

“Love is a serious mental disease.”

- Plato, 428 BC - 348 BC



Däm'Um:
Song of the Vam Pÿr's
LOVE IN VEIN
Book two of the One Blood series

Written by Stavros
Edited by Tara Lindsay Hall



Copyright ©2011 Stavros

Däm’Um: Song of the Vam Pÿr is a registered trademark of Organic Ghetto, LLC and are used under license.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2011917491

ISBN: 978-0-9828121-7-4

Published by Crazy Duck Press
www.crazyduckpress.com

“Howlin’ at the Moon”

Written by Hank Williams, Sr.
©1951 Hank Williams, Sr.

“The Order of Death”

Written by John Lydon.
©1983 Public Image Ltd

Illustrations and Graphic Design by Stavros
Typeset in Garamond, Blue Highway, and Scythe

Printed in the United States of America



*This book is dedicated, with love,
to my children: One & Story*



Däm'Um:
Song of the Vam Pÿr's
LOVE IN VEIN:

No Good Deed

11

Of Brief and Mere Chances

67

Long Day Between Nights

127

Two Bodies of Water

159

Circumstance of Time

205

Stealing the Thunder

243

Bad Penny

279

Road's End

317

Better to Burnout

343

Lord Death

381

Karma Tide

413

Lexicon

437

Diagram of Omjadda J'ins

447

Publisher's Note

449





No
Good
Deed



The song came crashing through the window. Before the roar and sputter of the '63 Cadillac's engine kissed Jared's ears and the screech of its white wall tires turned from the dirty, dry tarmac into the parking lot, the cold eye of the security camera displayed the baby blue vehicle on a tiny monitor. Jared's manager, Mukesh, couldn't hear the song, tucked away in his little office, grinding through paperwork. The monitor flickered silently. To the Guwahati immigrant the vintage luxury car looked innocent enough.

Jared recognized the song immediately: the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' *Date with the Night*, track two on *Fever To Tell*, only nine tracks shy of *Modern Romance*. He looked up from the newspaper rag, squinted, peering out of the large plate glass windows into the bright, white glare of oncoming headlights. A cold shiver washed over him and he followed the tail-finned Caddy as it pulled into a parking spot.

The article that Jared read in the trashy black and white tabloid was just a distraction. Something to keep him from thinking about the lyrics to *Modern Romance*, and by so doing...*thinking of her*. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs was her band, the one she always had playing whenever they made out, groping and grinding each other like bunnies in dry, panting humps. Amber had been on his mind a lot lately. Ever since he uploaded the song, *Modern Romance*, to his Facebook page and added a link to the band's video on YouTube he hadn't been able to get the girl off his mind.

The motor churned, bubbled and spat. The track danced, crushing like a hot crotch. The front license plate on the classic car read: *ETRNL BTCH*. The engine died unwillingly and big doors opened wide spilling their contents. The lead on the number 2 pencil Mukesh used broke. He looked up from his calculations and figures, turning to the display screen as the rough and ready hooligans stepped from the car. The corners of his pudgy cheeks twisted into a suspicious grimace.

Hard-soled boots connected with the concrete and carried what were, in Jared's opinion, two female punks into the four-pump gas station/convenience store. The bell above the glass door clanked its toll as the Hard-Rock chicks entered the Stop-n-Shop to appease their late night cravings. Jared watched them walk. Purposeful. Knowing. They moved up the aisles with practiced ease.

Jared Richter was twenty-two. White. Sandy red hair. Pimply faced. He wasn't an athlete. Skinny. He had an ole tabby cat he got in the tenth grade that he named after Fredrick, The Great because he was studying the reluctant King of Prussia in history class that week. Jared was a loner, mostly quiet, only had two girlfriends that he considered

real, and of those two lucky ex-loves he only had sex with one of them. Amber was the girl that didn't sleep with him. He still keeps pictures of her on his iPhone: the ones they snapped together last summer while at a music store in Phoenix.

Usually, Jared worked the nightshift alone. He had his own key. Mukesh gave it to him along with his last raise a few years ago. It was a perfect night for gaming, and it was being wasted. Only a few trucks had passed along Highway 95, and fewer still had made the little store their pit stop. Jared couldn't help but feel a twinge of regret at agreeing to cover Allison Beck's shift. Any other night he would have been online with his phone, gaming and chatting, but not tonight. Tonight, no good deed went unpunished. Mukesh had come in to clear up some paperwork. His daughter was getting married in four months and things at home were becoming more pressing, harder for him to find a quiet moment alone without his wife interrupting about one thing or another on the upcoming nuptials. So, the industrious immigrant drank coffee and ground through his paperwork as Jared read the pop culture tabloid and waited on customers, trying desperately to ignore the weight of his cell phone tugging at his pocket.

Jared had been home reading his course book when Allison called. He set the large text down and knew he shouldn't have answered it the second he heard her voice. Frederick the Great sat on the windowsill looking out on the apartment's parking lot, swishing his tail back and forth as Jared paced. It was two hours before Allison's shift was supposed to start and she was lying to him.

"Really. I'm not feeling well." Her voice sounded fine, a shrill octave above annoying. Jared had never liked Allison.

"I have Wednesday's off for a reason, you know."

"C'mon," she whined. "I'd cover for *you*. It's not like your hookin' up with Amber anymore. I know you're free."

"That's not the point!"

"You're just gonna sit home and whack off to the computer with all the other Warcraft geeks."

"That's rich. And you think that's going to make me cover your shift?"

“You know I’d cover for you. C’mon...”

“It’s just too late. Goodbye, Allison.”

“What the fuck, Jared, you want me to get the customers sick?”

“You’re gonna have to do *a lot* better than that.”

He hung up. Allison Beck was supposed to work the graveyard shift. Her name was on the schedule. In blue ink. A cursive script - 11p.m. to 8a.m. It had been posted for a week. He knew this because he had made the schedule. His cell phone rang again. Frederick the Great turned from the sparse night to the synthetic chime and hopped down from the windowsill.

“What is it now?”

“Ok, look,” Allison breathed heavily. “I’m not sick. I’ve just been running around ragged all day and am beat. Ok?”

“What you choose to do in your own time is-”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Lemme explain.”

As Allison spun it, her grandfather, the one with Alzheimer’s, wasn’t in his room again this morning and no one else was in the house to answer the phone when the nursing home called. So Allison was forced to get it. That was 7:30 a.m. Head all woolly, blond hair a tangled rat’s nest, the phone wouldn’t shut up. She had fallen asleep around 5:22a.m. with her headphones still drawn over her head, pumping out silence, and a book resting in her lap.

Allison, without a shower or breakfast, wearing yesterday’s underwear, found her grandfather two-and-a-half-hours later walking down Maple Street. The old man thought he needed to let Major out of the house and into the back yard so the dog wouldn’t soil the sofa again. Muriel hated it when Major did that and Frank didn’t want to upset her again because he had forgotten. Muriel was his dead wife.

Feet padding slowly and steadily, he was walking to where he remembered the doublewide rancher used to be. Major was the little Scottish Terrier he and Muriel owned back when Allison was a little girl. She liked the dog, but he’d been dead now for almost fourteen years.

Driving back to the nursing home Allison stopped at a little place and picked up some breakfast burritos. They both missed the morning meal and it was nice to sit with her Grandpap outside, on one of the

old wooden benches, that is, until he forgot who she was. Holes in his memory as big as bicycle tires, Allison hated his sickness. It was a cruel thing. She had to wait until he remembered who she was again before she could coach him back into the car. He caused a scene, shouting that he didn't even know who his granddaughter was. The restaurant manager helped Allison convince him that it was okay.

By the time Grandpap was tucked back in his room at the nursing home her cell phone rang. Her Mom asked if she would pick up her little brother from soccer practice as she was running late for a hairdressing appointment. Then Allison had to fix him dinner because their Dad was delayed at the office and Mom still hadn't come home yet. Allison was halfway through the mac & cheese, hot dogs, and green beans she had made when Penny called, and well...she was having trouble with David again. Allison had to help there. Couldn't abandon her BFF in a time of need, could she?

Yacking 'til her cell battery died, Allison realized she only had two hours before her scheduled shift at the Stop-n-Shop. Allison Beck sighed heavily into the tiny speaker of the electronic device. She felt drained. Tired. She needed a day off. Running around doing everything for everybody else had worn her out. So, she called Jared.

Reluctantly, Jared agreed to cover her shift.

Now, he watched the tattooed beauty with the short-cropped raven hair make a beeline for the drink coolers in the back of the store. The other one, a tall, lanky punk with a brightly colored mop slunk stealthily through the chip aisle and household goods stopping every so often to look at the items on the shelves. Her loud dyed red hair kept falling in her face. Both of the girls were too pale for Jared's taste. He liked his women caramel flavored, a rich honey-brown like Amber. He stored an impressive collection of pornographic magazines under his bed that depicted naked black women with big butts. Amber was skinnier than what the women in his magazines were, but it was as close as he was going to get to the girl whose picture was on his iPhone. Jared returned his attention to the trashy tabloid sprawled open on the checkout counter like a hot buttered biscuit, doing his best to ignore the lyrics of Modern Romance.

Lin eased the glass door open. A blast of cold air hit her knees. Like the register jockey, she didn't want to be here either. The purr of the Cadillac's white walls on tarmac was soothing. The store lights hurt her eyes. She felt the veiny parasite wiggle deeper into her corneas as a

strangling pang jolted her skin.

“Yeah, yeah, you greedy bitch. I hear you.” Between the restless Jadaraa Soo and Z clamoring in her ears to stop for a bite, Lin knew she’d never get a moment’s peace. At least, that was what she told herself, pulling off Highway 95 into the dim light of the little store.

Staring blankly at the rows of cold, bottled liquids, all of which wouldn’t solve her annoying little itch, she chided herself for being so obstinate earlier. She shouldn’t have refused the business lunch that the tall punk had lured to their hotel room. Now she was starving. It made it easier for Z to get her way. Lin exhaled. All she had to do was grab something. It didn’t really matter. *Coke? Pepsi? Mountain Dew.* At least they weren’t in Vegas anymore.

Vegas. Lin sighed. Las Vegas. Nevada. The city of sin. Where else could a vampire stay out all day and never see the sun? Those casinos are like tombs, windowless. Ever winding deeper inward, a catacomb of vice, rich with enticements luring one further and further into the trap. A bloodsucker could learn a thing or two from Vegas.

Lin felt it down in the marrow of her bones: Bringing Z with her this time around was a mistake. It wasn’t the fact that by noon the dyed red punk was out ten thousand dollars, or even the fact that she whined and complained until Lin steered the great big baby blue machine north toward the glitz of cheap eats, one-armed bandits, and garish monuments of carousal. It wasn’t any one thing in particular that smacked as an affront to Lin’s pity for the dying creature. It was just...*everything.*

Everything felt wrong. The glib, slap, dab of twinkling neon lights in broad daylight was unsettling. An abomination to the natural order of things, much like herself, Lin wanted to vomit. The dyed red punk just wanted to play on and on and on – *a constant merry-go-round ride.* Lin wanted off. But they had only just begun. One day on the road and already Lin was steering off course. She felt an urgency to get *there* bristling under her skin, under the veiny limbs of her Jadaraa Soo*, riding the edges of her bones unlike anything she’d felt before. But instead of cruising through the atmosphere, churning miles, she was appeasing Z. Driving the rails to Vegas, stopping for a habitual grab-n-burn. The rhythm of the road hadn’t even gotten a chance to settle in. The mood between them felt like new shoes, tight and uncomfortable.

Sequestered in a darkened hotel room away from Z was the only time that Lin enjoyed while in Vegas. That was until the punk came crashing through the door with some balding joker in a brown business

* See *Lexicon* on pg. 437 for assistance with definitions and pronunciations.

suit. Lin hated to admit it, but it was true: she should have left Z back home in LA to deal with Ryan's corpse. She felt icky, the backside of flypaper; and you know what they say, *what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas*. Well, for Harold T. Johnston that was most certainly true. He stayed in Vegas alright. He never left. A maid found him just after midnight wedged into the bar's mini fridge when she came in to turn down the room and refresh the liquor stock.

She found Harold naked and gaunt, cold, in full rigormortis and drained of all blood. She, like Lin, was amazed at how Z had managed to stuff such a big man into such a small, confined space. It was a thing of marvel, really. However, the awful sensation of Harold T. Johnston's bones cracking in her ears as he became more pliable, and that gleeful look on Z's beaming face didn't stay in Vegas. It had left the neon desert oasis with Lin. Sitting in the driver's seat with Harold's casino winnings crammed into her back pocket, the two raucous vampires barreled down the road.

And it was such a gorgeous night out, too. Clear. Dark. Stars ignited the pantheon of the sky. It was the kind of night that Lin wore on her shoulders. The kind of night that Lin could have driven all the way through from dusk 'til dawn. Thoughts drifting along the cascade pulse of the open road, painting the changing landscape. The quiet of the desert surrounded her, alive on all sides. Its dry breezes swept across her face through the open window as dormant frustrations lingering under the tapestry canvas of her dead skin lulled into the rhythm of spinning wheels and ironed her heady feelings out. She needed that. She'd needed it ever since she left Los Angeles – needed to drive, percolate her cerebral chatter to the surface so her musings could have palpable reason. It was exactly the kind of night that Lin had been waiting for. Yet, here she was letting cold, recycled air wash over her.

She grabbed a Mountain Dew roughly from its pristine advertising slot and imagined the hotel maid's scream shattering the blissful ignorance of the twelfth floor when she found Harold's twisted corpse in the mini refrigerator. Lin thought about how Sin City police would set about tracking Sally Kellerman, under whose name the room was registered, and follow the little breadcrumbs to a stale dead end. Because Sally died in 1972 at the tender age of twenty-three by the very same hands that had stuffed Harold T. Johnston into the tiny box. Lin wasn't with Z then when she ran into Sally. But the ole gal's identification had been floating around between the two of them for the past thirty odd years. Despite Lin's rank position with the punk riding shotgun, it gave the frustrated

vamp a smug jolt to think about the head scratcher they had left crime scene investigators, trying to figure out how a sixty-plus woman had crammed a forty-two-year-old man into a mini fridge.

Lin caught her grin in the frost-coated glass door as it quietly slipped into its jam. Her short haircut, just over the eyes, tomboy Bob felt good. She liked the way it framed her pale, white face. Initially, she only intended to give herself a trim before she hit the road. *Got a little carried away with it.* Though she liked the cut, Lin missed the bounce and weight of her hair's full regal girth resting on her shoulders. The ghost of hair locks lightly brushed against the back of her neck. She passed her eyes over her curvy frame. Motorcycle boots, faded Levi's, a wife-beater under an old green tee shirt, and a black leather jacket. Her shoulders slumped. It'd been a long day. The ickiness of Vegas was still there in her back pocket, pulling her down.

Lin spied Z stuffing a few tubes of lipstick, eyeliner, and blush into the pockets of her denim jacket as she entered the candy aisle. *Why couldn't she have just stayed asleep?* Lin grabbed a Snickers and a Whatchyamacallit. *Could've reached Flagstaff.* Barely out of Nevada and the vampire nodded off in the stroke of a sentence like an aging narcoleptic.

Ever since Lin learned that Z's blood parasite was dying she'd been letting the punk get her way. It was wearing thin, her nerves were razorblades and pin needles. Worrying about Z's symbiotic existence slowing down, ebbing to its inevitable stop wasn't working. It took its toll. *No good deed went unpunished.* Lin didn't even think the poor girl knew it was happening. Z just woke and picked up the conversation, without missing a beat, as if she hadn't stopped hours ago in a previous state. Consonants and hard verbs, the vibrant punk was ready to rumble through the veins of some unlucky vagabonds; tear reason from the cold fabric of night, and fuel her lust with blood. Z joined Lin's nagging Jadaraa Soo to find a quiet locale, off the beaten path, a little country-side oasis to party. After all, it'd only been a decade since their last splash. Lin sighed. *Fuck. She's so young; barely crowned a century.*

Z raised her head just as the store manager, a short, balding North Eastern Gateway native, stepped from the small, unlit hall near the fountain drink station. She flashed an eye at him and smiled. He scrunched his brow. Walking over to the liquid dispensing nook, Z wanted to be closer to the pudgy little man. She tried not to think about it. Time was wreaking havoc in her soul. Black holes the size of bicycle tires were spinning in her head. She was missing moments and didn't know why. *Lin's been unusually quiet, that ball of spit missing from her fire. She's*

usually such a mess when we start out for New Mexico, gabbing like a tourist.

He's watching me.

The corners of Z's mouth curved upward. The violent wench felt a hiccup of anticipation and stopped at a sunglasses rack letting the man's gaze linger on her slender form. Z liked being watched. She was a spectacle of god light and bullshit, packaged in a hot little body built for speed, a temple of carousal, and she began looking through the fruitful display of eyewear. She caught Lin's reflection across a dozen tinted lenses as the brooding vamp crossed to the checkout island, sizing the little man up for a meal.

Mukesh Priyaranjan believed. He believed his customers were robbing him blind. He believed that Allison was lazy and Jared was a good employee. He bought the little gas station on Highway 95 in '84 from a guy named Joe who voted for Walter Mondale. The Guwahati immigrant sold his first tank of gas three years before Jared was born. Mukesh's wife, Banhi, was pregnant then with their second child. Coming to America, purchasing the fuel station, and settling in the Arizona desert was something his family back in India never liked or supported. He went against family tradition because he wanted something better for himself than what his father had. He wanted the freedom of the West, fast food, MTV, and a shot for his son to become a doctor in the States. Mukesh believed. Mukesh believed all things were possible in the West and that a better life was out there for him. All he had to do was take a chance. It paid off and by the time his daughter was out of diapers and riding a tricycle Mukesh had built the tiny gas station into the convenience store that it was today.

The Stop-n-Shop was the central component that supported his family and he never regretted moving to America. Not once. Not even when his father lay dying in India and his sisters refused to tell him about it until after he'd already passed. Mukesh believed and his faith was rewarded. His son graduated high school in '96 and completed medical school nine years later. Mukesh was never happier. He was a proud parent living the American Dream. Bought and sold, he had the debts to prove it. When his son received a residency at the Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore, Maryland, Mukesh threw a lavish party even though he and Banhi really couldn't afford it. Jared was invited to the celebration, but he never showed.

Orcs had just ambushed Rune Shadow, Jared's then Elf Warrior, in a clever move led by the wizard Phantom Ze. It didn't look like Rune

Shadow was going to make it and Jared buckled in for a long night battling online. During a late night snack run to the Priyaranjan's convenience store he ran into a pretty girl named Amber, who also was out that night scurrying across the cold desert for junk food and soda. The two hit it off awkwardly, shy, but kinetic.

Mukesh turned from the brash vixen for a moment as the biker dyke set a handful of items on the counter. Jared didn't even have a chance to move the trashy tabloid from where it lay before Lin placed her purchase items down. Mukesh sighed. *What's wrong with these kids today, lazy and absent-minded, always dressing like a bunch of freaks?!* Mukesh moved to ring up the hooligans himself, but caught the tall, lanky punk shifting off to his right from out of the corner of his eye.

"In the mood for a little snack, huh?" Jared asked the pale, imposing chick.

Z laughed aloud and it popped like thunder. Lin smirked at the irony of the boy's innocent question and Mukesh turned to see the eyes of the cold-hearted killer heading straight at him.

"Yeah," Lin uttered, "something like that."

Suddenly, and quicker than the old man could ever imagine, the redheaded wench was on him and he was flying through the air. She merely placed a hand to his collar and he hit the coke machine with a bright painful crash, splurting beverage syrup and soda water all over the place. Jared turned in the direction of the loud noise. That was a mistake. He took his eyes off the maddening red veins that crisscrossed Lin's peerless spectrum and she pushed him back using both hands. It felt like he'd been hit with a War-Hammer, +5 Damage Bonus! He landed on the floor with all the breath knocked out of his lungs.

Lin bounded over the checkout counter, landing squarely on the old tiled floor banging on the clerk's eardrums. Straddling him like a graceful jockey over a downed racehorse, he tried to fight back by reaching up to push the alarm. The biker dyke stomped on his outstretched arm with her big-ass boots. It smarted.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," the raven-haired harlot stroked with her tongue. "I don't think so."

"Please, take what ever you want and just go," cried Mukesh trying to find some reasonable way out of this abrupt nightmare. "We

don't want any trouble.”

The old man's cries filtered past Lin's ears.

”We aim to do just that,” muttered Z to the frightened man. “Don't we, baby?”

Lin smirked. Z was in her zone. Every second the tall, vivacious coquette took breaking the law reminded her of the days when she was robbin' banks and shootin' it up with her husband Simon Ray.

”Yeah,” Lin uttered coldly to the live thing twitching on the floor under her. “Just that.”

Jared went white when he saw the tips of the gnarled fangs protruding from the gums of the smirking killer. He knew then that he was going to die. He quickly thought about what Rune Shadow 2.0 would do in a situation like this. He wondered who would feed his cat and it occurred to him that he wasn't even supposed to be here tonight. *Allison was scheduled. It was written in blue ink, a cursive script. It should've been her!* Before Jared could cry out, plead to God, or spit in the face of death the ashen woman was on top of him, tearing into his neck. He felt the harsh, unbelievable sting of his flesh being torn and couldn't get over how the sounds of his own screaming eclipsed the maniacal snarling brutality of his fate.

Mukesh pleaded for his life as he witnessed Jared writhing in agony, being ripped apart. *Such savage cruelty!* He turned away and his bulging, brown eyes fell on the cold, uncaring thing on top of him as she pressed her lithe frame into his trembling flab. He couldn't help Jared now. He couldn't even help himself. He thought of Banhi and how his death was going to ruin their daughter's wedding. He wondered why the bitch waited, why didn't she attack him like her friend had done to Jared? *Why is she toying with me?!*

Z inhaled Mukesh's fear as the store erupted all around her into a cacophony of beautiful music. She nestled her nose into the soft corner of the old man's shoulder and licked perspiration and soda from his dark mocha skin. His jugular vein pulsed rapidly under her tongue, a tiny ticking, and Z's ailing Jadaraa Soo jittered along her bones, dancing to the tune.

”I love Indian food,” she exhaled in a panting lust.

The Maestro descended into the hot flesh of the eastern man

with an opened mouth. Hungry. She clasped her arms tightly around him and cracked three ribs, making his battered screams a constant treble. The vampiric veins that twisted into the shape of her fangs unwound, like a ballerina's pirouette, and drove deeper into Mukesh's flesh, breaking through muscle, wrapping itself around the carotid artery, squeezing, while Z suckled, draining the old man like sweet nectar from the stamen of a honeysuckle flower.

Lin pulled every last drop from the boy. His flesh shriveled, nestling closer to his deflated muscles and bones. It framed his deathly composure. The vampire rose off from him satiated on the vibrant liquid coursing through her Jadaraa Soo, and wiped the viscous fluid off her chin. The red stain of Jared's blood on Lin's pale white flesh slowly absorbed into the mesh fabric of her skin as the protruding vampiric tentacles writhed back into the shape of two extended canine teeth. The sentient blood parasite was efficient. No drop was wasted. The greedy veins under Lin's perpetually decaying epidermis drew down the warm liquid; it consumed all – every drop, except those beaded on Lin's silver locket. The vile, poisonous metal could keep those droplets. Lin's Jadaraa Soo purred, emanating soft gyrations of pleasure to its host.

From the cold, glass eye of the security camera in the back of the store, the video recorder witnessed the carnal crime and how the dark haired woman strode to the cash register, pressed a few keys, and emptied the drawer of all its paper bounty when it popped open. Lin stuffed the loose cash into her front pockets and jumped back over the checkout counter like hopping a fence. She headed to the automotive section as Z slowly rose from her kill.

“I rode my horse to town today and a gas pump we did pass,” the whimsical viper sang on blood-covered lips. “I pulled 'im up and I hollered whoa! Said fill 'im up with gas. The man picked up a monkey wrench and wham! He changed my tune. You got me chasin' rabbits, spittin' out teeth, and howlin' at the moon.”

Z hovered over Mukesh's shriveled corpse a few seconds as her parasite absorbed the splattered blood that decorated her soulless face before sprinting to the Manager's office. There, she scurried to find the security camera's video recorder and spied Lin on a tiny monitor carrying an armload of containers to the ravaged cash register. Z hit the eject button on the ancient video recorder and continued singing the Hank William's song.

“Well, I took one look at you and it almost drove me mad. And then I even went and lost what little sense I had. Now, I can't tell the day

from night, I'm crazy as a loon. You got me chasin' rabbits, pullin' out my hair, and howlin' at the moon."

The violent punk stepped from the short darkened hallway into the body of the store, full of vim and vigor, and raising the outmoded videocassette high above her head, shouted, "And the award for best performance in a dramatic scene goes to..."

"C'mon," Lin prodded wearily, wanting to leave.

The wily punk was having too much fun. She crossed to the sunglasses rack again as Lin tore open the tops and emptied the containers of several flammable items that she had acquired from Mukesh's fully stocked automotive section. She began dousing Jared's dry corpse and the checkout counter island, mixing a mean cocktail. The titillating pulse of the kill hadn't settled her any. The warmth of Jared's blood, though soothing to the beast beneath her skin, only added to the icky-Vegas flavor riding her bones.

The tiny red veins that mapped Z's eyes and dove down the black holes of her pupils pulsed. They had grown fat and engorged on another's forced charity as the vampire tried on different pairs of sunglasses, one after the other.

"You sure we gotta do this?"

Z tossed the unwanted eyewear to the floor, hitting Mukesh's corpse.

"Yup."

Lin grabbed a pack of smokes from the cigarette rack above the cash register.

"You know she hates me." Another pair of unneeded sunshades hit the floor.

"Yup."

Z turned her head this way and that, examining the hot Hollywood look that the dark rimmed spectacles gave her.

"It'll be her fuckin' funeral if she steps to me again."

Lin chuckled, an annoying huff. Her fingers plucked a Zippo lighter from a little impulse display, flipped open the top, and struck the flint. A beautiful orange triangle of flame lingered above the gas spout as

the vampire lit the cigarette that dangled between her lips. She sucked the smoke in and remembered a time when birthing a flame was a lot harder to create than picking up such an everyday item as a lighter. Her Jadaraa Soo, Lin's veiny nightmare companion, jittered from the bitter tasting smoky nicotine.

Z pulled the hot Hollywood look off her face, tossed it to the floor, and scooped up yet another offering from the self-standing display. She modeled the sunglasses in the little rectangle mirror noticing her jaw line. Angular and cut like a Greek statue. Her Jadaraa Soo slithered over the bone. Lin tossed the easy fire over the counter and watched as it landed on Jared's dead body, igniting the rancid cocktail. Z liked the new look and pushed the rack over as she headed toward the door. The plastic display crashed to the floor with the finality of movement, cracking and spilling its vital low cost objects like a shattered coconut.

"Thanks for the good time, boys," eulogized Lin as she held the door open for her wild friend.

Now, at least, she might be able to get a break from Z and the vile parasite. Lin hoped. With a belly full of blood, fire at their heels, and dawn still miles away, the prospect wasn't certain. She would have to get over the fact that the young vampire was dying if she were ever going to stop derailing the ritual. It'd been at least ten years since they last passed this way and Lin felt the pull stronger than ever. As the two desperados climbed back into their getaway car and fired it up, the clank of the Security Tape hitting other past memorabilia in the cluttered backseat ignited the rest of Date with the Night blaring back to life.

The song's driving rhythm crunched from rolled down windows orchestrating wounded stars to look upon the murder of two more innocent souls. *Yeah, Yeah, Yeah*. The fire consumed Jared's picture of Amber as it ate his iPhone. The paperwork in the bin under the checkout counter crumbled to ash as it reached Mukesh's toes. The callused killers sped away into the dawning night as the hot horror blazed in the little store off Highway 95. Flames took root and climbed to the rafters of the roof like playful children up a treehouse.



Pulmonary Artery.
Semilunar Vein.
Right Ventricle, Left Ventricle.
Superior Vena Cava

Wednesdays are always a disaster.

Tricuspid Valve.

Septum.

Mitral Valve.

Pulmonary Vein.

Aortic Valve.

Sounds more like a carburetor than a heart.

“The outer covering is a thin, strong membrane called the Pericardium.”

Pericardium. Sarah rolled the word around her brainpan again, listening to the echo, as she looked up from her book and gazed out the bus window. It pulled away from the stop. A slow lurch, tugs and pulls, spitting out several puffs of black acrid exhaust, groaning into gear. Sarah’s stomach felt like lead.

Pyloric Portion.

Fundus.

Hydrochloric acid.

Pepsin.

I should have taken a Tums.

Prescribing her own medication and she wasn’t even out of medical school yet! Wednesday’s were *always* a disaster. Hard to focus. Test on Friday. Wednesday was when she went back to work. Sometimes she got both Monday and Tuesday off. But it was rare since they started helping her with tuition. Got her working more now.

That guy’s looking at me again.

Sarah ducked her head into the binding of the book, trying not to think about it. Today’s not Tuesday. She’d have enough guys staring at her soon enough; gawking at her, whistling over watered down drinks, pulling faded wads of cash out of moldy pockets to toss at her like surrogate cumshots; sticking Washingtons down her brazier that should’ve gone home to their families.

Can’t the fuckers wait?!

Right Ventricle, Left Ventricle.

Pulmonary Artery.

Hydrochloric Acid...Shit!

Her heart felt like it was in her stomach! Sarah glanced up from the cold, hard pages of her textbook. *Yeah.* He was still doing it. *What's his malfunction? Probably lives with his Mommy.* Sarah's eyes grew callused and bitter. *Men!* Bile formed in the back of her esophagus. She should have taken an antacid. She was almost at the Club.

Sarah turned back around, closed the book, and jammed it into her bag getting ready to depart the bus. *Today's not Tuesday. Test on Friday.* As the hard corners and the flat painted sides of the strip club loomed into the oncoming distance from Sarah's porthole window she dug her painted nails into the thick plastic cushion of the seat. *Another day, another dollar.*

Her thoughts collided with gritting teeth. *Time to shine. Bury the light, live the fantasy. Everyone's got a fantasy. It makes the hard and boring go down easy. Think of it in terms of medicinal. I'm doing them a favor. I'm the doctor. I'm helping them to live their tired, pathetic lives.* "Yeah...Right. Medicinal." Sarah huffed and sighed as the bus pulled up to the familiar stop, an insufflate cardiac wheeze. *Who am I fooling?*

That guy is still watching me. Sarah stood; head bent low, and shook the lies from the soft cotton curls of her light sandy brown hair. She walked the solid black plastic runner that divided the bus to the hiss of swooshing doors.

Men? It's like dancing for a bunch of fucking vampires!

On stage, she tried not to think about Derrick, mentally running through her notes on the human circulatory system, going through the motions. She didn't need him on her mind now. A test loomed like circling vultures. Her flat, sultry abdomen undulated in a sensual wave as she jutted her ass and breast to the meager crowd, dancing. She grabbed the pole and twirled, opening her legs like an autopsy, and inspired a few more dollar bills to hit the stage floor.

She worked the front of the crowd. That guy with "FREEDOM" tattooed across the front of his fingers just stared at her blankly, like he was at the zoo. His tattoo made her think of Derrick and Sarah felt gross. She rotated her ass and coaxed more crisp green paper into the bans of her scant leather panties. She looked up and noticed her boss, Tone, behind the bar counting out earnings against receipts. *Tone was an alright fellow.* Clean. Dressed nice. Sarah had no illusions about it. He was her pimp. *More or less.* If it wasn't for the fact that the Detroit born man had been paying for her semesters then she wouldn't be up here on this dance floor shakin' her ass or putting it into a seat at the

University. She justified it. Weighed the end against the means and did her best to push Mr. Freedom, and Derrick, from her mind.

Pulmonary Artery.

Semilunar Vein.

Right Ventricle, Left Ventricle.

Superior Vena Cava

Tricuspid Valve.

Septum.

Mitral Valve.

Pulmonary Vein.

Aortic Valve.

She was going to be a doctor.

Pericardium...Pericardium...

Hellbent and full of fury, if need be, she was gonna make it. She wasn't gonna to be like her Momma, subject to the whims of a constant string of loser boyfriends, barely able to make enough ends meet to keep her trailer tied to one spot. Sarah was going to be a doctor. So, if she needed to play the doctor of love for a little while to get her standing on her own two feet then that's all there was to it. Better this than some asshole that only understood I-Love-You if it was tattooed across his fist. *Fuck!* Sarah grabbed the pole. Feeling pride swell within her bare chest like Derrick's hardening cock, she twirled and slid to the front of the stage and buried her luscious round beauties in the face of a willing and eager customer. His twenty-dollar offering felt nice tucked between the leather ban against her ass.

It felt like success.

After the dance, Sarah hit the bathroom and went straight to the dressing room to change and clock out for the night. She'd already done three shows and still had a lot of studying to do. She was agitated. A jumbled ball, hard to focus, she needed to light a fire under her butt and catch the next bus.

"Eddie's looking for you," Brina said as Sarah slid into the portal beside her.

"Shit."

"Gürrrrlll," the Latino lovely stretched as she saw her friend's face.

“You got more bags under those eyes than Zsa Zsa Gabor got luggage.” She turned back around, applying her mascara in the lighted mirror. “But you know better than to make that man come lookin’ for you.”

“Yeah, I know,” grumbled Sarah as she wiped makeup off her face. “I have a big test coming up and....”

“Ms. Thing!” Came Eddie’s voice booming from the doorway. “You got a dance in room seven. You know you suppose ta’ see me after each show.”

Sarah’s sigh pulled her shoulders down and she begrudgingly turned to the large, round manager wanting nothing more than to change back into her street civvies and hit the bricks.

“I have a test that I have to study for.”

“So, you don’t want your job then. That’s it?”

The fat bastard stared at her puffing on a cigar blunt.

“I didn’t say that..”

“Guess I have ta’ go tell Tone you got betta’ things ta’ do than business with that tiny, little ass of yours.” His eyes scanned her up and down like a three-day-old Prime Steak dinner. “Don’t know why they even ask for you. You ain’t got enough meat on them bones to wet my gorgeous appetite let ’lone pay us back. I told Tone not to give you a single dime in advance, ’cause you simply couldn’t cut it.”

Sarah bit her tongue, feeling trapped.

“Thought so,” he gloated, filling the dressing room with damp Cuban smoke. “Now, get that skinny ass to room seven. Special Request! Or, pay me my money and get the fuck outta my building.” He turned like he was going to leave, but stopped. “Oh...and yous gots ta’ do another show.”

Eddie’s smile hit Sarah in the chest like a tattooed fist that read: *I Love You*. He waddled away leaving a thin, vapor trail of rancid smoke.

“Fuck!” Sarah swung back around and glared angry in the mirror.

“It’s not that bad,” Offered Brina trying to console her. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

The wanna-be doctor sighed heavily and picked up a makeup brush to reapply the costume she had just wiped away. Her eyes were red, swollen, and heavy with water. She caught her reflection in the silver-backed glass and the look of her Momma stared at her. Sarah threw the brush and pushed her makeup away, breaking into tears.

“How am I supposed to even pass the damn thing!”

“Hey. It’s all right,” Brina said as she took the young woman into her arms. “You’ll work it out-”

“How?!” The task loomed over her like an impassable mountain. “When do I have the time to do anything?! I’m barely passing. Can’t sleep...”

“Shit, ggiirrrlll.” Brina rocked the little dancer. “Sleep’s overrated. You’re young. Get all the sleep you need once yer dead.”

Sarah laughed a little and sat up. Brina always had a way of making her smile. Even if she did want to drive her fists into the belly of that fat man, Brina was right. She’d work it out. She had too! The Latino lovely turned around in her seat, grabbed a tissue, and took Sarah’s face in her hands and began wiping the dancer’s tears away.

“You can do this,” she encouraged. “You ain’t like the rest of us here. You’re going places, got things to do. You know it. Just hold onto that and don’t let these bastards beat you down. They ain’t got nothin’ on you. You’re doin’ what ya need to do and that’s okay. Just stay focused. You know all the answers already.” She smiled and eventually Sarah smiled back. “Your nose is always in those damned books. And, shit girl, you always got me...I got your back.”

“Yeah?”

Brina looked at the girl and it was solid in her eyes. “Yeah.”

Sarah took Brina’s hand, squeezed, and thanked her.

“Go on now,” said Brina dissipating the tender moment. “Do this thing. We can bounce some questions later in between.”

“You sure?”

“Suurrree,” intoned the dancer as she stood and checked herself once over in the lighted mirror.

“Thanks,” said Sarah again softly, meaning it from the worried bottom of her tired soul.

She picked up the makeup brush and stared at the black bags under her eyes.

“No problem,” said Brina dismissing it with a wave of the hand. “How else I’m gonna get free health care. Sure as shit ain’t by shakin’ my ass in this place.”

The Latino lovely offered a quaint chuckle and Sarah tried to smile. The woman cocked her eyebrows, squeezed Sarah’s shoulder, and exited the dressing room to take her turn on the pole. Once Brina was gone Sarah’s body drooped. The hand holding the makeup brush fell to her side as she peered blankly ahead. Hate churned in her chest as she stared into her own eyes through the lighted mirror. This place was sucking the life right out of her.

Room Seven. Special Request. That meant leather.

Sarah quickly put her face back on and decided that whoever the client was in Room Number Seven he was going to get a special treat, all right. She was going to bring her whip this time around. And she intended to use it! He wanted a *special* dance. A leather-clad prom queen. *Okay. He was going to get one. And if that meant blood was gonna be spilled in this carnival meat factory then it sure as shit ain’t gonna be mine!*



Sergeant John Wallace walked atop the charred rubble of the Priyaranjan’s convenience store. The acrid smoke and false campfire smell couldn’t cover up the scent of burnt human remains. *Putrid.*

“Hhrrmm,” grumbled the leathery faced Sergeant as he stepped on a pair of melted sunglasses.

The whole thing had an all too familiar vibe tugging at the pit in his gut.

“M.O. appears the same,” affirmed Lieutenant Mauldune as she stepped up to the veteran police detective in her smart shoes, holding her notebook open. “An accelerant was used, localized near the bodies; ignited for maximum incineration. Fire spread outward from the register. Most likely something from the store.” She flipped her notebook shut and surveyed the grim remains. “We’ll get the full report in a few days

and know for sure.”

“It’s them,” Wallace uttered from a stern face. “Got their stink all over it.”

“If so,” the detective announced. “Then that means they’re back.”

“Apparently.”

Wallace picked up a piece of burnt wood that used to be a part of the building’s roof.

“If they continue the pattern like last time,” the Lieutenant declared, “that means they’re heading East.”

The bitter sergeant tossed the charred piece of wood completely unlike skipping stones across the ocean’s surface. It landed with a tiny clank. Two ambulance attendants walked past them carrying the well-done husk of one of the two men that were trapped in the fire. Wallace’s eyes dropped to the black plastic body bag. Its filled folds were all too familiar. Wallace lifted his gaze to the Indian woman crying with her daughter, arm-in-arm, just outside of the police line. *They don’t need to see this.*

“Poor bastard,” he muttered.

Lieutenant Mauldune looked up from the body bag to her partner. She wasn’t with Phoenix Metro when Wallace worked a similar scene where his nephew, Stephen, was killed in exactly the same way. From what she learned around the water cooler Wallace found out for certain that it was his nephew in the blaze from the Medical Examiner’s report. *Hell of a way to learn that you just lost kin.* Kate empathized with the man, but couldn’t even begin to understand what he must be going through right now, reliving that horror. His eyes were like two glassy steel bars of rancor.

They’d gotten word about the fire over the radio. John went stark white and quiet and didn’t tell her where he was driving until they were almost there. He had more years and experience with Phoenix than she did, but she had the rank. In the small town from where she’d transferred she had risen quickly through the department from a few lucky busts. She’d reached the glass ceiling there and wanted something more. A bit of excitement, really. Coming to the big city, working with the seasoned grumbler, gave her more all right. John had seen enough of the brutal underbelly of humanity to make him cold, make him blow jurisdiction to trek all the way to Bullhead City on a hunch.

From what little she knew of the case ten years ago, the Sergeant's nephew and two others were murdered at work. A possible robbery or drug connection to one of the other victims was pursued. Each of the casualties had their throats torn out and the convenience store was burned to destroy evidence. The killers were never brought to justice. That kind of unanswered crime was just the kind of thing that kept gnawing at a man if he let it. Could consume him if he wasn't strong enough. The Sergeant was never one to get too carried away with his feelings or even talk like he had them. But Kate knew they were there. She knew he was feeling something. That his stomach had to be pulling itself into tiny balls and knots about now.

"Maybe it's not even them," she tried offering an alternative view. "Maybe--"

"It's them."

Ignoring the Lieutenant, he walked back to the car. Mauldune sighed and looked at the black ground feeling stupid and followed him to the unmarked police cruiser. She had to do it. He couldn't button himself up like this. He was a big man, had the years on the force. He knew the score.

"You know it's not our concern, Sarge?" she hollered after him. "Locals got the lead on this and if you're right, they're outta State by now. Federal Jurisdiction. The Chief is all ready to haul our keisters in a sling for breaching city limits. "

"Hhrrmm."

The Sergeant opened the driver side door and glanced up at the sky. He took a long minute staring at those slow moving Arizona clouds and felt cool breezes brush over him lightly. He pulled a grim face down and looked at the women who'd just lost their husband and father speaking with one of Bullhead City's finest. John thought about the look on his sister's face when he told her about Stephen and how she and her husband held one another as he delivered the news – *two lonely souls adrift in a sea of pain*. The Indian women held each other in the exactly same manner now.

"Kate," he said after a time. "You're a good cop. You don't want nothin' to do with this."

"Sarge?" she pleaded with him.

He only raised his eyebrows, saying to her in his silent reproach, *'I'm not letting these sick fucks get away with it again.'* He slid behind the steering wheel.

“Sarge...” *He had to see reason!*

He leaned across the seat. “You can get a ride from one of the other units.”

Damn him! A ball formed in Kate Mauldune’s chest. She knew what he was going to do. He was going to run off, be all cavalier and John Wayne, and bring in the two suspects that he’d been gunning for since his nephew Stephen had been senselessly murdered. It was macho and bullheaded, and she knew he knew it. And worse yet, she knew he didn’t give a damn. This was exactly the kind of thing that she was hoping to avoid when she found out the circumstances of their two-hour drive across the desert. *The Chief is going to hand him his ass if I let him do this.* Against her better judgement Mauldune opened the passenger side door and slid into the seat and confronted Wallace’s hardened gaze.

She stammered, nervous like a June fly, and then heard a different set of words tumble from her mouth than what she had planned to say. To her own surprise, Kate uttered, “Let’s do it.”

Wallace just stared at her. “Hhrrmmm?”

She stared back, but didn’t growl. Any second now and she’d lose her nerve. She wished that he’d just start the car and get going. Kate closed her door and sealed the deal as a handful of codes and regulations that they were about to break flitted through her head. Wallace fired up the unmarked ride and together they set off like some great cowboy movie across the plains of a southwestern sky.



May 9, 1934.

The road ahead was impassable. The sky was a solid brown, twirling mess, revolving around some hidden stormy center creating a deathly wall of sand. It smelled of tilled earth and dry leaves. There was an electrical charge in the air. Jordan gripped the steering wheel. He bent his head low and a blond lock fell across his face as he accidentally drove into the gigantic wall of dirt. He’d thought the horizon was farther off than it was, moving at a pace that astonished the young vampire. Juliana,

in the seat next to him, grabbed his thigh as a million pounding flakes of topsoil assaulted the Ford Coupe. It rocked back and forth so violently that Jordan half expected the tiny automobile to take flight. Even the smarmy comments from Prophet had fallen off and the brutish vamp was quiet in the back seat at the awesome power of the storm.

Jordan had hoped to connect with Highway 528 and take them all to a safe harbor around the storm. But deep in the thick of it, his only hope was that the swirling madness would soon pass them by, moving along its enormous path across the Great Plains, and they'd come out the other side, continuing on their way unscathed. Yet, after a few moments, pounding gusts against howling bursts, jostled in their seats, the five travelers knew they were in trouble. He depressed the small metal gas pedal and hunkered down doing his best to keep the car on the road. After a few more minutes he was sure that he'd missed the turn onto 528. Now they were lost. Visibility was nil and he wasn't even sure if they were on the road anymore.

Juliana started to panic, pressing her hands to the edges of the windows attempting to keep the sand from seeping into the vehicle. Lin watched her with a feeling of growing dread as the vampire complained. Lin pulled her coat tighter around her shoulders, nestled tightly in the back seat between Prophet and Ramielle Eirinhas.

"Calm yourselves," Ramielle told Juliana. "Losing your head isn't going to help matters any."

They were returning to Los Angeles from New York, and had managed to get through most of the Midwest without hitting any sandstorms. They'd been lucky. But Henry's little engine wasn't designed for this type of weather and soon the carburetor choked as if strangled and pistons ground against mud in their chambers. The automobile sputtered and coughed, and eventually stopped.

Jordan hit the steering wheel. "That's it, she's dead. We aren't going anywhere."

"What are we going to do?" Juliana's voice cracked. "We can't stay here. The sand keeps pouring in."

"Relax," mouthed the cool, sultry voice of their coven leader. "Can you fix it when the storm passes?"

Jordan turned around in his seat and looked Ramielle in her grave chocolate eyes and apologized. The Spanish woman leaned back in her

seat, thoughtfully. Lin turned to her and saw real worry displayed on Ramielle's face for the first time since she'd known her. Though she had to admit it, the vampire queen hid it fairly well from her brood.

"This looks to be a doozy too," muttered Jordan, peering outside his window at the dark and unnatural air. "I think we're going to be here for awhile."

Prophet laughed, a soft, soothing chuckle that unnerved everybody, and Jordan's eyes flicked hard at him. Lin felt the Bohemian's body jiggle in the seat next to her as he combated the raging storm with his awkward sense of humor.

"The sun will be up in a few hours," commented Juliana.

"There are bound to be farmhouses near by," added Jordan, hopefully.

Prophet's laughter burst loud in the small shell of the Ford's cab. It stabbed their ears like a concussion grenade.

"I don't hear you offering up anything useful," chided the driver.

"Like it matters," the hyena voiced.

"Enough," ordered Ramielle.

Her men fell silent and the din of the storm clamored more violently. Ramielle didn't see any other choice. They had to abandon the vehicle and seek shelter. The storm wasn't abating; it was growing stronger. She could feel its electrical pulse bristling across her skin, raising the soft, fine hairs along her forearms. Even if they stayed in the car they wouldn't be able to drive it anywhere once the storm broke. They were going to get caught out in the open come dawn, one way or the other. *Best to keep moving. Find a place to hole up for the day.*

"We have a better chance out there than we do in here."

Nobody said anything to Ramielle's comment. The storm raged against their tiny shell, a havoc of noisy moments. A few short breaths passed between them and she ordered everybody out of the car with clear instructions to stay close by it. Already the vehicle was being buried where it had rolled to a stop. Bitter, hard, howling madness beat against them. Lin didn't believe that they'd find anything in this mess. She'd been through the tail end of the Midwest before. It was hard enough to find good shelter on a clear night. Farmhouses were stretched thin across long

patches of flat nothingness. How then were they to locate a possible host in this crazy weather?

Surely, God had turned against man. These sandstorms that had been ravaging the country over the past few years were biblical in nature. Lin wasn't a devoted believer of anything. But witnessing the ground take to the sky and roar like angry bees was enough to make any honest vampire reconsider the Son of Man. When she stepped from the vehicle Lin knew she'd never see the little Ford again. It had that vibe.

They only had a few hours of night left. As strange as the storm was, its thick blanket of surging dust could shield them from the eventual climb of the sun if they were still in it come dawn. Lin figured that even if they were lucky enough to last until morning it wouldn't matter. They, like their auto, were going to choke. Even the Jadaraa Soo needed air to breathe. Sure, it prolonged their lives and gave them ungodly charms, but dirt never made for good oxygen.

Ramielle pulled her cloak tighter about her person and huddled close to Jordan and the others. "What do you think?"

Jordan looked through the black blizzard, dazed with no sense of direction or landscape. "That way's as good as any."

The tawny-skinned coven leader looked to her small brood. Now was the time for suggestions; Lin had nothing to stay. Prophet stood beside her, quiet.

"Okay," the tall dark-eyed mistress announced. "Let's do it. Everyone stay close. Tight group. Been through worse than this."

Confidently, she started walking in the direction that Jordan had pointed out. The others followed her. Jordan took Juliana's hand and held her close. She was frightened. The wind whipped around them, trying desperately to knock them over. A few feet away from the abandoned vehicle Lin tossed a look back. The coupe was practically buried. A few more steps away from the familiar shape of the two-door roadster and it was lost in the swirling thick.

They trudged on, wading through dunes as high as their knees and as low as a flat rock. Twenty minutes in and they were most definitely lost amid a turbulent sea of spiraling dirt. A stronger gale ripped through them, cold and bitter. Each had to duck into their shoulders, plant their feet, and block their faces from the sandpaper winds. In the gust, Jordan let go of Juliana's hand to block his face. He struggled to see and breathe

as he continued on, coughing and choking on the meaty gusts. Lin stopped, unable to tell which way to move anymore. Prophet pulled along side of her and pushed.

“Keep moving! Don’t stop!”

They plowed on, nestled against one another. It was hard to see a foot in front of one’s own face. Pressing forward, Jordan looked to see Juliana at his back. But his dirt-laden eyes saw only twisting thick dusts, heavy and lonely, without Juliana’s lovely form. Fear gripped him and he stopped cold in his tracks. He turned about, but she wasn’t anywhere. Lin noticed him and stopped too.

“Juliana!” the vampire called, his voice crushed in the heathen winds. “Juliana!”

It took Lin a few seconds to piece it together. Juliana had vanished. Lin rent her voice to the deafening winds, joining Jordan’s frantic calls to reconnect with his lover. Lin’s long, dark hair beat about her face and neck as her impaired sight, ravaged by the blinding sand bore witness – *God’s disaster and appetite had swallowed Juliana whole*. Prophet and Ramielle also stopped and began calling out for their wayward sister. Against the furious maelstrom the four vampires shrieked and cried, screaming out the poor girl’s name. “Juliana! Juliana!” But she was lost. Lost in the cacophony of bitter, heavy winds...



Through the rearview mirror Lin watched the spirals of dust and dirt swirling around the back end of the Cadillac as they turned onto the little dirt road. Taillights cast a red hue to the spinning, dusty stew and ignited the memory of that night, so long ago. Z’s rear-end was up in the air, bent over the front seat, digging through the backseat collection of junk in her capacity as Minister of Music. She was talking about something or other, but Lin had faded into the lush canvas of her thoughts. It seemed that the farther she drove away from LA the closer she got to reliving her past. The journey had finally set in and her hand wandered to the silver locket about her neck as the memory faded.

“What?” the preoccupied driver asked trying to reinstate herself into the conversation.

“How come we gotta stop by every time we pass this way, huh?”

Z turned right way around in the seat with a short stack of CDs.

“I told you,” Lin reminded her. “She knows it if we don’t. And if we don’t she’s gonna blame you. Neither one of us needs that kind of headache.”

“Fuck her,” Z blurted out as she tossed an unwanted CD into the backseat. “All of those ancient fucks are the same. Self righteous privileged pricks with their voodoo stuck up their ass.”

Another CD returned to the chaos from which it came.

Lin leveled her brow. “And you wonder *why* she doesn’t like you.”

“What’s not to like?” Z was serious.

Lin cocked a single knowing eyebrow and held her tongue. Z popped a CD into the stereo and leaned into the driver.

“You know I’m fun. I’ll never grow old. I’ll never die...and I’m sexy as hell.” Z’s words fell through Lin’s gut like cold lead as the impetuous rascal drew near. *She doesn’t know.* The crazy vampire coddled Lin’s ear with her tongue and kissed the dangling lobe. The effect was sensual and brash and Z broke out laughing. “I am one hell of a party!”

Lin thought on it for a second, wiping her wet and sticky ear with her shoulder. *She doesn’t know.* Finally, the brooding vamp conceded to the rascal’s point of view, breaking her grim countenance and they both fell into the warm merriment of laughter. Though, the edge of Lin’s giggle was nervous and uncomfortable, frayed by the knowledge that she alone held. Z cranked the volume on the stereo, filling the classic car with blistering tunes of modern decadence as she danced in the seat. Through the swirling haze of the dirt road that seemed to wind endlessly through untamed desert, taillights blared like little glowing devils vanishing into stark nothingness.

Ears of coyotes pricked up as the loud machine rolled past. Rabbits dashed under the false protection of sagebrush. Insects sacrificed themselves to the windshield. By the time dawn reared its nasty bright head they were nearly there. The square dome of Chateau le Rouge Mort rose in the distance and two helicopters were visible behind the bland adobe structure on the stone Helipad.

She’s throwing another party... the warm feelings that Lin had worked so hard to muster quickly vanished as Dominique’s Chateau drew closer. Sunlight crept across barren sandy dunes like a lover’s hand on the hip of

a woman. Lin sighed, *again?*

Inside, after narrowly escaping a sunbathing they parked in the above-ground garage and were led through the subterranean, hand-bored tunnel to the Chateau's buried chambers. Construction on the magnificent feat that was Chateau le Rouge Mort began in 1958 a few years after Lin took permanent residence in Los Angeles. It was completed in the winter of '67. Except for the solid protruding ground-level garage entrance the entire domicile was underground. The construction site was chosen particularly for its mass of hardened bedrock under the wispy desert. Lin knew Dominique had it built so that she could maintain a vigilant eye on her former consort and lover. Even after a hundred-and-fifty-some-odd-years since they first broke up Jaci still couldn't let her darling Linnet go. She had to remain constant, shining down like the moon, watching her. But the ardent Ex did not want to appear to be so obtrusive and so the southwestern retreat was the closest length of leash that she thought Lin would tolerate.

Dominique's Personal Assistant, Clyde, led Lin and Z to the main hall. Svelte and quiet, it appeared that she had been waiting for them. *Was Araci so predictable in her actions that Jaci could set a decade tide by her?* Dominique's arrogance was already too much too bear, and to be greeted with formal introductions, like they had never met, was putting Lin off. She had known the assistant for over a hundred years. She knew her habit to inhibit characters, but wasn't expecting it, or the party. The last time Lin had seen her former mistress's aide, she was going by Margaret, was fond of flower dresses, and had just shaved her head bald as a cue ball. Now, she was dressed in a snazzy business suit, had Margaret's haircut, was sporting decorative tribal tattoos across her dome, and carried herself with an air of disinterested confidence. If the girl wanted to be called Clyde now, what did she care. *Really, it doesn't matter.*

Lin frowned at her vulnerable common certainty. Dominique's dominion over her still seemed to permeate like an invisible vapor to even the farthest boundaries that Lin pushed. There was no escaping her former dark mistress. In this, Linnet Pevensey did not know if she should be thankful or rudely pissed. She owed the great monarch of night much and still had love for her, though it was not the disillusioned vibrancy it once was.

Lin noticed that several of the decorations in the quarter-mile tunnel had changed. Some of the same tapestries and statues remained, but there were many new additions, none recent or modern in design. Their presence spoke an uneasy undercurrent of longing in their owner.

Only one who had an intimate knowledge of the Lady De'Paul would be able to detect such pronounced feelings on display through the mere arrangement of artifacts. It was sad, and Lin was unsure if it was better to recognize these subtle cries and inquire of them with the mistress of the house or feign blissful ignorance. The shutters on her soul concerning the Vam Pÿr had been shut for quite some time. *Dusting them off now may not be such a wise decision.* Opening old wounds could hurt. Their days of basking in each other's light were over.

Yet, there it hung among the other additions to the entranceway collection. Master Reynolds' portrait of her. It spoke more loudly than the other pieces and drove the point home that Dominique missed her highborn lady from the Opera. Her mind was tempered from bygone days and like a staunch candidate waiting for death she lived in her memories.

"Awww," said Z, stopping to stare at the painting, drawing the sound out like southern fried chicken. "So cute! And with little bows too." The brash vamp laughed.

"Fuck off."

Lin found nothing funny about it. Dominique's heart was oozing all over the place! The portrait had not been hung since Lin abandoned her in São Paul, Brazil, after she returned from building her Council. It was shipped to France, covered, and placed in an attic among other painful treasures where it collected copious mounds of dust. Now here it was, restored to its former glory. Even the fire damage that her portrait received the night Inácio Braga attacked had been repaired.

To make matters worse chamber music began filtering up the sloping access from the main hall. The frank disgust awash on Z's face was a button for how Lin felt internally, though for completely different reasons. Z's distaste was simply in the music's style; too dull and baroque. Lin's distaste was in the message that the music carried. It was a continuation of all the visual uneasiness that she had so far endured. If Clyde's presence at the tunnel's entrance did not hint at Dominique's omnipresence then surely this choice of orchestration did.

It was the allegro to Antonio Vivaldi's *L'estro Armonico*, a concerto for two violins, cello, and strings in D minor. Lin recalled the first time she heard the piece. *Vienna, 1772.* She and Dominique had just attended a concert by Joseph Hayden for Prince Nikolaus, which was thrown by the Prince's personal physician and his wife Maria Anna. The middle-aged composer had performed selected works of his Sun Quartets

and an after party had ensued at the Genzinger's estate. It was a wicked affair. One to remember and Lin smirked.

In the late eves of morning after compliments and wine led through the personality of flesh the Maestro revealed in part his inspiration for his six-string Opus to the sun. Vivaldi. Lin had never heard of him. The Red Priest had passed before her birth, but Dominique knew of him and of his works. It pleased the Lady De'Paul that such an aficionado as Master Hayden gave not only praise, but accreditation and love to this magnificent musician. Joseph had many of Vivaldi's Concertos with him abroad and birthed, from a leather satchel, his hand written copies for the pale lady to peruse. The Maestro was studying them, as he said, *"because there dwelt genius in his quill."*

Upon Dominique's request Master Hayden roused a tangle of musicians from their rooms, pulled them as they lay barely clothed with their companions to take up their instruments and join him in his room. As the mostly naked ensemble played the symbiont's request she whispered in Linnet's warm, human ear.

"Of all the worlds, from all the lands, this song sang to me of your arrival in my heart. Now, here, on this night, I can no more outwardly express this love better than the collection of notes that do kiss thee."

As they neared the wide-open space at the mouth of the tunnel, and the allegro continued to wind its memory charm about Lin's waist, the bored-out walls of this underground palace began to feel as if they were closing in. The Vam Pÿr's daughter truly felt buried, suffocated by such garish displays of open longing and lost affections.

The main hall was mostly lit by candlelight, though intertwining strings of soft blue runner lights trimmed the ceiling, casting an angelic glow to the sky-painted canopy. The blue lights glinted and reflected off protruding metal chains and full-body leather suits that wound at their ends. Inside the sightless and soundless submissive garments were the party's unfortunate Sanglants. Sharp metal spouts punctured the blood-lender's vital arteries and filled the dangling thin, lengthy tubes with bright red fluid. Dominique's guests could easily replenish their appetites by twisting the valve at the end of the tube, enjoying hospitality and mirth, at the expense of taping the Sanglants like wine barrels. Lin wondered if The Council had sanctioned such abuse of resource. *Who am I fooling? Dominique was The Council. More or less, these days. She created it. Her control is flagrant.*

True to form, a nude blindfolded quartet played Vivaldi's

reminiscent score in one of the many alcoves that adorned the spacious room. Their wooden string instruments filled the great hall with lush song and Lin could think of nothing other than that night in Vienna, that beautiful night so very long ago. Though if Lin thought the additions to the collection and choice of audio accompaniment pointed to Dominique's heart and how she wore it on her sleeve, then the contrasting scene within the main hall conveyed tormented misgivings of the Vam Pÿr's darker nature and bitter age. *My former love is not herself.* In another alcove, two mortal women seduced a bound and gagged mortal man in a bizarre S & M show, and in still another alcove, actors improvised a divine comedy of lost carnality. Decadence and depravity, the rapacity of lust, flourished and were amply abound throughout the room.

A grotesque circus of callous opulence, it made Lin restless and she began tugging at the silver locket around her neck. Toward the back of the main hall was a magnificent arrangement of exotic fruits, lavish hand crafted cakes, and three special dishes prepared by the queen bee's personal chef. This delicious array was not just for Dominique's human guests, but for vampires with a nasty food fetish. Lin spied two gorged fanatics slinking away from the enormous spread of edibles, down a pink-lit hallway to where physicians waited to cram hoses up their bums and shovel them down their throats to eviscerate the chewables from their unmoving bowels.

Prominent vampires and humans littered the chamber, attired in various periods of dress from different continents and countries. It appeared that all those stored boxes of gowns and jackets, shoes and jewelry that had gone out of favor over the centuries were once again unearthed by their night-dwelling lords, and dusted off for the caprice delight. It was a spectacle of undead haberdashery, a monument to the onslaught of time and periods of Man. Both Lin and Z stood out from the crowd in their casual garb, looking as if they had just wandered in from a rock concert. Clyde took her leave as they entered the main hall and Lin saw the color in Dominique's cheeks rise upon seeing her.

Jaci wore an elegant black dress with an opened back. Her silky, dark Persian hair was done up and adorned with jewels. The mulatto tone of her soft amber skin was paler than what Lin remembered. Her complexion was aging white, reflective of the beasts that had transformed her. The Matron of Night even had her Jadaraa Soo pulled down so that its crisscrossing veins would not disrupt the unbroken tapestry of her sublime flesh. An immediate sadness welled up in Lin and she felt a flashing need to protect her former lover's perceived fragile condition.

“I mean it, Z,” the dark haired belle whispered. “If you fuck with her I’ll have to put you down.”

The comment was flippant and unexpected. Z was shocked. And on top of it, to add insult to verbal injury, the queen bitch was walking over to them now.

“My child,” Dominique offered with wide loving arms, speaking in French. “Oh my gentle spirit, you have come home.”

She kissed both sides of Lin’s cheeks in the European fashion and flashed hard eyes at Z. Dominique’s Jadaraa Soo twitched in constant ado as she enveloped Lin in a gracious and warm embrace. Upon parting she took her former maid by the shoulders, saying “if even for a little while.”

“How could I not,” returned Lin, also in French.

It’s called a gas pedal you stupid com. Z had to stop herself from blurting out something crude and intrusive that would shatter the moment. The words danced on her tongue, but she did not use them. She was pissed at Lin, disliked being around Dominique, and this wasn’t her type of party.

“Yes. Well...”

Dominique’s eyes inflicted judgment as she viewed Lin’s petite form. Her obvious displeasure of the vampire’s choice of accompaniment was more than evident. She didn’t even try to hide it this time. Instead, she played the stoic host and led her one-time lover into the grand hall, introducing her to guests as if she was a brand new prized jewel. It made Z want to puke.

“Friends. Vagabonds. Gate Crashers.” The room drew silent. “This is my daughter, Linnet...and *her*...acquaintance.” Several nods folded in their direction. “You will treat her as the lady of the house, without exception. The other is...game.”

Z rolled her eyes as the queen bitch’s pretentiousness smacked her like a vase of flowers. *At least the dislike is mutual.* Lin looked back at the vivacious punk as Dominique escorted her into the throng, feeling like she was abandoning her friend on an unsafe shore. *Why do I always have to stop and see Dominique? Why can’t I just truly break it off and be done with her once and for all? Others have.*

Squeezed into traditions, proudly on display, Lin asked herself

the same loaded questions that Z had asked earlier. But before Lin could define her questioning thoughts into painful answers Dominique introduced her to a pair of regal looking gentlemen from Nepal.

A smooth, velvety voice spoke from behind Z, thick with a Hungarian accent. “My...you do come to a party well dressed.”

The vampire turned. He was beautiful. Suave. Devilishly handsome and taller than herself. Immediately, and for all these reasons and more, she didn’t trust him. She wasn’t game.

“I love your perfume,” he gently offered. “What is it? Dirt and... blood?”

He smiled playfully, laughing at his own joke, and presented the newcomer with a goblet of warm sanguine fluid. *Gorgeous*. She refused the drink.

“Bite me.”

She flashed him a curt smile and started walking away. But the devilishly handsome vampire merely chuckled again, and his frivolity irked the edges of Z’s tense shoulders.

“You should not tease me with such a good time.”

His voice was chocolate. Z stopped. Sighed. And turned around. “You couldn’t handle me if you tried.”

He stepped toward her with a confident swagger. “Would you believe that’s exactly what Queen Maria the First, of Portugal, said to me in 1780 just before...”

The charming devil wiped the rest of the sentence away with the curl and flash of his hand, acting nonchalant. Z raised her eyebrows waiting for him to continue. The mysterious man only smirked.

“Before what?” Z finally asked, taking the bait. The hook was set.

“Now, there’s an interesting story.” He moved closer, passing the chalice of blood to the newcomer, and placed a pale hand to the small of her back. “I’m Edward, by the way.”

Offering the rough edged vamp his other hand, she took it. “Z.”

“Is that just the end of the English alphabet or is there some

hidden treasure behind it?”

“Just Z.”

“Ah, so mysterious,” he enjoined, leading her through the room. “I do love a lady with hidden delights.”

Z sighed. *God!* She hated parties where all the people did was talk. This was going to be an excruciatingly long daylight-trapped visitation. She tried to smile, though was absolutely sure that it came out crooked.



Sarah exited the class shaking her head. She pulled her bookbag tight against her shoulder and plowed through the yard to her next class ignoring the perfectly formed clouds that floated in the clear blue New Mexican sky.

“How’d you think you did?” came a familiar voice from behind.

Sarah grumbled. Friday’s test was moved up, a pop quiz. Jimmy caught up with her. He was moderately handsome, had freckles, and a cleft chin. He wore an old T-Shirt that promoted drinking because he was Irish, even though Jimmy did not have a single drop of Irish blood in him.

“You know we could get together later.” The young man nervously corrected himself, “and study, if...if that is, you know, if you want?”

“Yeah,” piped Sarah absentmindedly. “That’d be great.” She stopped walking. “But I’ve got work later on. And hopefully sleep at some point in between. Would you believe they have me working back to back shifts?”

“Another all-nighter, huh?”

Sarah rolled her eyes and started walking again. She and Jimmy had been friends since his high school days. He was the first person her age that she met when she moved to Albuquerque. His cousin Angie introduced them when she dropped Sarah off in the desert city several years ago. She even arranged for Sarah to stay with him and his family for a few days while the girl found her feet. But she didn’t stick around that long.