly. "In my village, when I was young."

"You're still young, a child almost!"

Agni scowled. "They called me a witch. The devil's child. They beat me, too. They stoned me. My father threw the first stone. He cried as he did so, but what good are tears?" She held up her hand against the moonlight, and the fingers seemed all bent and misshapen, like all the bones had been shattered. "Your father, the drunk. Does he live in this city?"

"Y-yes."

Agni slipped off the bed, extended her broken hand to Julia. "I like you, Julia."

"Pleased to meet you, Agni."

She must have fallen asleep then. It must have been a dream.

Such a strange dream, though.

In it, Agni opened the window, and the moonlight streamed in. It was like a bridge, a silver bridge suspended in the night sky, and Agni led her along it, dancing above the clouds. They ran hand in hand, Julia in her overcoat and her shoes and her two blankets, and Agni barefoot, in a ragged dress. The world was upside down in the dream - the sky was full of dark clouds, and the lights of the city below seemed to be a new constellation of stars.



Certainly it was a dream when Julia found herself standing outside her old house. There was a light on in the living room downstairs, and through the window she could see her father slumped in his chair, a bottle of bourbon spilling across the carpet.

"You'll have to invite me in," said Agni.

"I don't live here anymore," protested Julia. "I ran away."

"Still."

The spare key was under the porch mat, just like in real life. Julia opened the door – *quietly, so quietly, if you wake him he'll be angry* – and stepped inside.

"I invite you in," she said.

Agni stepped over the threshold, and went straight towards the door to the living room.

"Don't!" whispered Julia. "Don't wake him!"

"I don't have to be afraid any more," snapped Agni, and she threw the door open.

Julia's father woke, groaned, then his eyes widened. His face flushed with anger, and he scrambled up, hands clenching into fists. He lunged forward.

"Stop," said Agni.

He stopped.

"Kneel," and he knelt.

"Take this," she said, handing Julia the bourbon. "Go and wait outside."

The bourbon burned as it went down, a slow heat that made her forget about the cold and turned her cheeks red. When Agni came out, she seemed redder too.

"Let's go," said the strange girl, and they walked down the street. In the dream, it was a dream, Julia reminded herself, and how strange it was to know it was a dream while dreaming, and how good the bourbon tasted even if though it wasn't real – in the dream the street became a snowstorm, white ground falling away beneath her and whirling sky above, like they were flying.

Agni seemed angry. She talked to herself more than to Julia. "I do not like how he made you afraid. I swore, once the Family claimed me, that I would never be afraid again. I am not scared, but the others are. We have many enemies, Julia."

"Enemies?" stammered Julia. The rushing wind made it hard to hear, and the bourbon didn't help.

"Yes. They want to kill us. They have killed many of us. They are like the men who tried to stone me when I was alive. They fear the dark gifts, and I am so much stronger now. But there are so many of them, and so few of us. We escaped them, and crossed the sea to this city, and here we make our stand. We shall draw the signs of blood Ishtvan designed, and bind all this city to our will. Every living thing here will become *ours*, our cattle, branded by the sigils we shall draw across the burning sky. Nevena has seen this."

"You... you say such strange things, Agni."

The girl's lips became a thin and twisted smile. "They said that when I was alive, too. Look, we are here."

The sign said CITY HARDWARE.

"Why are we here?" asked Julia. *It's a dream. It's a dream. It's a dream.*

"Because I brought you here," replied Agni. "Because I was once scared and alone, and the Family helped me. Because even the Devil's child read her Bible, and remembered the story of Job. Because I wish it." She gestured at the hardware store. Kelvin's apartment was above the store. "Invite me in."

"I can't." The bourbon bottle was empty, but Julia still clutched it tightly.







"Bah! Another way then!" snarled Agni, and she glared at Julia, eyes unnaturally bright.

The name came up like vomit, and Julia couldn't help herself. She had to say it. To shout it.

"KELVIN!"

A light came on upstairs. A face at the window, and a string of curses. Kelvin hurried down to the ground floor, opened the side door.

"You stupid little whore, I told you you'd come crawling back, didn't I? Where else are you going to go? Come inside before you freeze to death, and I'll find someone to warm your bed tomorrow night. I'm not a running a charity here, Julia." He stopped. His gaze flickered from Julia's face to the empty bottle to Agni. "Where'd you get that? And who's this?"

"I'm no one," said Agni. "I'm not here."

And she wasn't. Suddenly, she was gone, only snow falling past the streetlamps.

"Inside. Now." Kelvin ordered her.

Julia was all alone. But still, she shook her head.

"No."

He took a step towards her.

"Come inside."

She didn't have to be afraid any more.

Julia swung the bourbon bottle hard, catching him in the temple. Blood sprayed across the street -

And then she woke up, and it was morning. The bed opposite was empty, and she was somehow sure that no-one had slept in it last night.

Julia stretched, and peeled back the blankets. She was still wearing her coat - and in the pocket, she found hundreds of dollars. She stared at the money. There was enough here to buy a train ticket to... to anywhere. Enough to keep her for months. Enough to start a new life.

She stared at the money in shock and confusion. Some of the bills were speckled or smeared with dried blood.

Words came back to her, half-remembered words from a fading dream.

*We crossed the sea to this city, and here we make our stand. We shall draw the signs of blood, and bind all this city to our will. Every living thing here will become ours, our cattle, branded by the sigils we shall draw across the burning sky.*

A voice in her ear, as if Agni was right next to her.

"I give you your chance. Run. Run as if I was at your heels."

Julia ran.

She left the city before they drew sigils of blood across the sky.



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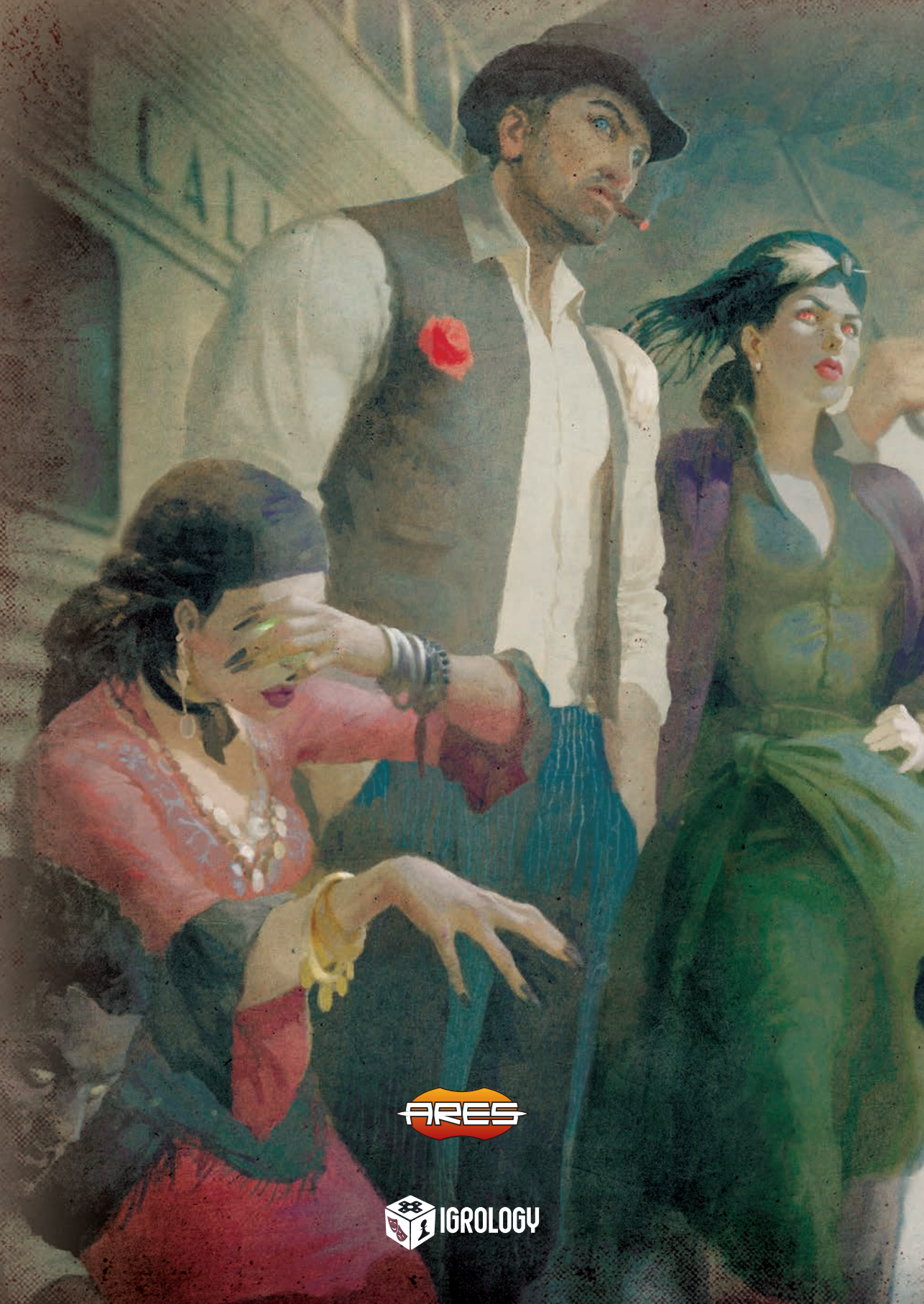
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