



Sunset

Chronicle of the
Devil Manor Banquet

VallochiiA

THE 2ND NIGHT

Story & Illustration
Cenma496





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Wallochiah

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THE DEMONS' BANQUET

"How'd you learn about me anyway? Oh, to hell with it. Just don't make it public, would you?"

Leave my name as 'Model Citizen A', how about that?"

"Ah, that. The Conference, huh? That brings a ton of memories."

"I won't say there was ever anything like a Golden Age as it concerns that little event."

Truth be told, it was mostly something we did out of a feeling of obligation—or maybe inertia is the better word for it?"

I don't even know who even first came up with the idea for it. It had been going on in some form since before the End of Magic, you know?"

"But man, 'influential vampires'... That sure was a pompous way of referring to ourselves. Sure, we were influential; some of us still are. Maybe someone felt bad about us not doing anything to help each other out."

I think it's always been a wasted effort though."

"I won't say nothing helpful ever came out of those talks. There were a few mainstays, but it was mostly a rotating cast of characters, some more spirited than others. Sometimes that enthusiasm rubbed off on everyone, ended up driving us to make some waves. It could only ever be temporary, though. I'm just speaking for myself here, but I usually lost all motivation for it by the time I got home."

"I don't think vampires really want to help each other out, not most anyway. In my experience, we barely want anything to do with each other. We're individualists with a weak sense of community. If there's a reason why some of us love to blend into human society wherever we can, I wager it'd be because we get to feel like we're above it all still, like we could cut ourselves loose of it at any moment. Isn't that hopeless? It's guys who think like that that end up getting attached to it the most. I should know—I'm the best example of it there is."

"...And yet the Conference kept going for that long. Even though few really believed in it, people still showed up. Of course, not everyone showed up every time—far from it, skipping for a hundred years was a common deal. But just enough still went so that it kept on happening. Why? I guess vampires are just bad at letting go of things. They're bad at letting things end when they should. You ought to know that by now, right?"

"...Mm? Them? Just my maids. Don't worry, they know everything."

"Hey, I said that vampires are individualists, but still, no man can live alone. And if I have to suck someone else's blood to keep my sanity, better it be someone I trust."

"Anyway, what you're really curious about is the very last Conference, right? Sure, I'll tell you what I know, though it's not much. I wasn't there myself, thank god. I'm willing to wager most weren't. I told you it wasn't uncommon for folk to skip a few of these meetings, but those that consistently got skipped the most were the ones hosted by that Nachtheim. "If you'd ever stepped foot into that manor, you'd get it. It's something anyone can instinctively feel. It's just not a place meant to entertain guests. Once you feel it for yourself, you start to warn others of it. It became commonplace for the Conferences hosted by Nachtheim to have less than ten guests show up. Mostly newbies, and a few of the particularly thick-skinned regulars."

"I heard it was the same for the last one, too. Who went, again? Some newbies, the brothers, the moneylender, the queen... ah, and that barbarian, too. What a lineup, huh? I only feel bad for the younger ones, really. The rest, I wouldn't celebrate what happened to 'em, of course, but I won't lose any sleep over it either."

"As far as the specifics go, I don't know much. Hell, I have a feeling you know more than me, mister. Well, it's all right."

It's not the kind of thing I enjoy thinking about anyway. I'd rather keep on knowing as little as I do."

"The way to kill a vampire", huh? What a hopeless hook for an invitation. This is what I felt like telling him, reading that: *if there is something like that, keep it to yourself.*"

- Rotmann von Rosenwald, heir to Rotfried von Rosenwald
*(to be redacted)

Cast of Characters



Origia Clib

Cycasia Clib

Dolly Penumbra

Jackal V. V. Brooks

Zamira Zamirage

Craven Nevermore

Nosferius Wisborg



THE HUNTER'S REGRET

"I like to think that having regrets is a form of arrogance in itself. To regret something is to be ashamed over having failed in some way, but failure is part and parcel of being human. Omnipotence is not in our nature. People should live with their heads held high, knowing they have given it their all in each and every moment.

"Still, it would by that same token be a show of pride to claim that none of those many failures have stung. There are plenty to choose from, but the first that comes to mind as I write this is my defeat in the village of St. Purgatorio. I shudder when I think about the being I have let slip through my grasp.

"The girl once known as Rafflesia Valpurga; I have no doubt she will continue to be an obstacle against our ideal long after I am gone. Even as I fully understand the blasphemy of the thought, I cannot help but feel that her appearance in this world is some manner of demonic miracle. That I of all people would be forced to say such a thing is a particularly humorous twist of fate.

"Not only was she born from that most contemptible of all phenomena, the vampire conversion, but she is also the possessor of abilities far beyond almost any vampire I have ever come across. As of my writing this, plenty of squads have come against her, but none have even significantly damaged her, let alone subjugated her. And more than that, they have all returned with almost no injuries. Her mercy is yet another sign of her detestable constitution: the arrogance of inhuman strength, secure in its invulnerability, which laughs even in the face of man's faith and determination.

"She cannot be allowed to taste eternity. If she is already such a monster while having yet to exceed a human's lifespan, I cannot imagine what she could become if given thousands of years. "Indeed, she may very well grow to rival that dark monstrosity which swallows all."



Sunset
Chronicle of the Devil Manor Banquet
Vol. 1
THE END NIGHT

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List of Characters

Vio Valakia _____ 68 Year Old Vampire

Rafflesia Valpurga _____ 17 Year Old Vampire

Cycasin Clib _____ 46 Year Old Vampire
Younger of the Clib Brothers

Origin Clib _____ 129 Year Old Vampire
Older of the Clib Brothers

Jackal V. V. Brooks _____ 784 Year Old Vampire
Loan Shark

Zamira Zamirage _____ 1497 Year Old Vampire
Former Queen of Oasia

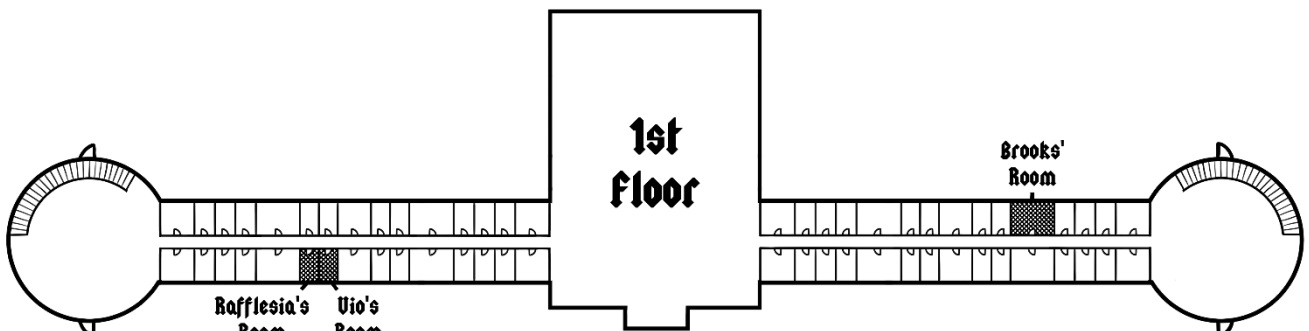
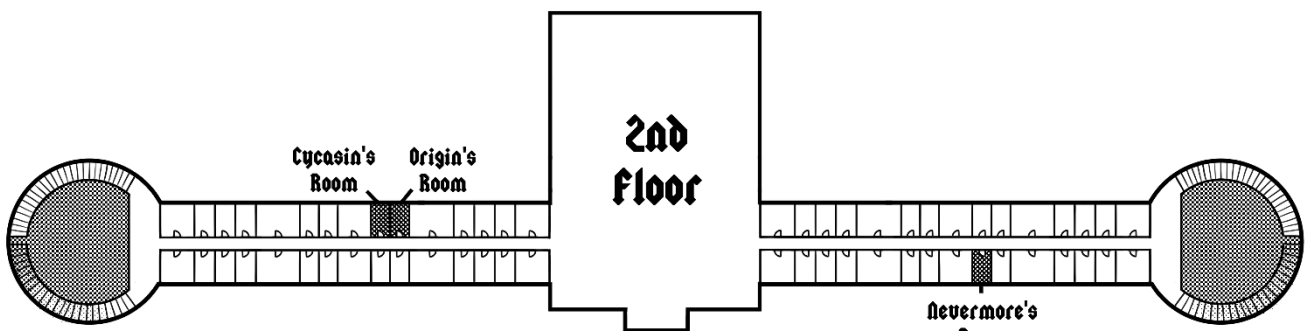
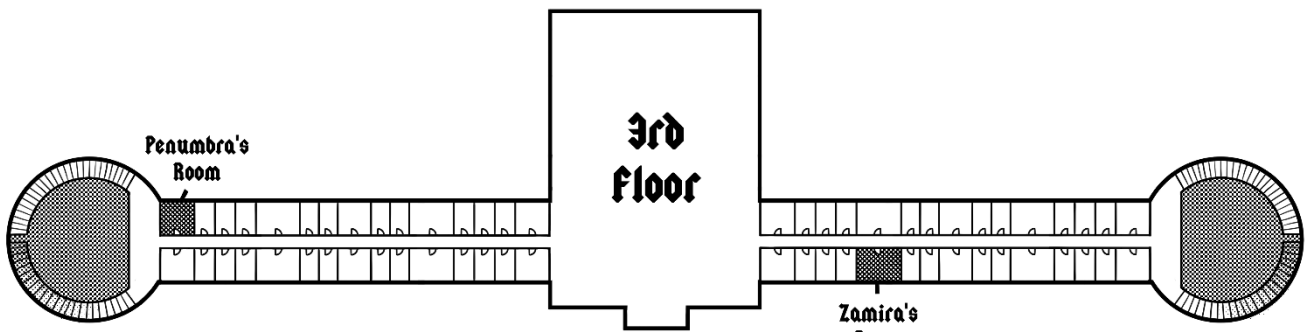
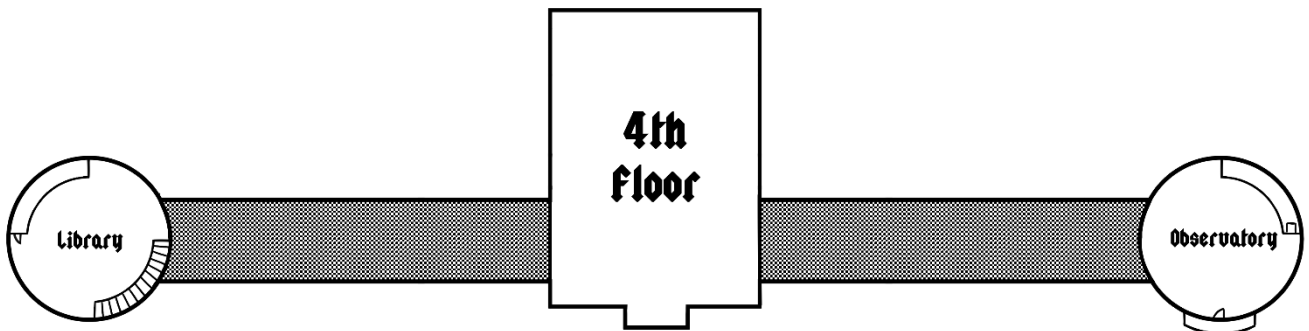
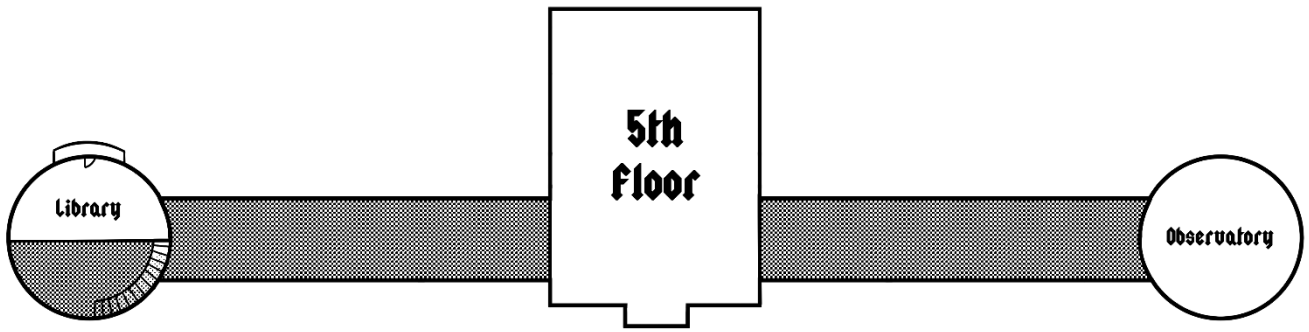
Craven Nevermore _____ 291 Year Old Vampire
Vagrant

Dolly Penumbra _____ ??? Year Old Vampire
Unknown

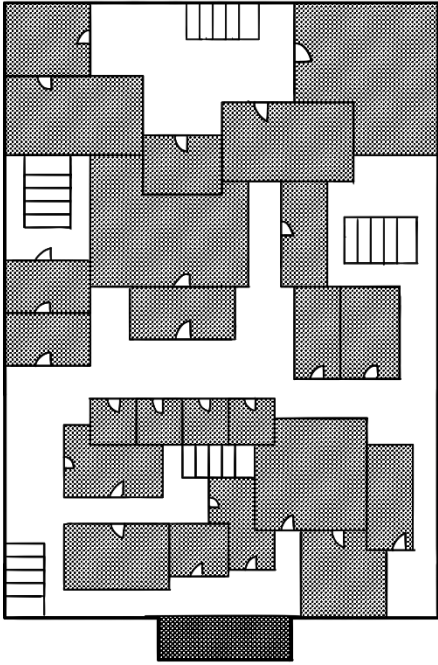
Fafner Belial Nachtheim _____ 80,000 Year Old Vampire
Master of the Manor

Nosferius Wisborg _____ Millenia Old Vampire
Servant

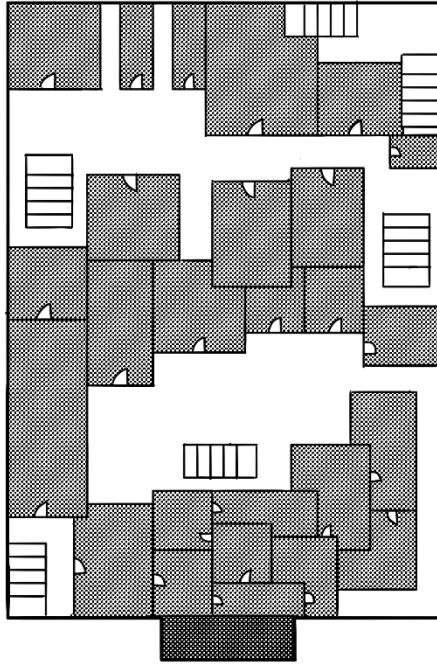
Nachtheim Manor Plan #1



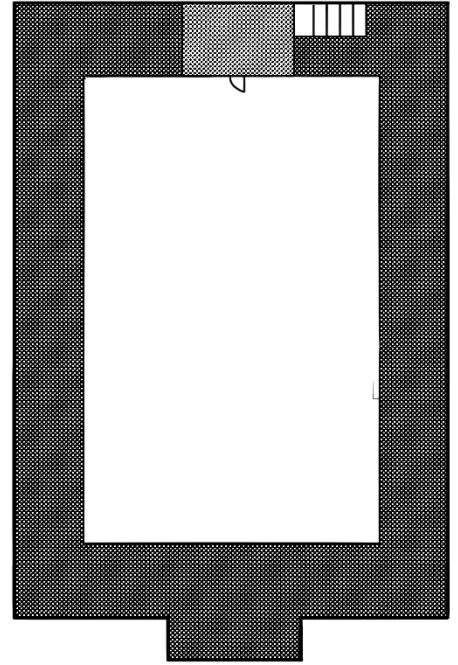
Nachtheim Manor Plan #2



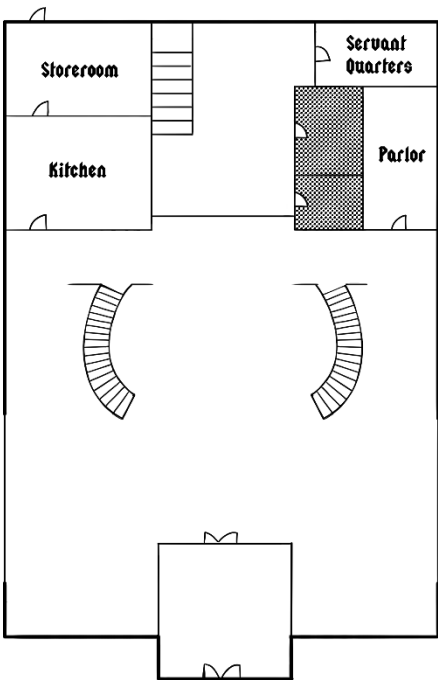
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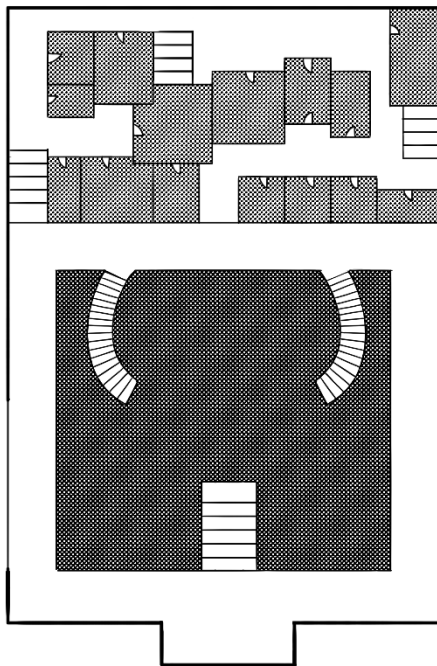
5th Floor



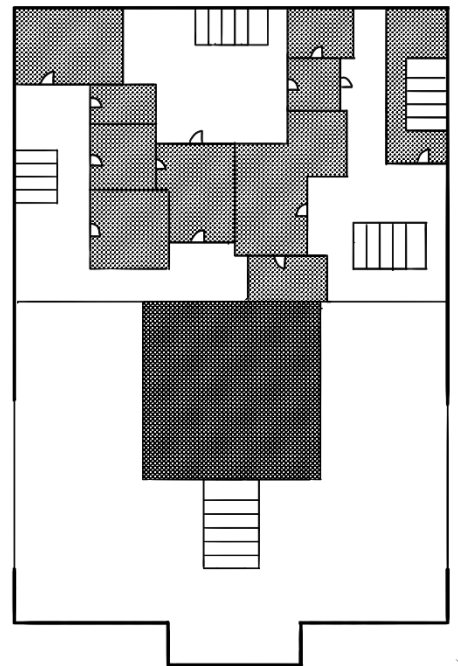
Roof



1st Floor



2nd Floor



3rd Floor

Preface to the Chronicle

Have you ever wanted to live forever?

Is the meager century of life allotted to man not
enough for you?

Does it dismay you so that you will miss out on the
fruits of your descendants' labor?

Perhaps you set out to achieve a goal far too
ambitious for your station?

Or is it simply the case that you fear death far too
much to bear it?

Whichever your answer may be, such wishes are
best left in the realm of the wandering mind. There
is no such thing as eternal life.

Oh, you don't believe me, dear reader?
Then perhaps the following chronicle shall put
those doubts to rest.

Prologue: Invitation

They say that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, but if that old adage has any truth to it, then we ought to be strong indeed, for there's nothing at all in this world that can kill us.

That said, I myself don't feel particularly strong. And I especially didn't at that particular moment.

“...This is mine, okay? I wrote my name on it.”

“I got it already...”

The expressionless young girl forcefully asserting her ownership over a pack of pudding was the one who'd one day be known as the terrible and great vampire Valpurgisnacht—though at the time she was nothing more than fellow drifter Rafflesia Valpurga, age seventeen.

I'd love to claim that I need no introduction, but I understand perfectly well what a forgettable person I am in comparison, so I'll go ahead and mention that my name is Vio Valakia.

One year had gone by in the blink of an eye since the events that took place in the isolated village of St. Purgatorio. I won't get into it now—if you'd like to know more, I'm sure you can find some record of it out there somewhere—but suffice it to say, my lifestyle had undergone quite the change since.

Over the course of one year, Rafi and I had been living as bona-fide vampires on the run, hiding our identities as we toured around the nation. We'd been uncovered by the hunters of the Heliocentric Church a handful of times, but we'd managed to get away each time (no thanks to me).

Luckily, as a pair of vampires, we were capable of sating our lust for blood by drinking from each other, a nonsensical function that I was

nonetheless quite thankful for, as I was far from the violent sort capable of forcefully feeding off of strangers—that being said, I couldn't exactly speak for my partner in crime on that front.

"..." Rafi protectively clutched the pack of complimentary pudding we'd received from the hotel staff as she eyed me suspiciously. I could only smile wryly as I scratched the back of my head.

Rafi hadn't changed much outwardly since I'd met her—she still had her usual poker face, and while she'd gotten a lot better at expressing her emotions, she was still far from talkative. But even so, her personality had undoubtedly undergone a shift over time.

To put it plainly, she had become incredibly greedy. Or would it be more apt to call her stingy? Either way, she was extremely possessive of her belongings. Given how she'd been raised I couldn't blame her, and I'd no doubt encouraged her behavior in this direction. Still, there was such a thing as moderation, and this was clearly not it. I had to act as a responsible adult and mentor and steer her in the right direction before she turned into a tyrant.

Furrowing my brow as best I could and readying myself to scold someone for what might have been the first time in my life, I faced Rafi and called out.

"Hey, Rafi, we need to talk—"

"Mm~." As she stuffed her cheeks with pudding, she closed her eyes in an expression of bliss. Then, only once she'd swallowed down the sweet mouthful, she turned to me with a "Hm?"

I slumped my shoulders, looking down. "N-nothing. Go on, enjoy it."

"Oh, thanks."

I couldn't do it. I'm sorry, future generations. If you need someone to blame when she's enslaved you all, then feel free to blame me.

It was as I was ruminating on my uselessness that we heard a knock at the door. Before we could even react, it swung open.

"Scuse me, sir, miss!" And in came a girl wearing an apron and holding a broom, her reddish hair reminiscent of a wild berry.

"You know, you're supposed to wait for a reply after knocking," I said.

"Tahaha, no time for that, sir! Lotsa work to be done around here!" The girl—Maylie Sherryford—said so, cheerfully and without a hint of shame.

"Right..." We'd been staying at a remote lodging called the Silver Crown Hotel for about two weeks. It was a comfortable place, but in all our time there I had never once seen any staff member other than Maylie, who constantly seemed to be working ten people's jobs at once. Still, she always looked happy doing it, so I didn't worry much over it.

“More importantly,” Maylie said, “here!” She removed something from her apron pocket and handed it over to me. As I looked over the object, I couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow.

“A letter came for you!”

“Huh?” Rafi and I unconsciously shared a dubious glance. Needless to say, as two stragglers running away from the world itself, there shouldn’t have been anyone who’d even know of our location, let alone write to us.

As I cautiously examined the black envelope, sealed with a gaudy wax crest in the shape of an N, I questioned Maylie about the letter’s sender.

“Hey, did the postman bring this?”

“No, actually, it was the weirdest thing ever. See, I was cleaning up in the lobby when I heard some scratching at the window. So I went to investigate, and what’d you think popped in?” The hotel’s caretaker gesticulated wildly as she talked. “A bat! He swooped right in carrying this thing, dropped it right in front of me, then left into the night.”

“.....”

“Don’t see that every day, huh? Anyway, your names were written on the envelope, so I figured they must be for you.”

“...R-right.” I forced a stiff reply out of my paralyzed face. “Strange indeed.”

“No kiddin’.” She nodded emphatically. “Anyhow, unless you want anything else, I’d best be on my way. Those floors won’t sweep themselves!”

After saying goodbye to Maylie, who disappeared out the door as quickly as she’d come in, I turned to Rafi, worry most likely written all over my face.

“...She didn’t seem to think anything of it.”

“You’re right, but even as carefree as she is, isn’t that a little too suspicious?”

Rafi didn’t seem all that concerned. “We can just run away again, if she finds out.”

“You’re right, but...” Up and leaving behind everyone we’d met again and again was something I’d never enjoy doing, however many times it happened.

Shaking off that melancholic thought, I said, “Either way, we should take a look at this, right?”

Cutting open the seal of the envelope revealed its contents: a single sheet of high-quality, decorated paper, alongside two smaller cards. The title on the letter, written in powerful, bold lettering, read as such:

Invitation to Nachtheim Manor

To the esteemed Lord Vio Valakia and Lady Rafflesia Valpurga.

In acknowledgement of your recent exploits against the tyranny of the Church, we have recognized you as vampires of high status within the Dukedom of Grimgrave. On behalf of Lord Fafner Belial Nachtheim, host of this year's decennial Conference for the Prosperity of Vampirism, you are hereby invited to spend a week with us at Nachtheim Manor in a moon's time.

As we each silently read the introduction of the letter, both of us inadvertently looked in befuddlement at one another.

"Nachtheim..." I muttered.

"Heard of him?"

"No... As far as I'm aware, there's no well-known vampire by that name." At the very least, he wasn't well-known by human standards.

In recognition of your special circumstances, we understand that you might not possess certain knowledge that those in our circle consider to be common sense. As such, we felt it appropriate to lay out an introduction in regards to the purpose of our organization.

As the letter explained, the circle of vampires referred to within the text was a semi-formal group of the Dukedom's most influential vampires, be it through vampiric abilities or any number of other means. Their purported goal appeared more or less to be the protection and improvement of vampires' lives within the borders of the Dukedom.

"I thought so, but," I interjected, "if this letter is legitimate, then it's probably because of you that they reached out to us."

"..." Rafi didn't reply, but she knew it as well as I did. I was far from influential in any sense of the term, but Rafi's vampiric powers were far beyond anything I'd ever heard of.

As we read on, another fragment strongly stood out.

Lord Fafner Belial Nachtheim, the host of this gathering and the master of the Nachtheim Manor, is the oldest vampire dwelling on this land, having drawn breath and shed blood for over eighty millenia.

“E-eighty millenia!? That’s...” The sheer scale of that number left me speechless.

“Is that possible...?” Rafi asked, seemingly unable to wrap her mind around the number.

“So long as they can’t die, there must be some vampires who’ve existed for as long as our species itself, but... That’d make him older than most historical records we have.” I couldn’t even begin to imagine how the world looked like to someone who’d seen it change for thousands upon thousands of years.

“...” Rafi frowned as she scanned the words on the page.

“What’s up?”

“...This could all be a trap,” she said gravely.

“You think the Church would pull something like this?” Mulling over the idea in my mind, a certain bespectacled priest’s face popped up in the back of my mind. “I don’t know, this kind of trickery doesn’t seem like their style.” *If they’d learned of our location, it seemed much more likely that they’d just storm in guns blazing.*

Not arguing back and yet still visibly skeptical, Rafi nonetheless read on. It didn’t take much longer, though, for those petty suspicions to be wiped away by a much more unbelievable claim.

“This...” I shiver ran down my spine. “This can’t be real, can it?”

“...” Rafi had no words to comfort me with, only a wide-eyed stare of her own.

What made us freeze in place was a simple phrase written in plain letters, its apparent nonchalance only making it all the more shocking.

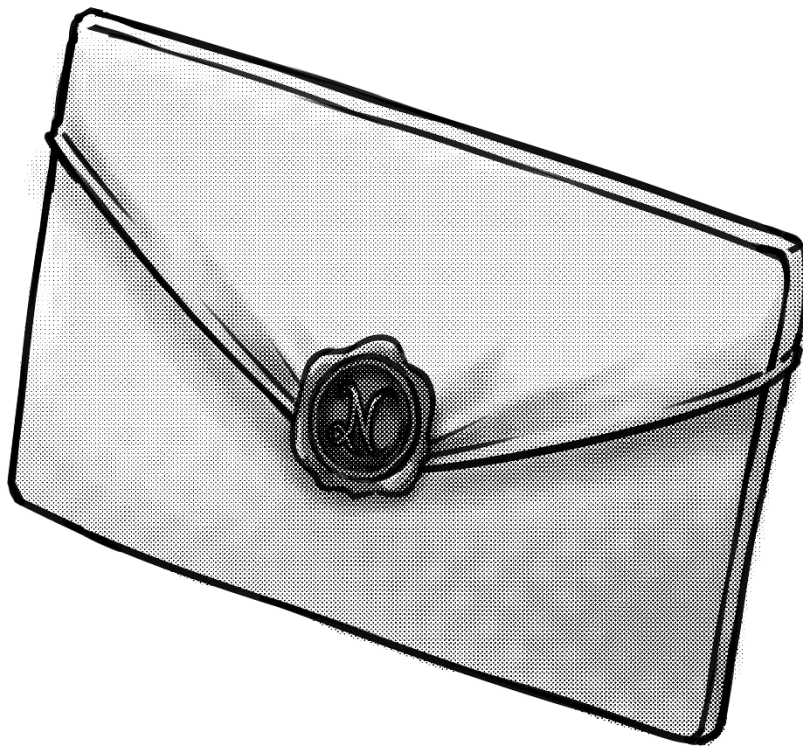
We urge everyone to attend the conference if at all possible, for there is a matter of great importance to be discussed. A development that concerns not just you, but every vampire to walk this Earth.

That being—the way to kill a vampire.

◆ Record 1 ◆

Blood Banquet

「 Into the
Homesick Manor 」



◆◆**Y**-you sure we're going the right way?"
"...The letter said we'd find it, didn't it?"

The murky overcast sky was barely visible between the coiling thorny limbs of the great trees around us. The narrow path left no room for comfortable traversal; were you to lose attention, you'd surely trip on one of the many roots criss-crossing the earth. Still, it *was* a path—it was far preferable to any attempts at penetrating the densely packed forest. Its pitfalls would surely stagger you, and its branches would dig into your skin, exhausting you as you lost your way amid the unchanging scenery.

We were currently making our way towards the Nachtheim Manor, and a painless trek it was not—the manor was reportedly located within the Cursed Forest of Heartpfahl. It was a location I'd only ever heard of offhandedly, but I certainly didn't know of anything actually being there. It was an ancient forest upon which a spell had been placed—*no man that wanders into it shall ever reach their destination*.

With that in mind, you might be asking what sort of idiotic specter had possessed us to step foot in here, but the answer could be found in the letter we'd received:

If you wish to attend our conference, then you must treasure the invitations to the best of your ability; make sure not to lose or damage them, for they are your only means of traversing the accursed forest that protects the manor—only those that hold an invitation signed in the blood of Lord Nachtheim can cross the woodland.

So it said. The invitations referred to the smaller cards contained within the envelope; each had our respective names, as well as the signature of Nachtheim.

We'd tried flying over the forest entirely using Rafi's wings, but that led nowhere—from above, we couldn't even see any paths, let alone a building. So with no other choice, we just followed the one path we managed to find from the ground. Thankfully, Rafi got her bat familiars to carry our luggage, so we at least didn't have to worry about carrying it by hand.

“And if it's a trap...?”

“Then I'll deal with it.”

“You're so dependable,” I muttered, my manly pride in tatters. “You must be really curious, to throw caution to the wind like that.”

“You're the scaredy-cat, not me,” Rafi said, mercilessly dealing the finishing blow. *She used to be a lot nicer to me, wasn't she!? What happened to that cute, shy girl?*

We filled the dead air with idle chatter, all to distract ourselves from the eerily quiet world around us. This was supposed to be a forest, the domain of nature, and yet I could not hear the rustling of leaves, the cry of any critters, not even the buzzing of the insects. It was as if life itself was unwelcome here—at least all life that didn't remain rooted to the ground.

It was just when we'd begun to resign ourselves to the reality that we'd never arrive anywhere that a change occurred—the path began to gradually expand. The roots in the ground retreated, making way for even ground, the branches overhead extending above us like grand arches above a regal aisle.

“Woah.”

“...”

Both of us were transfixed by the sight before us, staggering forward open-mouthed. From the deep darkness beyond, the contours of a shape came into view, one clearly different from the organic growth around us.

A man-made structure—calling it that might have been a misnomer. For the building before us was built by no man.

It had been built by the Devil.



Though they had called it the Nachtheim Manor, the home was more than grand enough to be deserving of the nomenclature of 'castle'.

Dark stone walls reached up above even the trees, topped by wine-colored roof tiles. The central portion of the building looked to be six stories high, its gabled roof split down the middle, the curved gap between the two sides evoking the image of a demon's horns. Two wings accompanied the central structure, each only three stories tall and dotted with crystal windows obscured in black that betrayed nothing of the interior. Both wings led to circular towers which rose as high up as the main block.

It bore the kind of opulence that would inevitably have left me, not to mention Rafi, stunned, but more than that, the manor exuded a foreboding aura of rejection towards any would-be visitors. Invited guests that we were, it left us feeling unwelcome, hesitating on whether we should even step forward or not.

Our impasse was only broken by an evident shift in the scene before us.

Suddenly, the manor's entrance was bathed in light; two lamp posts surrounding the path switched on, seemingly by themselves. The bright, yellowish flame atop them flickered, shifting and swaying the many shadows produced by the grooves and decorations of the manor's walls and giving the impression of a great slumbering organism coming to life.

And just as suddenly, those many tiny shadows were swallowed up by a much larger darkness—stretching against the stone walls, a humanlike shadow appeared.

I quickly shifted my gaze back down towards the front doors, where I finally perceived its origin.

It was a man—at least, that's what I assumed, for the figure looked more akin to a ghoul. Draped in black from the neck down, only his hairless head was visible, his wrinkled skin, white as paper, standing out against his mantle. As his cloudy eyes registered us, his mouth curved upwards, before he arched his already hunched back further, giving us a courteous bow.

He remained that way for a while, showing no sign of stopping. Instinctively, Rafi and I shared another apprehensive look, before nodding to each other. We set forward towards the entrance, approaching the man.

“U-um,” I began, though my mind soon went blank, unable to follow up with anything.

“Lord Vio Valakia. Lady Rafflesia Valpurga.” The man spoke our names in a coarse, wispy voice, raising his head to face us. “I am overjoyed to see that you have decided to grace us with your presence. My name is Nosferius Wisborg. I am the sole servant of Lord Fafner Belial Nachtheim. For the length of your stay here, I will be at your disposal.”

Both Rafi and I nodded in clumsy acknowledgement. Nosferius Wisborg turned his back to us and opened the great wooden entrance doors.

Looking back over his shoulder, he beckoned us with a nod. “Please, come in. I will show you the way.”

And with that, he entered into the dark corridor beyond, his silhouette swallowed by the darkness. With no other choice, we hesitantly followed suit.

Immediately greeting us was a small entrance hallway capped off by another set of great doors. I use the word ‘small’ here relative to the rest of the mansion; the space was about the height of four men stacked atop one another, and in the dim torch light, the ceiling almost seemed like a void, as if it extended much further up towards some unknown place beyond the sky.

Looking down wouldn’t provide much relief either, however—two rows of armor sets peering at one another decorated each of the walls, their gloved hands used as torch holders. The image of phantom eyes staring at me from behind those helmets was one I couldn’t wipe from my mind.

Trying to shake off the uncomfortable sensation, I directed my eyes to the back of Wisborg’s head, before eventually settling on the tips of my shoes.

Passing through the entrance corridor, we found ourselves in a valley—no, that’s simply what my brain mistook it as for a moment. The manor’s massive lobby was entirely bereft of furniture—combine that with the dim light from the light stands scattered near the walls, and the room’s edges became very difficult to detect. The two staircases starting near the room’s extremities curved inward as they ascended, but the darkness swallowed them up before we could see their meeting place.

“Ah...” Rafi let out a gasp as she took in the grand sight. I wasn’t much better than her—I may have prepared myself for opulence, but this level of grandiosity was simply impossible to scoff at.

“This way.” Wisborg’s shaky voice snapped me out of our wide-eyed admiration. The servant led us to a door on the right end of the wall facing the entrance. “I will deliver your luggage to your rooms. Behind this door lies the salon. The others are here.” His ghoulish face then morphed into something resembling a smile. “You ought to find it more comfortable.”

We were ushered inside before I could fully process the meaning of the words ‘the others’. And then, as I took in the scene before me, I finally felt in full the significance of what we’d just signed up for.

For once, the room’s size didn’t feel oppressive, although it was still larger than any living room of any house I’d thus far lived in. The lighting, though still much dimmer than you’d typically see, was also amplified, just enough to illuminate the many faces of the room’s occupants.

“Oh!” I couldn’t help but gasp involuntarily. The room was full of people—people? No, these must have been the other guests. I’d been so preoccupied with wondering whether this was a trap or not that I had failed

to compute it, but of course, there would have been many other guests here besides us. That meant—the men and women before us were all vampires.

As I stood frozen to the spot looking at them, one of the guests, a young man with a hat, turned his head in our direction, finally noticing us. Instinctively I looked back at the door, but Wisborg had already disappeared somewhere. With no other recourse, I returned a nervous, crooked smile to the man.

“Hey! You guys’ the newbies?” The (seemingly) young man, his dirty blond hair flowing below the brim of his hat, greeted us in a friendly manner. *He seems pretty normal.* Relieved, I approached him, Rafi following close behind.

“Hi, I’m Vio Valakia. This is Rafflesia.” She gave a curt bow. “We’re both very new to this whole thing, so you’ll have to be patient with us.”

“Don’t worry,” he laughed. “It’s only my second time around, too. Well, feel free not to worry that much about the serious stuff and just treat it as a vacation, you know?”

“I for one think you ought to start taking it a little more seriously.” A taller man wearing a similar hat came up next to the blond man. He had long brown hair and thin eyes. He turned to us. “Don’t worry, we’ve all heard of your situation. I don’t know if everyone else will share the sentiment, but...” he said, troubled for a moment, before returning a smile. “Well, if you’re feeling lost, feel free to ask us anything.”

“Oh, thank you!” As I was about to ask their names, a boisterous voice cut me off.

“Ahh, our new guests! My apologies, you’re both so small I almost missed you!” A man of colossal proportions wearing a dark suit approached us cheerily. He was almost perfectly rotund, his thin limbs by comparison like branches stuck to a snowman in place of arms. He had long red sideburns and, as he took off his tophat in greeting, we could see his slicked-back red hair as well. He thrust out a gloved hand, taking mine and vigorously shaking it, before turning to Rafflesia. “You must be that talented young’un I’ve heard talk of. It’s a pleasure, a real pleasure!”

Rafi bowed reluctantly, perhaps somewhat intimidated by the giant grinning down at her. Sensing this, he fixed his hat back on, and mimicked a cough. “My apologies, it seems I’ve failed to introduce myself—My name is Jackal V. V. Brooks. I’m but a humble money lender.”

Rafi merely nodded vaguely, but on my end I had begun shivering as the name registered itself in my mind. “V-V-V...” Noticing the cold sweat dripping down my forehead, Rafi sent me a questioning gaze. Dragging her

away from the crowd, I whispered as forcefully as I could into her ear. “Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of him!”

“Nope,” she said at full volume, putting all my caution to waste.

“He’s a vicious loan shark. They say he’s the eighth richest man in the world!”

“Seventh now, actually,” Brooks cheerfully added from a few meters away, looking pleased to see gossip being shared about him. “Baron Kingchamber died last fall, and his fortune was split among his many, many children. Like a colony of ants all scurrying off with their own crumb.”

“Sor—I apologize for my rudeness. It’s an honor to meet you, sir,” I said, my cheeks stiff as I bowed up and down at him.

“Ah, cut it out, boy. We’re here as equals, and I’m nothing compared to the other esteemed guests.”

He seemed surprisingly carefree for such a famous and powerful vampire.

“I only demand respect from those indebted to me. Make sure to remember that, if it ever comes to it,” he winked. *Maybe he’s not so easy-going after all.*

I felt a hand on my shoulder. “Getting so stiff every time will tire you out. You’re gonna need tougher nerves than that, man. We’ve got some crazy names here, after all. Even I can’t go unfazed.” It was the blond behatted man from earlier. He pointed toward a sofa further into the room, upon which a dark-skinned woman in loose clothing lay. “You might not believe me, but that’s Zamira Zamirage over there.”

“Za—” My mind went blank for a few moments as I tried to compute the name I was just told. Even after making the connection, I still couldn’t believe it. “You mean—that Zamirage?”

“None other,” he grinned impishly as he looked at my flabbergasted face.

Rafi was looking blankly at the both of us. *If she’s never heard of Brooks, of course she wouldn’t know her either.*

“Zamira Zamirage was the queen of a nation called Oasia. It’s gone now, split into a bunch of different smaller countries, but it’s got a long history. And for most of it, she was their ruler—a proper vampire queen.”

“Wow,” Rafi said, the extent of her surprise really failing to give credit to just how shocking that information really was.

She’d probably noticed us talking about her, but Zamira Zamirage—*can I really call an actual queen by her name?*—paid us no mind.

“You’re being rude, brother,” the taller behatted man said. “Besides, how are you going to introduce other people when we haven’t even given our names?”

“Right. Guess we should,” he said, taking his hand away and smiling wryly.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” the taller one said, offering a handshake. “My name is Origin. That’s my younger brother, Cycasin. You can just call me Gin.”

“And feel free to call me Sin,” the other said.

“Sure—” I was about to carefreely take his hand—when I froze in place. My spinning brain finally managed to link together the names I’d just heard. I couldn’t help but draw back instinctively. “Wait, aren’t you—the Glib brothers!?”

“...Yes,” Origin said, withdrawing his hand with a bitter smile. Rafi once again sent me a questioning gaze. I was so surprised I managed to blurt things out in the least tactful way possible.

“These guys... They were involved in the massacre at Ruthven Port! They wiped a whole town out!”

“Hey man, what the hell...!?” Now red in the face, the blond man—Cycasin Glib, took a step toward me.

“Ah! Uh, I mean...” Realizing my mistake, I stammered. Origin, sighing, raised a hand to stop his brother.

“Don’t get angry, Sin. It’s not his fault for not knowing. That’s the common knowledge among the general populace.”

Cycasin nodded and, also heaving a sigh, looked away. Origin took it upon himself to explain things to me.

“I know what you might have heard, but I want you to believe me for a moment. We didn’t kill anyone. We were—well, I don’t want to say this lightly, considering the fate of everyone involved in that tragedy, but we were also victims of sorts to what happened.”

“What do you mean?” I didn’t know if I could trust him, but I couldn’t see the point in a vampire lying to another vampire about such things, and besides, I certainly didn’t want to antagonize them any more than I had already.

“—You’ve heard of Hematolegion, right?” That name instantly sparked a memory in my mind, though one not my own. I certainly had a vivid image of that monstrosity. “That thing swept through the town. We just happened to be in it. To be honest, we were pretty desperate too. Even as a vampire, you can’t take that lightly.”

“It left every human a dried-out husk,” Cycasin added. “And it apparently also goes after vampires, for whatever reason. Maybe it can’t tell the difference. Gin almost got swallowed up by it.” I could perfectly imagine what he was talking about. That’s just the kind of horrible creature it is. Their story sounded pretty credible to me.

“I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions.” I hung my head.

“It’s fine. But they try not to publicize that thing’s true nature too much. We made for convenient scapegoats, I guess.”

“Terrible way to get famous, eh?” Cycasin said.

I took a glance at him. He smiled casually. “Hey, it’s all water under the bridge. My bad I got mad.” I was thankful for how kind he was. It would have spelled terrible news for my prospects going forward if I gained an enemy minutes into meeting this group.

I set my hand out, and Origin–Gin returned a firm handshake.



Being the first to make proper conversation, the four of us naturally formed a group, heading over to a bar counter furbishing the corner of the parlor room. I couldn’t say I’d been to many mansions before, but it felt surprising to see something like this in such an old estate.

“Mr. Wisborg brought it here,” Sin explained. “Along with most of the recreational material. Courtesy towards the guests, apparently. Can’t thank him enough, honestly,” he said, pouring himself a drink with a smile. “Saved us all from the cruel fate of death by boredom.”

“Ahaha...” I hoped all of his irreverent remarks wouldn’t get me in trouble.

“...Aren’t we here to talk about important stuff?” Rafi asked.

“Mm, in theory, but it’ll be a while till we get to that. Vampires just loove wasting time, see.”

“It might be hard to understand for someone of your age, but it’s extremely easy for vampires to lose track of time. Especially for the older ones, the base unit of measuring the passage of time is not hours, but days or even weeks.” Gin explained. “Well, I don’t fully subscribe to the idea that time passes by faster the older you get, but it *is* a fact that we don’t have any particular reason to hurry about anything.”

“Hey, speak for yourself,” Sin interjected. “I’ve got plenty to be doing back home, and you bet it’d be a lot more fruitful than lounging about with folks who can’t respect others’ time.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Gin shrugged. “It’s the youth’s abundant energy at play.”

Gin still viewed his brother like a kid, it seemed. But despite his irreverent demeanor, he was a full-fledged adult with plenty of life experience. I supposed that put Rafi somewhere closer to a baby in his eyes. Or perhaps that applied to anyone whose age fell below a human’s natural lifespan.

“Either way, we’ve been here for two days now and there’s no sign of anything happening any time soon,” Sin said.

“Two days? I thought today was the meeting date,” I said.

“Again, these guys couldn’t care less about timing. That’s more of a formality than anything. Some people take their sweet time coming here, others show up way early. Hell, the host isn’t even here. The proceedings don’t tend to start till we’re all up for it and we’re sure enough that no one else is coming.”

“...There are other guests coming?” Rafi asked.

“Who knows? Plenty were invited, I’m sure, but I doubt many want to trek all the way to this creepy place. I sure wouldn’t be here right now, if it weren’t for that message.”

“Right...” We were pretty much in the same boat, so I could easily empathize.

“I’m sure we’ll be talking about that enough to get sick of it later, so how about we refrain for now?” Gin suggested in a pleasant tone, and I quickly acquiesced. I didn’t want to come off as too forceful by immediately bringing up the main topic of discussion before everyone had even gathered.

The talk prompted me to scan the room a bit more, however. Unlike what my frantic first impression suggested, there weren’t that many people here. Discounting our group, I could only see the corpulent Brooks, Queen Zamira and—“Hm...?”—another girl, sitting in a dark corner of the room, almost fading into the background.

“Who’s that?” I inadvertently muttered. Noticing my gaze, Sin replied offhandedly.

“Dunno. Never seen her before. She hasn’t said much, either.”

Gin appeared equally ignorant. I continued gazing at her for a while. She had the appearance of a young girl, but there was something ghostly about her.

Suddenly, our eyes met. *Crap, must have noticed the staring.* I quickly turned back to our group.

“Still,” Sin said, not paying me any mind, “it’s too bad you guys only got invited now. We had some real stars last time, it would have seriously blown your noodle. Like Rotfried von Rosenwald.”

I should’ve seriously gotten desensitized to it by now, but he’d gotten me again. “Earl Rosenwald is a vampire!?”

He winked in self-satisfaction. “Yup. Never found it a little odd how young that family’s heads always die? He’s just changing names, that’s all. He was our host last time, and I tell you, his mansion has a hell of a lot more entertainment to offer than this one.”

“Don’t be rude, Sin. And don’t you think you’re being a little pathetic, bragging about your celebrity acquaintances like that?” Gin’s brotherly scolding earned him a pout from Sin. Meanwhile, Rafi tugged at my sleeve in curiosity. I just had to resign myself to explaining every bit of common sense that came up, I guess. One hectic year must not have been enough to catch her up to speed.

“He’s a pretty important figure in the Dukedom’s nobility, though he doesn’t show his face much. His name comes up in the newspapers every once in a while. I would never have guessed he was a vampire though.”

“...I guess there are a lot more of us around than you realized,” Rafi muttered.

“You bet,” Sin interrupted. “There are a ton of vampires just below the surface layer, doing their best to live a good life. Eternal or otherwise, it’s no different.”

“That’s right,” Gin nodded. “Here’s to a long friendship to come.” He extended his glass, and I naturally responded in kind with my own, producing a satisfying clink. Meanwhile, Sin directed a high-five in Rafi’s direction, which she hesitantly accepted.

It didn’t take long for me to start trusting the Glib brothers, despite their reputation. The younger brother’s natural cheer was hard to resist, in particular. But as I gave the dim room another look-around, I couldn’t help but let some anxiety leak into my heart again. Was it truly wise letting my guard down among all of these unknowable vampires?



Not long after that, we were being led around the manor's dark hallways by Nosferius Wisborg.

It happened right after I let out a deep yawn in the parlor room, next to everyone else. With my worries momentarily allayed, I finally realized how tired I really was. We had gone on a long walk, after all. And just as I was thinking about perhaps retreating for the day, Wisborg showed up out of nowhere, offering to lead us to our rooms.

Rafi and I accepted his proposal, and soon enough the lively atmosphere of the parlor was replaced by the eerie silence of the house, broken up only by our footsteps. Maybe this was just prejudice on my part, too, but Wisborg didn't feel like the type of person I could make small talk with.

Thankfully, after what felt like forever wandering through a dark hallway, we arrived at the rooms assigned to us. For once we wouldn't be sleeping in the same room anymore, but we were still next to each other.

"Please, go ahead and take a look," Wisborg suggested. Upon opening the tall door, I was met by a candle-lit bedroom with a canopied bed and elegant carved furniture. Atmosphere aside, it was every bit as luxurious as I'd have expected from an aristocratic manor, down to the fluffy rug. However, I couldn't help but notice that the size was still relatively small.

Perhaps sensing that reservation, Wisborg further explained in his scratchy voice. "I thought that you would feel more comfortable with this, rather than one of the larger rooms. If you are dissatisfied, another can be arranged."

I shook my head, smiling in return. "No, this is perfect. Thank you." I was pleasantly surprised by his consideration. It seemed he really was a stellar servant.

"Then, on behalf of Lord Nachtheim, I wish you a pleasant rest." Bowing his crooked spine deeply, Wisborg uttered some final pleasantries and then slithered away.

Just the two of us now, Rafi and I looked at one another. "Well, it doesn't seem that bad so far. What do you think?"

"Hmm..." she hesitated for a moment. "Doesn't seem like a trap, at least."

“The Glib brothers seemed nice enough, too. Can’t believe I’m saying this about wanted criminals, but I’m glad to have some normal people around.”

“...At least, I think I can trust the younger brother.”

“Oh? Why do you say that?”

“...Because he seems like a simpleton.”

“Haha...” *Wow, brutal.*

“But... something still doesn’t feel right about this place.” She looked down with a subtle frown.

“...Well, there’s a lot we probably can’t understand. Be careful you don’t poke at any nests with hornets in them.”

“...I don’t wanna hear that from you.” It was true that I’d been inadvertently stepping on a lot of landmines in this newest period of my life, but I wished she wouldn’t talk like it was a part of my character.

“Well, good night.”

“Yeah...”

And with that, we retreated into our respective rooms. My luggage had all been brought directly here, but I didn’t bother trying to open any of it, just collapsing straight into bed. All the walking and the worrying had taken its toll. It didn’t take long at all for my heavy eyelids to naturally lower, leading me into a heavy sleep. That was how my first day at *Nachthem Manor* had ended.



At least, it should have. But no matter how hard I tried to relax, I couldn’t sleep a wink. Now that I was alone, I couldn’t suppress the primal fear welling up in me.

I felt, now more than ever, that I was in the belly of the beast.



“Hey... Wake up.”

Mmmgh... After a not-insignificant amount of time spent being shaken, my heavy eyelids were forced into opening. The first thing I saw, of course, was Rafi's expressionless face staring down at me.

"*Mh...* Good morning to you too... What time is it?"

I was nowhere close to being well-rested, but I knew there was no shot I'd be falling back asleep any time soon anyway, so I reluctantly raised my sluggish body. The room's curtains were all drawn and fully opaque, so I had no idea what time it was.

"It's noon... I'm hungry."

"Oh dear. You're an early riser, aren't you? Must have been up for a while. You know, you didn't really have to wait for me to wake up."

She just averted her eyes. Well, I couldn't blame her for not wanting to navigate this ominous place by herself.

Deciding not to make her wait any longer, I quickly got myself ready, shaking away all the remaining drowsiness. Five minutes later, we were walking along the tall corridor of the right wing, heading to the parlor.

"Oh!" And as we entered the lobby, I couldn't help but gasp as I saw the face of the person just now leaving the parlor. Her dark skin draped in expensive embroidered cloth and jewelry, it was none other than Zamira Zamirage.

"Good day. How do you do?" She smiled, her visage perfectly composed.

"Ah, err... Good! How about you?" I squeezed out a casual reply, and then immediately regretted it. I couldn't exactly be blamed though, could I? I had no clue how to talk to a queen, former or not.

"Hmm. We've yet to even exchange names, but you already feel the need to act a certain way around me. How odd." She giggled softly, though her expression didn't lose a shred of its intricately sculpted elegance.

"R-right... Sorry, that was rude of me. I'm Vio Valakia." I also went ahead and introduced Rafi, who gave a curt nod.

"Don't mind it. As for me... I am Zamira Zamirage, an old relic that serves no purpose. I do hope you'll treat me kindly." She offered that self-deprecating introduction without any hint of humor, her smile like a statue's. While I sat there not really knowing how to reply, Rafi took the initiative and stepped forward with a question.

"Hey... Isn't a queen supposed to be more arrogant?" I could already feel my back sweating. *Is she picking a fight here or what?* If it weren't for her totally earnest tone of voice, it'd be difficult not to think so.

Zamira, on the other hand, just laughed. I reflexively apologized again, but she waved me off. "If I'm to be frank, I prefer this kind of attitude." *Sorry, but I don't think I have it in me to match your sensibilities.* "Now then, to answer

your question—true arrogance tends to last only about five hundred years or so. Thinking so highly of yourself starts to feel comical after that. Of course, you might still keep it up, if only to save face in front of your subjects. However—I have no more subjects. Arrogance for me would be like—how to put it...” She paused for a moment, before regaining her smile. “...Right, it would be like an old woman trying to dress the same as the youth. Unbecoming, wouldn’t you say?”

Did she deliberately try to use a more *human* example for Rafi’s sake? If so, it was unfortunately likely wasted on her. Even so, after hanging her head for a few moments, she hesitantly spoke up again.

“...To be honest, I still don’t really understand what the point of kings and queens is. But... were you an evil, bad queen?”

“...Why do you ask?” Her expression wasn’t particularly shaken, but I felt as if her gaze on the girl in front of her had gotten sharper.

“Because... If you weren’t, I can’t imagine the people in your country would be happy to hear that.” Rafi returned that gaze without flinching.

“...*Ha.*” A few moments later, Zamira let out another laugh, closing her eyes. “That’s an optimistic thought, child.” And then, as if looking through us, she quietly added. “...Well, if it were those from back then, then perhaps they wouldn’t be.”

After that, without any parting words, she turned around and began walking toward the right wing. I took a few steps to follow her, calling out to her back in a quiet voice. “Umm, thank you for being so kind to her.”

“I should be thanking her, if anything. If I can have a conversation as invigorating as that even once every fifty years, it makes living this long life of mine worth it.”

“Right... We were about to go to the parlor, but, umm, where are you headed?”

“Just going to get some fresh air. You two go and enjoy talking to the others. I’m sure their company will be a lot more enjoyable than that of a fossil like me.” And with a final lazy wave towards us, she disappeared into the darkness of the corridors.

Something about her parting statement tugged at me for a moment, but the feeling was quickly forgotten as I stepped back next to Rafi. “She was nice enough, but boy am I awkward next to people like her... Hey, are you okay?”

Rafi was still looking down. Hearing my question, she shook her head and looked back at me. “Yeah... It’s just, she reminds me of *her.*”

I felt like I could understand her point. It must have brought to mind some bad memories. I didn’t probe any deeper.

And so we were on our way to the parlor once more.



“Hey, good morning!” The one who gave us that enthusiastic greeting was, of course, Sin. His brother Gin and Brooks were the only others present in the room.

“Hey, what are you all up to?”

“Mister Brooks was just telling us some stories of his past,” Gin explained.

“Oh really?”

The large man nodded, his top hat leaning precariously from his head. “What’s a long life worth, if you don’t have any good tales to share? And besides, my profession makes it so that a lot of dreamers and a lot of desperate folks come knocking on my door. The most interesting people, in other words.”

“Profession... You were a loan shark. What’s that?” Rafi asked.

“Seriously? You don’t know what loan sharks are? Did you grow up under a rock or something? –Ow!”

“People have their own circumstances, Sin.” Gin said, elbowing his sibling in the rib.

I’d been wondering about that for a while, but while they appeared to know about Rafi as a vampire, information about her background hadn’t spread. At least not to these two. In that case, I had to be grateful for Gin’s consideration—it wasn’t something to be talking about with strangers.

“A loan shark is someone who lends money to those in need—”

“—Then comes back for it when you least expect it,” Sin said, interrupting Gin’s explanation. “Though in the case of Jigtime Jack over here, that can be anywhere from decades to generations’ worth of time.”

“Generations...?”

“The sins of the father are not the sins of the child—but debts, on the other hand, never disappear until they’re paid,” Brooks said, smiling joyfully.

“The children bear the responsibility...” Rafi thought for a moment, then plainly stated it. “So you’re a bad guy then, mister.”

Oh, Rafi... One day, will you please learn that even if it’s something we’re all thinking, you shouldn’t go saying it directly?

Sin started laughing. “You’re right on the money with that! He’s just a petty villain. You’re gonna see a lot of that among the old guys, so try not to let it get to you.”

Brooks made a troubled smile, as he took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his hand. “Oh dear. I know I don’t run the most respectable business, but I rarely hear the insults thrown directly to my face.”

“Err... Sorry.” Once again, I apologized reflexively. I really had to do something about that habit.

“Not to worry. It’s enjoyable in its own way. I rarely see anyone that wants nothing from me, after all.” He put his hat back on. “Still, I feel compelled to give an excuse or two. What I love to see more than anything are the heights of greatness others can reach with just a little push from me. It’s simply tragic that humans don’t have the time to make good on that ideal in just one life. That’s why I must look to their successors instead.”

“And take all that they’re worth, once you feel like it?” Sin asked.

“It’s the one way I can feel their gratitude, my friend.” So he said, face still dressed in a pleasant smile.

“...” I couldn’t really tell what she was thinking, but at any rate, Rafi said nothing more.

After that, we spent some more time making idle conversation. Nobody even thought to mention anything related to the official business we were all here on. The lazy atmosphere got to me too, and it all soon disappeared from my mind.

Eventually, Wisborg arrived, carrying a tray with two meals. Just as my stomach began rumbling in envy at the delicious-looking breakfast, a plate was promptly placed right in front of me.

“Huh?”

“I assumed you would have gotten hungry by now, Lord Valakia, Lady Valpurga. I took the liberty of preparing this meal for you. Please, forgive my presumptuousness.” Wisborg squeaked out that exaggeratedly humble explanation, bowing to me. Constantly surprised by the level of luxury, I gave a swift bow of my own, thanking him profusely for the trouble. Meanwhile, Rafi had already begun greedily stuffing herself.

It seemed that there was no expectation of taking breakfast together; everyone would wake up and eat at their discretion. In retrospect, that made a lot of sense—even though I had egregiously overslept, the only one to come wake me up had been Rafi.

And then, another thought suddenly struck me as I savored the skillfully prepared cuisine—*I haven’t seen Wisborg at all until now. How did he know we woke up?*

“Hey, Mr. Wisborg, how about you sit down too?” Sin piped up, interrupting my train of thought. “Isn’t it boring, doing all of the back-breaking work? Take a break and chat with us!”

“I am undeserving of your kindness, Lord Glib. A servant like me shouldn’t disturb the Master’s honorable guests with my presence.” His rather disturbing visage unchanged, Wisborg once more bowed deeply. I could see how his back had ended up like that with all of this bowing. *I oughta be careful too...*

“Nonsense, man! If anything, you’re one of the only sensible people here.” Sin spoke rather familiarly to him. “I’m dying to know just how old you really are. You’ve got to have a story or two to share, I know it—ow!”

Gin delivered a light knock to his brother’s forehead. “Cut it out. Mr. Wisborg has his own responsibilities.”

Sin pouted childishly as he let out a groan of disappointment. Wisborg, for his part, scrunched his face in what it took me a while to realize was probably meant to be a smile. “You needn’t worry for my sake, I assure you, Lord Glib. The path of a servant is one I tread by choice.”

And with nothing beyond those enigmatic words, Wisborg soon disappeared from the picture. I took the opportunity to voice my curiosity.

“It sounded like you knew him pretty well.”

“Mm? Aah.” Sin set his beverage down, turning to me. “This isn’t my first time meeting him. I took part in the last one of these, remember? I met him there, though I wouldn’t say I know him all that well. He’s one hell of an enigma.”

“He came in Nachtheim’s stead,” added Gin. “The master is supposedly quite the shut-in-enough to earn this place the nickname of ‘Homesick Manor’.”

“And yet here we are, stuck waiting for him while he’s off somewhere,” Sin shrugged.

“Huh.” I’d felt bad for judging the old servant based purely on appearance, especially with how well we’d been treated by him, but that didn’t change how much of a question mark he was. Not that thinking about it would lead me anywhere.

Finishing my breakfast, I stood up. “I’ll be back soon. Going to the restroom.” Rafi eyed me nervously. I shook my head. “You can stay here, it won’t take long.”

Or so I’d thought, but the manor was as disorienting as ever, and alone the dark halls took on an ominous aura I’d failed to sense before. I had gone

looking inside the central block for the bathroom, but I didn't realize how confusing its layout would end up being. Really, it started to feel frustrating—when I couldn't locate a general-purpose bathroom after five minutes of wandering around, I'd decided to just head to my room and use the one there, but I was even having trouble figuring out how to return to the lobby.

What is this, a labyrinth? I hoped to run into Wisborg and ask him, but the eerie quiet almost made me feel like I was alone in the entire manor. And yet—with each step, it felt more and more like some kind of unseen presence was leading me astray.

I should have just waited for him to come back. It was a little late for regrets now, but I hated this feeling of helplessness. It was like no matter how much time passed, I'd never be able to accomplish anything by myself.

“Ugh.” Wallowing in self-pity wouldn't do anyone any good. Raising my eyes from the ground, determined to continue my search—I found the silhouette of a person, clearly visible even in the darkness.

It was the mystery girl from earlier. She was wandering through the corridor, sticking closely to the right wall despite the generous space available—from the slowness of her pace, I couldn't tell if she had any sort of destination.

“...” Our eyes met briefly, but a moment later she had turned her gaze back to the emptiness ahead of her. However, reticent as I was to talk to an unknown vampire, I couldn't let the chance to ask pass by.

“Err... Would you happen to know where I could find a restroom?”

At that, she stopped her advance and stared at me for what could have been no less than a dozen seconds, enough to make drops of sweat form on my forehead as I worried that I'd somehow offended her.

Eventually, though, she took her eyes off me and pointed at a plain door just barely visible further ahead in the dim corridor. *I'd been that close to it this entire time!?*

“Ah, thank you very much!” I bowed lightly, but the girl had already lost interest and began walking away. I ought to have been rushing, but I stopped to stare at her retreating back for a few seconds.

I briefly regretted not asking her name, but it wasn't the time for that anyway. Putting it out of my mind, I rushed over to the bathroom.



Somehow managing to find my way back, I entered the parlor, which seemed to be a lot noisier than before.

“Damn it, how am I so unlucky?” Sin flopped down onto the table, letting the cards in his hand scatter all over it.

“It’s not about luck, it’s about how you make use of it,” said Gin with a wink.

“Don’t give me that, bro. What’s up with that ridiculous poker face of yours? I totally thought you had a garbage hand.”

“...You’re just too easy to read,” muttered Rafi, putting her cards down. Then, turning my way, she nodded. “Welcome back.”

“Ah, you’re here. That took a while,” Sin said. “Wanna play cards with us?”

“Oh, sure.”

“How about you, Mr. Brooks? Would you join us for a round?”

The large man was enjoying a drink off at the edge of the bar, but hearing the call, he walked over to our table.

“Well, if you’ll extend the invitation, how could I refuse?” Sitting down at the very end of the long table, somewhat far from the rest of us, he began rapidly shuffling the deck. With a wink, he added. “I’ll have you know, however, that I’m quite good.”

“Bring it on,” Sin smiled.

As he’d started off brimming with the overconfidence of youth, we were all treated to a magnificent display of the slow transition from hope to despair. It didn’t take long for him to be back with his nose to the proverbial pavement.

“This guy’s a monster...” Sure enough, by that point the only ones left in the game were Brooks and Gin. And the former’s expression was as jolly as ever. Even the formidable older brother was soon brought to his knees.

“I concede,” he said, laying his cards down. “They say you should never challenge a vampire to a party game. Foolish of me to hope for victory against one your age.”

“Haha, nonsense, son. Luck was simply on my side this time.” He laughed as he laid out his unbeatable hand on the table for all of us to see.

“Hey... what’s the chance of getting that?” Rafi asked, her eyebrow raised.

“I don’t wanna think about it...” replied Sin, in a quivering voice.

“So, now then,” continued Brooks, in an equally lighthearted voice—as he fixed a sharp stare onto all of us. “I guess that means you’re all in my debt, huh?”

I felt a cold sweat on my back. *Hey, all I signed up for here was a game!*

“How old are you again, Brooks? Is it still so much fun to scare the kids?”

We all turned around at the new voice. It was Zamira, who languidly walked past our table from the door and laid down on the couch.

“It never gets old, my dear. We don’t all have the luxury of a court jester, so we’ve got to make do with what we have,” Brooks responded and once again let out a laugh, the tension dissipating at once.

“What, so you’re all talk? Knowing Jigtime Jack’s reputation, here I was expecting you to seriously mark us down for it. I guess you’ve mellowed out, old timer.” Sin shrugged off his defeat with some daring words for the victor. Brooks, for his part, guffawed heartily.

“A young man’s vigor is something to behold, all right. Just what makes you think a few short years are enough to do what centuries couldn’t? Perhaps I ought to show you how serious I really am.”

Sin grinned confidently. “Your luck’s about to run dry, mister.” Then he looked to the rest of us. “We’re going for another round, right? I can’t rest till I’ve beaten this guy. Hey, Queen Zamira, want in?”

The lady just waved off Sin’s invitation without raising her head. “Go ahead without me. I can’t see the fun in playing with a cheater anyhow.”

As I sat there unable to process her statement, Sin moved at lightning speed. He raised his hand and extended it in Brooks’ direction—and then, without warning, his forearm detached from his body and flew in a straight line towards the money lender. In the time it took me to blink, Sin’s disembodied arm grabbed onto Brooks’s own and shook it forcefully. Not a moment later, a number of cards tumbled out of his sleeve.

“Ahh, you were cheating! What the hell! So that’s why you sat all the way over there.” Furrowing his brow in anger, Sin glared at Brooks as his arm returned back to his body. I could see dozens of tiny bat wings growing from the ends of the severed arm, flapping vigorously as they returned to their master.

Without any regard for my open-mouthed shock, Brooks laughed back, in the way an embarrassed uncle might the moment his tricks were exposed. “My bad, my bad. Guess I’m the one who owes you now, eh?”

Sin sighed. “It’s not about that, I just don’t get the point. You just said there were no stakes involved.”

“Ahh, but that’s precisely it, my boy. It’s because there are no stakes that no one ever expects it. And it is oh so wonderful to see how long it takes before they figure it out.”

“You shouldn’t look for sense from this old fox. The only thing he’s ever straight about is money,” Zamira added from her place on the couch. “He once used those dirty tricks to keep winning against another vampire for a whole three days and nights, with no breaks.”

Brooks laughed gleefully. “That’s how long it took the poor fellow to realize there was something off. Oh, he was so mad once he finally got it, he almost managed to put the fear of death in me!”

“Doesn’t that make the game boring...?” Rafi asked blankly.

“Boring, eh?” Brooks mused for a moment. “You know, humans always think that eternal life must be plagued by boredom, but that’s not really the case. Boredom, after all, exists to stimulate action, so that people may spend their limited time achieving great feats. But we’ve no particular need to hurry. No matter how much time we have, we’ll always have more of it. Given that fact, I for one am happy to let myself be washed away by boredom for as long as it takes, so that I may enjoy all those pleasures which take time to ripen.”

“...Weird.” Of course, that wasn’t something a seventeen year old girl could understand.

“Whatever, man, just no more cheating this time, okay?” Sin said exasperatedly.

“You have my word.”

“Good. Now, let’s go again.” He regained his smile as he began shuffling the cards.

“...The fact that you’re believing him so easily is why you keep losing,” commented Rafi.

“Wait,” I said. “Wait, wait, hold on.”

“Hmm?” Sin turned to me. “What’s up, buddy?”

“No, wait, err...” Everyone looked at me so matter-of-factly that I began wondering whether I was the crazy one there for a moment. “Is nobody going to ask about the hand thing?”

Sin and Gin shared a bewildered look for just a moment. Then, as if on cue, they laughed to each other. *That’s pretty rude.*

“Sorry, I forgot you’re still not used to tricks like this,” Sin said, turning to me. “But shouldn’t you be less surprised, if you’re hanging out with that gal all the time? I’ve heard some pretty amazing things about her, myself.”

“Can you do something like that?” I asked Rafi. She just shook her head.

“Well, I guess it takes a while to get into the right frame of mind. It took me a while to figure it out, too.” Saying so, he demonstrated the ability once more, extending his arm in the air. His forearm detached from his body once more, floating about a meter ahead of the stump connected to his body, perfectly stable. It looked like someone had taken an eraser and removed the connecting lines in a drawing of an arm. The cross sections were pitch-black. “Pretty cool, huh? I can’t take the credit, though. My bro came up with it.”

At that, our eyes all went to Gin. He scratched the back of his head, looking somewhat embarrassed. “Well, neither Sin nor I are particularly powerful vampires, so we can’t rely on super forceful techniques. That’s why I tried to think of something that wouldn’t require that much power.”

“How does it work?” I asked.

“Well, you must have heard about this before, but vampires can change their forms at will. However, doing something like that takes a lot of time and concentration. It would require fundamentally altering your inner image of yourself, after all. I won’t say it’s impossible, but I’ve never met a vampire who could change their appearance instantaneously.

“However, if you think of a transformation as not a change but merely an extension of your already existing capabilities, such as increasing your reach, it becomes a lot easier to do something like this.” He seemed reticent at first, but it looked like he’d gotten kind of excited explaining it.

“But how can you still control your arm even when it’s separated from your body?”

“Well, you see, that’s the most brilliant part!” Gin said, his eyes glowing. “Vampires control familiars remotely all the time, but the interface of a separate being requires the abstract notion of an ‘order’ to be made concrete. I thought that to be inefficient, so if I instead conceive of a familiar as an extension of a limb, I can control it just as smoothly as I would my own hand!” He said it triumphantly, but I couldn’t even process how one would reach that state. “The biggest obstacle was the fact that the sense of touch cannot be transmitted back to the body. Eventually, I realized you can trick your mind into feeling something akin to phantom pain to compensate for it. But boy, I tell you, it took me about forty years to get the hang of that. In that sense, Sin, you must be a lot more adaptable than me. You picked it up way quicker.”

“Ohh, you really think so?” Sin puffed out his chest in clear satisfaction, putting his non-transformed hand on his hip.

Meanwhile, Rafi quietly walked over to him and peered into the gap in the arm curiously. And then, a few moments later—she tried blocking the space with her palm.

The floating arm instantly plummeted to the ground as Sin clutched at his stump in pain. “Owww! What the hell!? Don’t just do that without warning!”

Gin’s expression froze, before turning into a bitter smile. “Well, there’s still room for practice. It’s a matter of perception, so if there’s anything that can ruin the impression of completeness, it can just as easily fall apart. But hey, all it takes is time, so I’m sure even you could do it!”

“No, no, I appreciate the vote of confidence, but that kind of amazing technique is beyond a regular citizen like me,” I said, raising my arms in surrender. I didn’t even know what I’d use something like that for, beyond trying to reach the highest shelf in the library.

Still, I thought as I looked at Rafi, who had picked up Sin’s severed arm and poked at it curiously for a few seconds, before having it violently snatched back by its owner. She was a genius at taking ownership of things, but I didn’t know how flexible her thinking could be. I wondered if she’d be able to master an ability like this any time soon.

“Do you think you could do that, Rafi?” I asked her.

“Mmm... I don’t really get it, but I don’t like the idea of being in pieces like that.”

“...Right.” Hoping I hadn’t brought to mind any bad memories, I dropped the topic.

“Well, fellas, how about that game?” Brooks asked from his end of the table.

“Right, let’s go for it.” So said Sin, his arm newly attached to his body.



Just like that, we spent the rest of the afternoon playing around. Not just cards, but various other party games they had lying around. Zamira never did join in, but she stuck around the parlor and occasionally joined in the conversation. There was no sign of the mysterious girl, however.

Once the sky had already sufficiently darkened, Wisborg visited us once more, calling for us to come have dinner in the dining hall. Yesterday we’d arrived a bit too late to participate, but it seemed that, while breakfast or lunch weren’t imposed upon us, it was customary to at least have dinner together. Probably out of consideration for the more nocturnal vampires, who would only around now be waking up.

With that in mind, we all followed the servant and entered an overly grand room without any windows, its ceiling the height of four men standing atop one another. The only piece of furniture in it was a huge long table with over a dozen chairs laid out around it. In the table's center was a large candelabra, which served as the only illumination in the dim room.

There was no particular seating order, but all of us instinctively refrained from taking a seat at the head of the table. Even in his absence, that chair was reserved for the master of this place. Rafi and I sat down next to each other on the right side of the table, where the Glib brothers also sat. Rafi discreetly scooped her chair closer to me.

"Now then," Wisborg said, standing up at the head of the table, beside his master's chair. "Some of the honorable guests sitting at this table have been kept waiting for quite some time. For that, I can only offer my sincerest apologies. Unfortunately, I cannot yet answer the question of my master's arrival. As the longest-lived among us here can attest to, with age it becomes harder and harder to mind the passage of time, and that goes doubly so for one as old as my master, who has lived for over eighty centuries."

"Um..." Rafi spoke up, rather unusually. "I've been thinking about it, but isn't that a huge number? Is it really possible to live that long? Did people even exist that long ago?"

It might have been a rude thing to ask about, but I was equally curious about that point. I supposed if the question had to come from anyone, it'd be best received from her.

Wisborg directed his bloodshot eyes at her and nodded solemnly. "That is correct, Lady Valpurga. It is far before my time, far indeed before the time of every other vampire I've laid eyes upon in this life of mine—but it is undoubtedly the truth. My master has not bestowed upon me much knowledge of that time, and I dared not ask, so I'm afraid I cannot elucidate whatever curiosities you may have about that."

"...Okay."

"If it makes you feel any better, I've got plenty of doubts about that myself. That kinda timeframe's just impossible to picture, y'know?" Sin said freely.

"That is what immortality means, child. From where I stand, the existence of someone like Lord Nachtheim seems an inevitability," Zamira said. "The idea that this existence of mine could have an end seems laughable to me. Don't you all agree?"

Her pointed statement drew everyone's attention, our eyes then naturally moving to Wisborg. He responded to the challenge in that same raspy monotone. "The words in your invitation letters must all weigh heavily

on your minds. I fully understand your doubts. But I assure you, the master would not make such an announcement frivolously.”

“Do you know anything about it, then? This supposed... way to kill a vampire.” With Gin’s question finally putting it into words I felt the odd sense that there was no going back. This blunt and yet impossible sentence which had taken root in the back of my mind, perhaps in the backs of all of our minds, despite not once mouthing it until then.

“...I’m afraid I must disappoint you, Lord Glib the Elder. I know no more than you all. We must wait for Master Nachthem’s arrival.”

“Figures,” muttered Sin. “Not much we can do about that, but the holiday mood’s all gone now, huh? How about we get some work done in the meantime?”

“There must be many topics we can discuss even without Lord Nachthem here, right? How about we warm ourselves up until the star of the show gets here?” With Gin’s addition, the Glib Brothers’ proposal seemed to sway the discourse, without any sign of resistance from any of the others.

“If we must. I guess without some spirited young ones around, us doddering old fools would never get anything done, eh?” Brooks joked as lightheartedly as ever.

“Are we all in agreement?” Wisborg looked at all of us in turn. Rafi and I just went along with the flow and nodded. “...Very well, then. I suppose it is unlikely any more invitees will be appearing.

“In my limited authority as representative of Lord Fafner Belial Nachthem, I declare that the Conference for the Prosperity of Vampirism has officially begun. The honorable guests in attendance at this time: Lord Jackal V. V. Brooks, Lady Zamira Zamirage, Lord Cycasin Glib, Lord Origin Glib, Lady Dolly Penumbra, Lady Rafflesia Valpurga, and Lord Vio Valakia. May we together strive for a better eternity.”

Only half-listening to Wisborg’s dispassionately uttered formalities, it took me a moment to make the connection. *Huh, so that’s her name.*

In just a few moments, however, that new piece of information would become the least of my worries. Indeed, right as Wisborg’s speech came to an end, before anyone else at the table could even open their mouth—a noise shook the dining room.

The double doors were roughly kicked open with enough force that they swung around and slammed into the wall. In the dim light of the Manor, I could only make out the silhouette of the invader. Setting their foot down, they began to walk—approaching our table.

“Already getting down to business, huh? Not a shred of consideration for the poor saps still on the way?” A man’s voice, tinged with irony and

contempt, resounded in the otherwise silent chamber. “How hasty of you all. What, afraid you’ll be running out of time soon or what?” And as it did, his wretched figure gradually became visible.

Long, unkempt hair flowing down his shoulders and a messy stubble adorning his chin. Body wrapped in ragged clothing. And above his vain and savage smile, one eye thin and fox-like—and another nowhere to be seen, hidden from view beneath a bundle of black bandages covering the upper left side of his face.

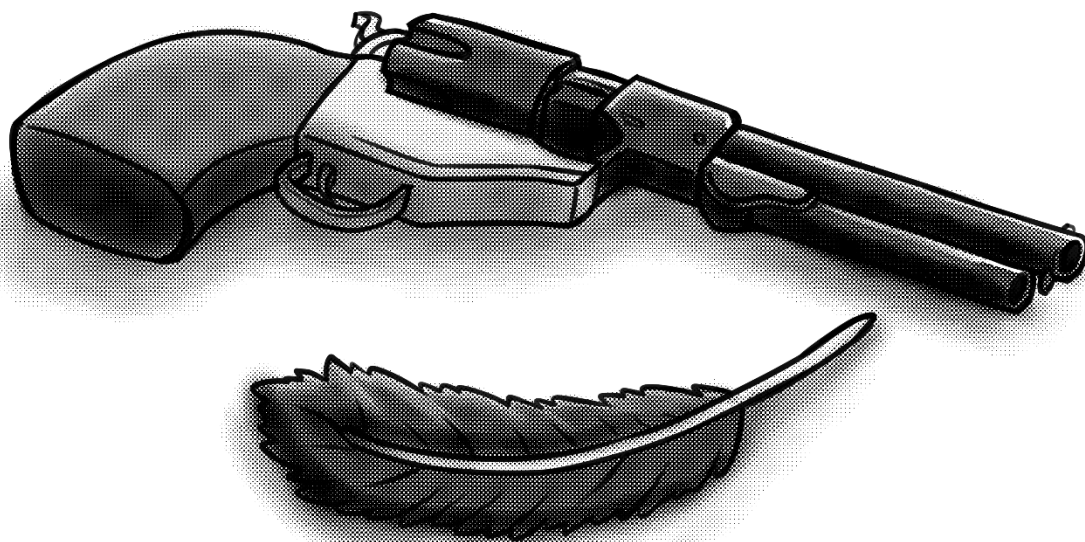
It did not require a warrior’s instinct to know that this man was dangerous. And it did not require a tactician’s instinct to know that his arrival would invite chaos upon this gathering.

With that, every guest had gathered. Only the lord of the manor had yet to show his face.

◆ Record II ◆

Murder of Crows

「 Hidden Malice 」



From the Devil, a word of advice:
Fear and revile the hearts of others. It is the sole way of staying sane.

The previous night, as I squirmed and shifted around in my bed, desperately begging for sleep to take me and yet acutely pained by its rejection, I thought about the present, and I thought about the past.

Meeting a bunch of ridiculous vampires in a creepy mansion was not a situation I'd ever encountered in my life till now, but I certainly had experience in being thrown into a new environment filled with people I didn't know. I'd had to do it over and over again throughout my life, all to keep my identity as a vampire a secret. How had I dealt with all of those people again?

That's right. I would keep my distance. I'd be as forgettable as possible, blend into the background, and hopefully be forgotten without a second thought. Bar those two who had stuck with me for their whole lives, in over sixty years I had never formed a single meaningful relationship with anyone. Was it because I knew it would be temporary? Because I feared my secret would be found out, my equilibrium tarnished? Would things be different, now that I no longer had anything to hide?

...On sleepless nights like these, I would always think back to those people I had never tried to love, I would mourn what friendships had never been born. And even as it sent a chill down my spine, the thought that I would

one day remember this very day the same way—amidst the horrible unease which kept me awake, it brought a modicum of comfort.



“—So you’ve decided to join us this year, Lord Nevermore.” Wisborg’s shrill acknowledgement of the intruder brought motion once more to the frozen scene. The man merely deepened his sneer in response. *That name...*

“...I heard you were among the no-show invitees at last year’s conference too, but—” Sin gripped his fist tightly as he glared at the new arrival. And then, as if unable to contain himself any longer, he stood up to face him. “You’ve got a lot of nerve showing your face here, *mass murderer!*”

“Oh?” The man looked down at Sin. “How about you go ahead and *do something about it then*, brat!” Seeming entertained by the provocation, he replied with one of his own. And Sin looked liable to follow through on it, taking a step forward with murder in his eyes. He was only stopped in his tracks by his brother gently placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Not now. As frustrating as it is, he has every right to be here.”

It seemed that Gin’s quiet argument had won him over. Sin stood back down, though not before the loud thud of his fist slamming the table resounded throughout the room.

The man called Nevermore scowled. “How disappointing. Is that your so-called *fairness*? That pathetic diplomacy you’re all so eager to perform is exactly why I’ve never shown my face at any of these pointless gatherings of yours—until now, of course.”

He swaggered around the table as he spoke, looking as comfortable as if in his own home.

“Really, I don’t know why I bothered coming. That joke of an invitation letter was so hilarious that I thought I’d come just to pay my respects to the clown who wrote it, but now that I’m here, it all seems to have lost its charm somehow. Seems like most of the boring old faces decided to skip this time, and don’t even get me started on the new ones.” He paused, closing his one visible eye and sighing dramatically—before taking a gun out from below his cloak and aiming it right at Rafi’s forehead.

“You—!” Sin sat up once more, and Gin followed suit this time. I couldn’t see anyone else displaying much of a reaction, nor did I really have the wherewithal to look, frozen in place as I was.



Rafi, for her part, didn't react much herself, not even flinching, but merely glaring up the barrel of the gun and its wielder. And then, without a word, she stood up from her seat, pushing her forehead into the gun and forcing the man to back up. He scoffed at her. "Hah! Interesting. I expected a more human reaction from the little missy that just got turned. Already high on immortality, girlie?" He peered coldly down at her as he forcefully dug the muzzle into her forehead. "Shall I teach you just what kind of pain an immortal can feel?"

"Back off, you fucking animal!"

"If you want us to respect your presence here, you're going to have to cooperate."

The Glib brothers' respective hot-blooded and icy threats did nothing to dissuade the gunman. It was like he couldn't even hear them, locked in a staring contest with Rafi, a savage smile on his face. I knew I had to do something, but my feet were frozen in place. I could only brace myself for the worst.

Before he could act out on his murderous intent, however, a quiet voice altogether unfit for the situation wafted over the tense scene.

"-You shouldn't fight."

And before I could even turn my head to see who had spoken up, *something* too fast for the eyes to see tore through the air and smashed right into Nevermore's firearm. The gun, sent flying into the air, broke apart into darkness and reformed as a raven which flew back into its owner.

Irritated, he looked at the interloper. Following his gaze, I looked at the opposite side of the table, where that girl-Dolly Penumbra-had raised her arm in our direction. Her eyes were inscrutable and empty, but her intent was clear.

Perhaps emboldened by her intervention, I finally managed to force my trembling legs into motion. I walked up to Nevermore, putting Rafi behind me. "Do you have nothing better to do than threaten a child? Is that the way you show your 'strength', Mr. Nevermore?"

"Ahh? Who the hell are you? You look like a wimp." Furrowing his brow, he then paused, shrugging. "You're right though, this is pretty dull. I figured I'd test out the newest member of our species, see if she's worth living forever." *You think you're worthy of that?* "But I can't get excited about it when I'm given this little of a reaction. Boo-hoo for me."

And then, without a shred of regret or word of apology, he turned his back on us. "Well, that being the case, I've got no desire to while my time

away with you people, nor do I care to hear about any of your inane topics of discussion. I'll go pick a room at random. You don't mind, do you, servant?"

Wisborg bowed.

"Well then, call me when the big man shows his face. I do so want to hear exactly what kind of nonsense he's cooked up. And if by some miracle he is right, then go right ahead and try to kill me. I'm sure you'd all like that."

Spitting out those last few vitriolic words, he slammed the big doors behind him shut, finally releasing the chamber from his presence.

"..." As if abandoned in the aftermath of a whirlwind, we were left staring blankly at each other, quite unsure of how to proceed. Whatever talks we were about to be getting into, I felt pretty secure in thinking they'd been safely shelved for the day.

"...Who was that guy anyway?" Rafi asked, though the name they'd called him by had been enough for me to put the pieces together.

"The exact kind of trash me and my brother are always accused of being."

"Craven Nevermore... You might have heard of him as One-Eyed Nevermore, or Nevermore the Ravenous." As Sin huffed and crossed his arms, Gin calmly explained. "Well, as you could tell, he's got a profound hatred for humans. He's the exact type of monster that puts a bad name on us all. A vagrant that lives through pillage and destruction. The church is well within their right to hunt him down."

"And they already did so once," I added. "But he escaped." After enough torture to leave him permanently scarred—to leave him one-eyed. He was an infamous vampire in his own right—although, what tugged at me the most was his connection to a certain nun I'd met. Remembering that story, I furrowed my brow. "Mr. Wisborg, why was someone like him invited here?"

"...My apologies, I understand that his presence must be upsetting to you." Recognizing my accusatory tone, he bowed once again. "However, this conference is open to every influential vampire of this land, regardless of the righteousness of that influence."

"We have no choice but to talk, you know," Zamira said, joining in the conversation for the first time as she rested her cheek in her palm. "We're all doing all we can just to escape persecution—we don't have the time or the resources to police our own people. If we want him to stop what he's doing, our only choice is to convince him to do so, unpleasant as it may be."

"What's the point in trying?" Sin scoffed. "He's clearly never gonna change. We're better off throwing him to the wolves."

“If you really feel like it, go right ahead,” Zamira said, smiling. “If you have a way of setting a trap for him without falling in it yourself, that is. None of us could have even expected him to come here today.”

Sin merely clicked his tongue and looked away.

“Fighting amongst ourselves won’t lead anywhere good. But as long as we have him here, it’d be irresponsible of us not to at least try to reason with him,” Gin said, though none of us had much of a response. I think we could all see it was a lost cause.

“Good heavens.” Brooks heaved a deep sigh. “That boy hasn’t changed a bit in any of the ways that count.”

“...You know him, Mr. Brooks?” I asked.

“Is it so strange that I should? There aren’t that many of our kind, and I meet a lot of people in this life of mine.” Brooks laughed at my question. “But I suppose I did know of him from before he earned all of those distasteful titles.”

“I see...” After that, conversation dried up, replaced only by an awkward endurance contest as we each waited to see who would suggest leaving first. In the end, Wisborg officially announced the conclusion of that day’s fruitless discussion.

As we each stood up and headed towards the dining room exit, I took note of the retreating back of a petite girl, covered by flowing white hair. More out of inertia than anything, I called out to her, using the name I’d overheard earlier.

She stopped her advance, turning her head to me and eyeing me vacuously. Though she had always blended into the background, only when facing her directly like this did the indescribable sense of presence emanating from her make itself apparent. Or perhaps, a sense of absence was more apt. She was like a shadow made manifest, defined more by what she lacked than what was there.

Unwilling to test the patience of this inscrutable girl, I blurted out the first words I could think of. “Umm... Thanks, for intervening earlier.”

She stared at me for a few moments more, before returning a courteous nod. And then, without another word, she turned her head forward again and resumed walking.

That was it? I had been looking for a more substantial bit of conversation, but having no clue what to say to keep her, I just watched her disappear off in the darkness.

“...What is it?” Seeing me stuck in place, Rafi called out.

“N-nothing.” And so, following her lead, we left the grand chamber behind us.



Back in my room, Rafi and I hung around idly in the luxurious space. It was a bit too early to be sleeping, but I didn't feel like going out in the parlor to try and socialize, and I was fairly certain the others were in agreement on that front.

As I sat on the extremely comfortable bed, looking up at the canopy, I felt my conscience prick at me. "Hey... Sorry for earlier, that I couldn't do more to help."

"Don't worry about it," Rafi said nonchalantly, toying around with an ornamental chalice lying on the room desk. "...You're small fry, so I don't expect that kinda thing from you."

Ouch! Have some tact, for crying out loud. Though her bluntness did alleviate any remaining guilt I had. "I guess dealing with him wouldn't have been much of a problem for you anyway."

"...I dunno about that."

"Oh? Was he that tough?"

"Mm... There's that too, but... I can't use my powers very well here."

Rafi's fighting potential depended entirely on how much of her surroundings she could own. Or, I guess, to put it more aptly, how much she could convince herself she owned. For a vampire, those things were one and the same, and she could freely manipulate matter under her control.

Her greedy personality was definitely an advantage on that front, but as expected, she couldn't display the kind of overwhelming power she had back in her home town here. It all depended on the psychological factors involved, ultimately.

"Well, I guess it's pretty tough to feel like home in a ridiculous place like this, huh." I sat up to look her in the eye. "You should be careful, though, with that guy roaming around. Whatever his problem may be, I don't think he's done antagonizing you."

She just shrugged. "...Not like he can kill me."

I laid back down. "Who even knows at this point..."

Not long afterwards, we said our goodbyes, and Rafi went to her own room. There wasn't much I could do by myself, so I unlit the candles and went to sleep.



Another sleepless night. Cold sweat poured down my back. The Devil whispered in my ear.



The following day.

It seemed that Nevermore's arrival had really ruined the laidback atmosphere of the mansion. I had a feeling there wouldn't be any more casual play in the parlor today, and that feeling seemed to be on the mark as we found it empty. Neither Rafi nor I saw much appeal in staying there, and so we promptly left after taking our breakfasts.

The problem was, however, that without any socializing to fill the time there wasn't much to do. I didn't fancy the idea of running into that homicidal maniac, but laying about in my room was strangely enough even less appealing. And so, the two of us decided to try properly exploring the manor.

It wasn't much more than a casual walk around, really, but having some objective in mind made it feel more exciting. We strolled around the garden, which, while well-trimmed, lacked any kind of color or spark of life, filled with thorny bushes and dark hedges. Next, we traversed the hallways of the manor's two wings, which held an abundance of guest rooms, most of them empty. I wondered if there'd ever been a time when all of these rooms had been filled. *Must be a pain to clean them all.*

Compared to the central portion of the house, which had the labyrinthine halls I'd previously gotten lost in, the structure of the wings was simple—each floor had only one hallway, going in a straight line up until the very end, where they linked up with their respective towers. The towers also had staircases which allowed us to move between the three floors. I hadn't measured it, but as far as I could tell both wings were perfect mirrors of one another.

As we followed along the dark halls, I tried making a mental note of where each guest's room was located. Wisborg had taken the time to attach

placards with all of our names to the doors, so I didn't have to go knocking anywhere, thankfully. Perhaps out of consideration for each other's privacy, most of us had been placed pretty far apart from one another. Rafi and I had adjacent rooms on the first floor of the left wing, and the Glib brothers were similarly placed next to each other one floor up. On the third floor of the left wing, in the very last room next to the tower, we found the nameplate for Dolly Penumbra. Moving to the right wing, we found name plates for Brooks on the first floor, Zamira on the third, and even one for Nevermore on the second floor, which we made sure to quickly scurry away from.

After that, we found ourselves wandering the serpentine corridors of the building's central block. Unlike the wings, which only seemed to hold guest rooms, here we found a cacophony of strange rooms with unclear purposes. Of course, I was hesitant to just randomly go opening doors in a stranger's home, but I couldn't hold Rafi back from fulfilling her curiosity. Even so, while we occasionally discovered regular rooms like dressing rooms and servant quarters (which seemed to have been deserted save for a single locked door, presumably Wisborg's room), other times we found ourselves standing on the threshold of totally empty rooms, or rooms entirely bereft of furniture save for one single misshapen statue at its center, or rooms covered in undecipherable works of art.

Our navigation was made worse yet by the fact that, instead of a single staircase to cover the entire height of the building, each floor had its own set of stairs positioned seemingly at random. We had only covered the first three floors, but my head was already hurting, so at some point Rafi and I had decided to leave it at that and return to our rooms (even the return trip seemed like it would be troublesome enough in itself).

It was around then that, walking through those barely lit corridors, I sensed a swift movement through the corner of my eye. I couldn't even register what the figure had been, and I would have been happy to chalk it up to a trick of the mind, but it seemed that Rafi's reflexes were a lot quicker than mine. In the blink of an eye, she had moved to the edge of the hallway and slammed her foot down.

"Huh?" I jumped at her sudden, violent movement. She beckoned me to come closer with a nod.

Even then it took me a moment to register what I was looking at, the creature being bathed in Rafi's shadow—but the tiny animal desperately trying to escape, its tail trapped under Rafi's heel, was without a doubt a rat. A medium-sized black rat, staring vacuously up at me.

"Oh dear. That's not very sanitary." I didn't really like rats. It might have been hypocritical of me, since a bat was pretty close to a rat with wings,

but bats didn't have the same stigma of carrying diseases. *Not that I have any need to worry about diseases though.* "Still, you shouldn't be stepping on the poor guy."

"No... That's not a normal rat."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I think... that's a vampire's."

"Really?" I kneeled down to look closer at it. It didn't have any creepy glowing red eyes or anything. "How can you tell?"

"Just a feeling... But it's not making any noise, right?"

"Oh!" She was right. It should've been in a lot of pain, having its tail trampled like that, but it wasn't making a single sound. "Huh. Whose could it be...?"

"That would be me, Lord Valakia." A raspy voice cut through our conversation. It was Nosferius Wisborg. He bowed as we turned to face him. "If my familiar's unsightly appearance has indisposed you, I deeply apologize."

"Oh, no, not at all!" I said, as Rafi released the critter, who in response scurried toward his master and crawled up into his coat. "What's up with it running around here though?"

"It is not just here, Lord Valakia. My familiars wander all throughout the house. Barring, of course, your personal guest rooms and the like—I wouldn't want to violate your privacy. However, having many eyes makes it easier to properly serve you all."

"Oh wow, I never noticed them until now. What about you, Rafi?"

She shook her head in denial.

Still, that explained a lot. Like how he'd been able to come serve us breakfast without us even having to ask.

Wisborg narrowed his eyes. "Well, truth be told, I have been sending out a larger number of them lately. I am mindful of keeping them out of the sight of our guests, but it appears that I have failed. I apologize for my lack of discretion."

"No, it's no problem at all. But why, is something wrong?"

"It is shameless of a host to lay the blame on their esteemed guest, but if I am to be honest, it seems that Lord Nevermore has been destroying every familiar that he happens to run across. I only learned of this after one happened to see the massacre and escape unscathed. It has been quite troublesome."

What the heck? What kind of petty harassment is that? It could definitely pose a problem, though. While a vampire can wordlessly communicate their orders and intent to their familiars, especially those who are in close

proximity, their senses aren't linked. We can't see through our familiars' eyes—any sensory information they perceive can only be transferred once they fuse back with us. So if the familiar was unable to return to Wisborg, all information that the creature might have gained would be lost. “Is there... any particular reason why he would be doing this?”

“I believe it is simply his nature to scorn beings he views as beneath him. Perhaps his keener senses have rendered their presence offensive, like the buzzing of a fly.”

So he's just being an ass, I see...

“If there were any other reason,” Wisborg continued, “then perhaps it would be a similar sense of disdain toward me as that which he has shown toward Lady Valpurga. After all, I, too, was once human.”

This new piece of information, dropped without any kind of fanfare, had left me shocked. I wouldn't have wanted to say this to the man directly, after how hospitable he had been, but Wisborg was pretty much the embodiment of the average person's view of a terrifying vampire, so it was hard to believe he had once been just like them.

“You... were human?” Rafi asked.

“That is right. Though many ages have passed since then—I no longer recall what it was like, to be mortal. If that is the reason for Lord Nevermore's disdain, I can only humbly consider it misplaced.”

“...Is that why you look so old?” Rafi bluntly asked. “Were you old when you got turned?”

I thought about trying to reprimand her for the overly forward question, but Wisborg showed his disfigured attempt at a smile. “You have a keen intuition, Lady Valpurga. You are quite right. In ages past I have tried to assume the mask of youth, but this appearance ultimately reflects my soul best, unsightly as it may be. Mortals sometimes think of us as eternally young, but I believe that to be a misunderstanding—we are, more often than not, eternally old.”

“...” Would I feel the same way after centuries, after millenia of life? In my mind filled with the common sense of humans, old age implied a sense of contentment, of preparedness for death. And I was the type of scoundrel that would do anything so long as he could avoid dying. Even after nearly seven decades of living carefreely, I was no different. But what did a mere seven decades mean to him, who must have lived many times more? I wondered, though I didn't dare ask.

“In any event,” Wisborg said, changing the subject, “is there anything I may be of assistance with? Are you searching for anything in particular?”

“Oh, no, we were just looking around. I’m sorry, should we not have been loitering around in the central block? I really should have asked beforehand...”

“No, you are free to go anywhere you wish on the premises. The Master and I want nothing more than for you to feel at home here. Still, I cannot imagine the central corridors have anything to entertain guests like you.”

“Yeah, you’re right, we did get a little lost too. Serves us right for mucking about without a guide.”

He bowed again. “This portion of the building was created far before the wings. The Master did not have guests on his mind at the time, so the layout reflects his own preferences. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

I suppose it made sense that this strange place would reflect the owner’s eccentricities. *Still, can he really remember this confusing layout?*

It wouldn’t be until later that night when I would conclude that, perhaps, that had precisely been the point. A confusing, disorienting layout would serve him well—it would serve well the kind of master that had an eternity at his disposal to spend learning it.



With Wisborg’s help, we easily returned to the first floor. No sooner than us reaching our destination, the servant said his goodbyes and promptly slinked off to some obscure corner of the building, and we were left to take a breather by ourselves.

We absentmindedly tried turning the corner to head to our rooms in the left wing, but the moment I registered the sight ahead of us in the corridor I instinctively grabbed Rafi and hid behind the wall. I couldn’t make out their expressions, but I could definitely discern their silhouettes—at around the midpoint of the corridor, Gin and Nevermore were speaking.

It was probably an overblown reaction, but I seriously didn’t want to deal with that guy. Nor did I want to interrupt their conversation. We were too far away to hear them, but I assumed Gin was trying to reason with him, as he said he would. I only hoped it wouldn’t earn him a bullet.

The fact that they’d decided to have this talk here of all places, however, sure was annoying. We’d have to wait for them to be done before getting anywhere. A minute or two later my curiosity bubbled over and I decided to sneak a peek from behind the wall. The moment I did, though—

“Hey there.”

“Woah!” I jumped back, startled by the face that filled my view. Needless to say, it was Gin, giving us a friendly smile and wave. “...Phew, you startled me. Did you see us?”

“Sorry about that. And yes, you are not the most subtle duo around.”

“Well, my bad for being unsubtle...”

“Haha, don’t worry, I prefer it that way. Puts me at ease, you know, compared to all the other cool customers around here.”

“Yeah... About that.” I looked behind Gin, but there was no trace of Nevermore. Had he taken the hint and gone the long way around? *Didn’t strike me as the type who would, though.* Maybe he just didn’t feel like dealing with us either. “...How’d it go? With him?”

“About as well as you’d expect,” Gin said, sighing. “That guy must not know the meaning of compromise. Oh, I don’t think he’d stoop to actively trying to attack you, but you still ought to be careful not to provoke him.” He took his hat off and twirled it around in his hand as he narrowed his eyes. “I couldn’t do anything to make your stay here a little more comfortable. I do feel bad about that.”

“...It’s fine. I’m not scared of him,” Rafi said.

“We appreciate the attempt, regardless.” I gave him a smile, which he quickly returned. Gin seemed to be the dependable sort, and he didn’t hesitate to take the initiative regarding this entire matter. Honestly, despite being one of the younger vampires in attendance, he seemed like one of the few to really treat this whole conference seriously. I wasn’t sure if their organization had any kind of leadership structure, but he had my vote if they did. *Whatever that counts for.*

“Well, I’ve kept you guys from your rooms for long enough. Shall I be on my way?” Gin was about to walk off, but as he did I at last recognized that this had been one of the few times I’d seen him on his own, without his brother to accompany him. I decided to satisfy some of my lingering curiosity.

“Ah, before you go... If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, could I ask you something? Um, it might be a little personal, but—Well, you and Sin are brothers. Does that mean you know your parents? How...” I struggled to put it into words. “How is it, all of that?”

“...Hmm.” Gin showed a wide-eyed expression, before folding his arms and frowning.

“Sorry, I know it must sound like an asinine question. But I’ve only ever lived among humans. As you can tell, I’m pretty ignorant.” I scratched my cheek. Part of me regretted asking, but you know what they say: better to be a fool for a minute than a lifetime.

“No, it’s quite all right, it’s just not a question I’ve ever thought to answer. But all right, I’ll explain it like I would to a human.” Gin assumed a reassuring smile as he spoke. “Well, as you might have guessed, vampires rarely procreate. Much more rarely than humans. I suppose we should be thankful for that—the world would be overflowing with us otherwise.

“It’s not like we’re actively refraining from it out of any kind of consideration, though. It’s simply not an instinct most of us have. We’re individualists by nature—there’s no need to feel responsible for propagating our species when we aren’t equipped with the function of death. Simply continuing to live is enough to fulfil our duty. Honestly, I have to wonder why reproduction is even a necessary aptitude for an immortal creature. Who knows if we’ll ever get an answer to that mystery, though.

“Reproduce, though, we do, rare as it is. I can’t attest to the accuracy of these numbers, but as far as I’ve been able to ascertain, newborn vampires appear at a rate of about two per century. Barring, of course, miraculous cases like that of Miss Rafflesia here.”

“...Is it really that big of a deal?” she asked, furrowing her brow.

“Most certainly,” Gin replied. Guess it was tough for the little celebrity to really acknowledge her unique standing.

“Wait,” I said, the thought suddenly coming to me. “Does that mean Sin and I...?”

Gin laughed. “I told you, I can’t be sure of exact numbers. We vampires aren’t really in the state to conduct any demographic studies at this point, after all. But yes, it’s quite likely you and Sin are the only purebred vampires born within the past hundred years. I suppose that’s something to bond over.”

Even if he said it like that, I’ve never thought of myself as anything special, so it wasn’t the kind of thing I could easily accept. Though maybe it was only because I’d been mired in the common sense of humans that I saw a century as any sort of significant figure to begin with.

“If you think about the psychology of the average vampire, I suppose those that decide to parent children could be thought of as deviants, in a sense. My parents are probably the most deviant of all, deciding to birth two children only a century apart,” he said, smiling wryly. “Though in the grand scheme of things, after an endless lifetime, it becomes likely that one would try it at least once. I suppose it is by that flimsy motivation that our species slowly expanded.”

“...I’m not good at thinking about numbers like this, but doesn’t that mean everyone here is pretty young?” Rafi asked.

“Come to think of it, you’re right.” Barring our hosts and Queen Zamira, every other guest invited to the manor was less than a thousand years old.

That was unfathomable enough to my eyes, but on a historical scale they weren't really *that* old.

"Well, not many of those who were invited actually came. You could think of the ones who did as being filled with a certain amount of youthful vigor themselves. Though, your observation isn't far off the mark—the reality is that many of the older vampires have already been put to sleep by the Church."

"Oh..." I guess that much was a given. If all of their hunters were even half as dedicated as that priest, it was no wonder at all they wouldn't stand a chance.

"I feel a little bad saying this about my own kind, but by and large, a lot of it isn't unwarranted. I hate to say it, but endless life doesn't have a great effect on morality, you know? Many ancient vampires are not too dissimilar in worldview to someone like Nevermore. There are plenty of exceptions that get unjustly hunted down like the rest of them though, so I still can't say I abide by their methodology."

"..." I knew Gin probably wasn't lying, but I didn't want to believe him on that point. I don't want to overstate my own virtue or anything, but I couldn't believe another century or two would be enough to make me think like that maniac. I changed the subject with another question that suddenly hit me. "Wait. I don't know how many of us there are in the world, but... Doesn't this mean that many of us could be related? Like, closely related?"

"Hah. Another fun question we just don't have the answers for. If there was anything like a genealogical tree of vampires, we might discover just that, but as it is, the data is lacking, and trying to trace our way back is a fool's errand. Who knows how many vampire couples out there are unknown cousins or something? I'm not sure they'd care all that much, though. In the end, the concept of family becomes somewhat foreign to immortals, after a time. The differences in life experience between parent and child are reduced to nothing after thousands of years, and familial bonds are destined to grow distant. At the scale of a vampire's lifespan, human conceptions just tend to lose their usefulness, you see?"

Gin continued his explanation with an excited grin, but soon stopped once he noticed my expression clouding over. I spoke with a bitter smile. "I guess that makes sense."

"...Sorry, I guess I haven't really answered your question. I'm afraid I wouldn't be great at trying to explain the feeling of having a family. Neither Sin nor I have even seen our parents in over ten years. I'm sure it doesn't quite match the human conception of a happy family, at least." Gin looked apologetic as he removed his hat and fidgeted around with it.

“No, don’t worry about it. It does feel a little liberating, in a sense,” I said, looking away. “At least I don’t have to feel like I missed out on anything.”

Conversation dried out for a few moments. Realizing I’d made things awkward, I thought about what I could do to change the subject, but before I got to say anything, Rafi cut through the heavy mood with a totally unrelated question.

“By the way... Can humans and vampires make babies?”

“Oh!” Gin’s eyes lit up again. “Well, that gets to the core of another one of vampirism’s big mysteries. Why is it that we are so closely linked to humans, so much so that humans can even become vampires under the right circumstances? The answer to that question probably gets to the core of our origin—oh, I’m getting carried away again.

“To answer your question, it is possible—however, the effects can vary depending on the circumstances. Questions of sex become hard to answer when speaking of beings that can alter their own physiology, but to put it simply, it appears that only an immortal womb can produce an immortal being—a human male and a vampire female can give birth to a vampire, albeit the chances are much lower than regular conception. On the other hand, a vampire male and human woman can only ever give birth to a human child—this has sometimes been referred to as a ‘demon’s miscarriage’. Though given the fact that a mortal child is only a temporary responsibility, there are some vampires who have been rather indiscriminate as it concerns fathering human children.”

We continued listening to Gin’s explanations about the facets of a vampire’s life. It was all quite enlightening in its own right, although my mind was on other things. Some time later, after we’d all gotten tired of standing about, we finally decided to end our conversation and head our separate ways. I returned to my room.



That evening, we convened for dinner again. Unlike the previous time, however, no one was eager to speak—it seemed that we wouldn’t be getting to any real discussion after all. I could tell Sin wasn’t pleased with the situation, but for once he didn’t say anything to rock the boat either. The whole affair felt a lot like the small, aching pressure one might feel as they keep putting off some task they know they should be wrapping up already.

Silently taking note of the atmosphere, Wisborg retreated from the dining hall once he'd finished setting the plates, leaving us to mostly chew in silence, with some occasional bouts of small talk.

The unpleasant situation made me eat a lot faster than I normally would have, and I soon found myself full. I didn't want to be the first to leave the table, so I just warily looked around at everyone else. It was then that the glass of wine in Zamira's hand caught my eye.

"Umm, by the way, just out of curiosity," I said, "what would happen if you needed blood here?"

"Oh? What's wrong, has the urge struck you?" Zamira asked, taking a sip of her glass. "I'm sure you could take a bite out of your little companion, if so."

I wish she wouldn't choose the worst possible phrasing for it...

"If that happened, you could privately ask Wisborg to give you some fresh blood. It's not something you'd want to showcase to others. It's unsightly, after all." So said Gin, who had also quickly polished off his plate, which didn't have much on it to begin with.

Unsightly... I could definitely agree with that description, but I was surprised to hear that the others thought the same. I would have thought that a 'proper' vampire would be fully accustomed to such a thing.

Perhaps reading the curiosity on my face, Gin smiled and answered. "I told you before, that vampires are individualists. It doesn't feel good to depend on others like that."

I see... so it's unsightly to depend on others, huh? A bitter smile crossed my face.

"...Do they have a giant barrel of blood or something here?" Rafi asked.

Sin, who had still been sulking, couldn't help snickering at that. *I don't think he can tell, but she's definitely glaring at him right now, isn't she?* Gin was once again charged with explaining, a strained smile on his face. "That wouldn't work. You don't necessarily need to suck the blood yourself for it to sate you, but it has to be relatively fresh, or else it won't have any effect. It's probably a matter of the connection between the flesh and soul weakening after being severed."

"Won't deny it, there's some fucked up folk out there that even keep blood slaves on their property to have a consistent source of nourishment. This isn't that sort of horror house, though, don't worry," Sin said, awfully casually given the shocking content of his words. "Mr. Wisborg would probably just drain some of his own blood for you."

I noticed that none of the others were participating in the conversation. It wasn't particularly unusual, but I figured that maybe openly discussing

this kind of subject was seen as something of a taboo. Just in case, I decided to change the subject.

“Umm, by the by, Gin, are you really full with just that? You haven’t eaten much, have you?” I hadn’t ever seen him eat breakfast, either, come to think of it. I would have chalked it to just missing it, except that I’d caught his brother doing so a couple of times. “Oh, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, though.”

“Haha, don’t worry about it. It’s true, I haven’t been eating much. Truth be told, I’ve been trying to condition myself to stop feeling hunger at all.”

“...Is that possible?”

“It should be. Hunger doesn’t serve any purpose for us. Anything we eat is simply a waste of resources for those that need them. And my theory is that any effects of malnutrition are simply psychological—you think you’re supposed to be feeling weak, and so your body reflects the effects. I think it’s something we all should overcome if we’re going to coexist with humanity forever.”

“Huh.” I’d never really thought about it before. *I should reflect on the luxuries I unthinkingly partake in, I guess.*

“...You should just eat if you’re hungry,” Rafi said sullenly.

“The little lady’s quite right, I’d say,” Brooks joined in. “Some harmless little indulgences here and there are what keep the soul alive,” he said joyfully as he refilled his plate with another portion.

“I’d never expect an oaf like you to learn restraint,” Zamira said, sipping on her wine. “Back in the day they’d always come offering me all sorts of things. I only wished the populace would put their energy into something more worthwhile than fattening a layabout like me, but I couldn’t exactly refuse their thoughtful gifts either. It was more of an annoyance than anything.” *I guess even queens have their problems, huh?* I could only smile as I scratched my cheek.

Like that, dinner passed by uneventfully, and after a few more idle exchanges we all went our separate ways.



After dinner, I decided to go to the manor's library, about which I'd heard from Wisborg earlier. It was located at the top of the tower at the end of the left wing, occupying the size of at least two floors. There was nothing else in the tower save for the spiral staircase leading up there.

Rafi didn't feel like joining, and her literacy was dubious to begin with, so I split off from her and went up the stairs from the lobby to the third floor hallway of the left wing.

I wasn't aware if vampires had some sort of natural vision enhancement—the glasses I usually wore were purely ornamental, a leftover of my latest change of image and identity, but I'd never found my eyesight to be anything but ordinary. Still, passing through those hallways always made me feel like my eyes were failing me. The darkness obscured the end of the hallway, and the monotonous series of identical, unlabeled doors gave off the illusion of a repeating, neverending tunnel.

It was when I was finally beginning to distinguish a vague shape in the distance, the outline of my destination, that a powerful splintering sound stopped me dead.

I only caught sight of the anomaly in my peripheral vision. What I could only describe as a small explosion took off near my feet, at the edge of the hallway. Along with fragments of wood, globs of blackish blood sprayed around the area, even reaching my ankles.

Amidst the chaos, I saw the violently severed head of a rat rolling for a few centimeters.

As my brain finished processing every individual detail of the tiny carnage below my eyes, I finally heard the sound of footsteps from behind me. First quiet, they gradually grew in intensity, reaching ever closer to me.

Even before I turned around, I knew who those steps belonged to.

Pistols held tight in each hand and facing the high ceiling, fingers dangerously perched against the triggers, Nevermore smirked at me with a savage glint in his eye.

"Don't you just hate those pathetic things? I can't stand 'em—the moment I see one, a bullet goes flying before I even know it."

"...What are you doing here?" I said, desperately trying to keep my legs firm.

"Hah? What kind of a question is that?" He said, raising his eyebrow incredulously. "Is this hallway your property or something? I could ask you the same thing."

"...Those aren't normal guns, are they? I never heard anything like a gunshot."

He shot me a blank stare and then scoffed. “Ah, that right there confirms it.” And then, keeping that same pose, arms in the air, he pulled the trigger.

I almost didn’t notice it. There was, after all, no sound, and no spark—however, the gun undoubtedly fired. Barely distinguishable from the darkness above, an obsidian projectile swan dived downwards—and then, like a bird in flight, changed its trajectory in midair, heading directly towards my face. I instinctively shut my eyelids, my body bracing for impact—but none followed.

Cautiously opening my eyes, I saw before me a bullet, stuck in the air right before me, mere centimeters away from my face.

The ‘bullet’ proceeded to twist, unfurling itself like a rag; its body grew like a balloon pumped with air, and as it did it began to assume a certain shape—like the skinned fur of a beast spread over a mold of clay, it regained its original form: a raven, its empty eyes gazing into mine.

Losing my balance from the shock of it all, I fell backwards, landing on my rear. As the bird retreated back into the barrel of its master’s pistol, I saw the man himself snickering at me. I glared at him the best I could, though I doubt it had much of an effect from my pitiful posture.

“See, that’s the kind of thing a vampire can do—why would I ever bother with a regular pistol?” He stepped forward, crouching down to look at me, his gun-toting arms resting on his knees. “I had this impression the moment I saw you, but—buddy, you’re one of the ones that lived among humans, right?”

Bewildered as I was, his presence wouldn’t allow me to get up and leave. All I could do was nod.

“Hah, knew it. I could almost smell it on you—the human mediocrity. Not like I’m one to talk, but how’d you ever end up here anyway?”

The sight of this man, his sleazy smirk wide as he let out one flippant word after another, repulsed me. Not because he was some special, unique breed of evil, but because he wasn’t—I’d lived for nearly seven decades, and I’d seen scum like this more times than two hands could count.

I knew what his answer would be, but I went and sought confirmation anyway.

“Tell me... When the church caught you, you murdered the guard that set you free, didn’t you?”

“Hah?” he was taken aback for a moment, before smirking all the same. “Dunno where you got that from, but sure, I did. I squashed plenty of those bugs on that day, but she was the only one I took my time with.”

“...”

“Not gonna ask me why? You’d better not. You can understand me, can’t you? Her death couldn’t have taken longer than ten minutes—those bastards kept me locked up in there, torturing me every single day, for no less than twenty years. Put the two on a scale, and one clearly outweighs the other, don’t ya think?”

Repulsive. His smirk sent shivers down my spine. I gritted my teeth, desperately trying to hold in my anger, but my mouth formed words of provocation before I could control myself.

“W-what gives you the right to look down on people’s lives like that!?”

He paused, his eye narrowing. The smirk vanished from his lips. A few moments of silent pressure continued, before he finally spoke again, this time in a deep baritone which seemed to lack the drunken irony of his previous statements.

“Let me tell you a little tale. It happened some decades ago, that I was passing through this random village out in the boonies. My eye caught on some woman moping around some corner—she was a real looker, I guess that’s about all there was to it. So on a whim, I decided to ask her just what she was so depressed about.

“Long story short, her father had sold her hand in marriage to some local big shot and she was none too pleased about it. She’d even tried to escape the village, but they caught her and beat the daylights out of her.” Here, he briefly smirked at me. “You seem like a city boy, but even you know that these things still happen, right?”

“Anyhow, I couldn’t really tell ya why myself, but I decided to ask her: ‘Do you want freedom? Do you want to get out of here? To get rid of all of this?’ She said yes, even begged me.

“So I did her a favor and killed everyone in that village. If anyone had remained, they may have pinned the blame on her and taken revenge. That would constrict her freedom, too—and so I killed them thoroughly, down to the very last brat and geezer.”

“...” I felt sick to my stomach, but he didn’t seem to register it. His eye was lost in his story.

“I did it purely on a whim, really, so I wasn’t expecting any thanks. I was just curious what she would do. Would she run away? Would she become angry at me and try to attack me? I went looking for her, curious to see what the reaction would be.

“And yet, somehow, I was still taken aback. She had opted to take her own life. Here I’d taken the effort to give her freedom, but she went and wasted it.

“At the time, I couldn’t wrap my head around it, but now I think I can.” And so, directing his eye back to me and regaining his previous cheer, the murderer espoused his philosophy. “Human lives are defined by death, and by extension, weakness. That’s because, at every given moment, they have the escape route known as death at the ready. That’s a privilege we don’t share. Do you think there’s any human out there that can withstand the worst torture in the world? Whatever lofty aspirations they may have held, a week or a month or a year of torture is enough to leave them begging for death. And no matter what kind of thoughts it contains, once you split it open, a human brain is no better than a pile of shit on the sidewalk.”

Nevermore laughed, his shoulders trembling. “I don’t know what kind of conception you’ve been working under, human lover, but we’ve got two options, us immortal fellows. You can either deride yourself as an abomination, a cancer upon the world that refuses its rightful death—or you can choose to be superior, to look down on all other life as someone chosen by the world to forever walk upon it. Those are the only two options—well, I guess you can also close those eyes and ignore it the best you can, too! Hah, hahaha!”

Every word he said aggravated me, made my blood boil. I didn’t care if I’d end up like a honeycomb, at that moment my sole priority was wiping the smirk off his face. And so, putting on a grin of my own, I called out to him. “So mortals are no better than bugs to you, I got that much. In that case—aren’t you the most pathetic one of us all? You let yourself be changed by these insignificant insects, after all!”

His laughter was cut short. With movements swifter than my eyes could see, he grabbed onto my collar and slammed me against the ground, the pistol in his other hand digging into my chest. Above me, his smile didn’t change, but the words that left his mouth did so through gritted teeth. “...And just what do you mean by that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? That disfigured face of yours! They say you were tortured so much it became permanently stuck to you, like branding a cattle! Must be humiliating, huh!?”

I was sure I’d be eating a bullet now. I braced myself for a world of pain, but it never came. My eyes met with Nevermore’s sole eyeball. Its color had ever so subtly shifted. A few moments later, he roughly released me and stood up, laughing all the while.

“Trying to hurt my feelings, now? You’re a real nasty sort, buddy!” His words dripped with irony.

“...That’s it?” I looked at him in disbelief.

“What, you think I’d act violently while in the good graces of our host? Perish the thought!”

I don’t know what I expected out of him. He was a nutjob, nothing more. I felt like an idiot for giving in to anger like that—it was moments like these that made me feel like I’d lived all these years without learning a single thing.

Getting up and dusting my backside, I turned my back to Nevermore and trotted away as quickly as I could without outright running. I never wanted to deal with this guy again. I didn’t know where he was going or if he’d be walking in the same direction as me, but I never turned back to check.



I reached the library in the tower, a vast square room with shelves many times taller than me covering every wall. I mindlessly browsed through and grabbed various volumes within reach, but the titles evaporated from my memory the moment they left my sight. My mind was still swimming with thoughts of my unpleasant interaction with Nevermore.

He was a simple scumbag, a dime-a-dozen egotist—so why had he made me so angry? Losing control of my emotions, snapping like that even while knowing it would only lead to trouble—none of that was like me.

Like me, huh?

That’s all it amounted to, I guess. His words had hit uncomfortably close to home. I was a selfish bastard who had chosen to live forever. Every bite of food I ate was something stolen from the creatures of this Earth that lived properly and died properly.

I wonder what *they* would have thought of this?

Valentina and Vincent Valakia. The mortal humans that I had spent the entirety of my life with, from our days together in the orphanage until our final moments together by their deathbeds. What would they have thought of me, living forever and ever, for centuries and millennia?

Of course, we hadn’t gone decades together without ever discussing it. But in the end, they only ever lived as mortals, and they could only ever view me as an equal being of the same age. If they could somehow see me in a thousand years, in two thousand years—in eighty thousand years, what would they think?

What a pointless hypothetical. I didn't even know what I would think. And the only way they could have seen that was if they, too, had become immortals.

What I needed, then, was an immortal companion that would never leave my side.

I snapped out of my reverie. My eyes were pointed downward toward my lap, to the tightly packed words of some ancient, hand-scribed tome resting upon it. Of course, I hadn't processed a single one of those words.

Shaking my head clear of these idiotic thoughts, I closed the book and returned it to its spot on the shelf. I thought I'd already come to terms with the life I'd chosen to lead. I didn't remember ever having a particularly high opinion of myself, yet here I was worrying over just what kind of bastard I was or wasn't. All I could do was sigh.

My browsing mood was thoroughly ruined, and in fact it turned out I'd already spent a good while zoning out, judging by the clock helpfully mounted in one of the library's corners. I grabbed the first interesting-looking book I saw and headed down the stairs towards the base of the tower and into the left wing's first floor. I only hoped that trigger-happy nutjob hadn't decided to take his roaming to my floor.

Helpfully, my prayer was answered, and I reached my room without incident. I considered knocking on Rafi's door to say good night, but... somehow, I just couldn't bring myself to. I quietly opened the door to my own room, and stepped inside.



Once again, I couldn't sleep a wink. I thought I heard the voice of the Devil whispering in my ear.



The following morning.

The large third floor hallway of the Homesick Manor's left wing looked, at that moment, the most cramped it ever had. All of us had gathered there,

gazes full of uncertainty, looking down at the floor—and at the *object* which dirtied it.

“What is this...?” One voice asked. It was that of Cycasin Glib, although it sounded very much unlike him in that moment.

“It is as I’ve explained it to you, Lord Glib the Younger.” The raspy response could only belong to the servant, Nosferius Wisborg, although I never did lift my gaze to verify.

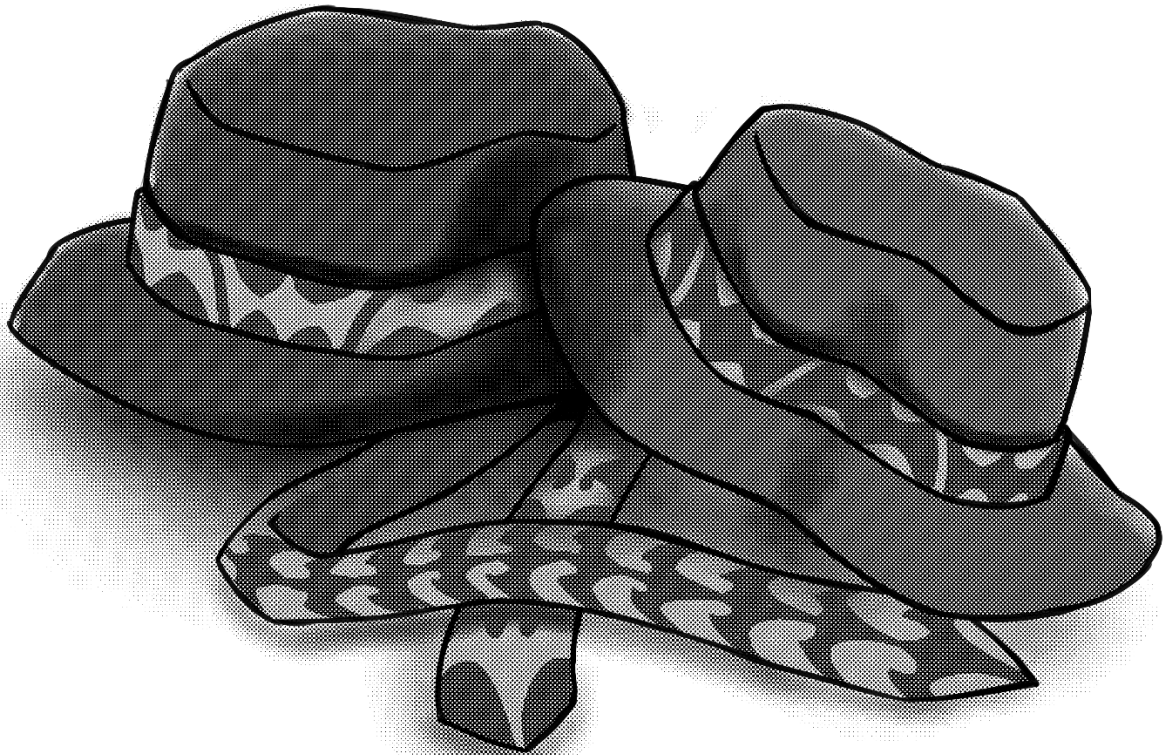
And then, silence; for a long while yet, nobody would find any words to speak. There was no doubt in my mind that all our eyes’ were on it—on Craven Nevermore’s tattered, disfigured, wounded and broken—corpse?

That was how the banquet of demons finally began.

◆ Record III ◆

Original Sin

「 The Brothers Glib 」



“Forgive me, but could you lay it all out for us one more time, Mr. Wisborg?”

After silently taking in that sight for a while, just as the shock began to be overtaken by confusion over how exactly to proceed, Gin spoke up.

“Very well.” Wisborg started to lay out the same story he’d given us earlier, this time slower and with many more additional details. “At around one in the morning last night, one of my familiars discovered Lord Nevermore lying here like this. As some of you may be aware, Lord Nevermore had a tendency to destroy any and all familiars of mine that he came across, so I am unfamiliar with anything that may have happened to him in this hallway prior to that point.

“I took note of the abnormality of his state, but since I did not wish to disturb him, I opted to leave him alone. However, when I again came across him six hours later in the same state, I decided to take a closer look. That was when I noticed that he was covered in wounds that weren’t healing. Concluding that this was clearly unusual, I shamefully decided to call upon all of you.”

As expected, none of us immediately knew just what to think of this testimony. Looking at him, I could clearly tell that he was covered in many cuts and bruises, and one of his arms was clearly bent in an impossible

direction—but I suppose from the vantage point of a rat crawling on the ground, that wouldn't have been immediately obvious.

And there was one more bizarre aspect to the scene.

"There's no blood..." Rafi muttered.

"You're right... Hmm." Gin bent down to check the area around the body closer. There wasn't even a drop on the cold marble floor. Not only that, but even on the body itself, there were only a few slight traces of dried blood around the wounds and soaked into the rags he wore, but nothing more. "This... is clearly unnatural."

And then, furrowing his eyebrows, he turned towards the rest of us. "Does anyone have some sharp claws or something? If so, could you help me test something out?"

I didn't really know what he was going for, but it didn't take long for a surprising volunteer to step up: Dolly Penumbra walked over to the body with quiet steps. I could see Gin ready to mouth his words of instruction, but not even letting him get a sound out, she knelt down and, winding up her hand—she severed one of Nevermore's arms at the elbow.

"Oh dear," Brooks exclaimed. I stumbled backwards in shock, but for his part, Gin merely scratched his cheek with a wry smile.

"I wouldn't have gone quite *that* far, personally, but... Well, thank you. You can see what I was curious about now, right?"

Indeed, the gruesome experiment highlighted another peculiarity of this incident.

"...There's no blood," Rafi muttered. Indeed, even as Dolly held the severed arm with the wound pointed downward and shook it like a drunkard trying to liberate the last few drops of a wine bottle, nothing came out.

"The leftover remains of vampires act differently from decomposing human corpses, but still," Gin said, like a schoolteacher before a classroom, "a single night is not nearly enough time for all of the blood to disappear like this. In other words, he must have been drained."

"..." I didn't know what to say about this conclusion, and the silence that took hold over us all seemed to agree.

All that eventually answered Gin was a heavy sigh. Zamira, looking as sleepy as ever and wearing an indifferent smile, didn't hide her impression:

"Quite the farce this has all turned into, don't you think?"



After that, deciding that it would have been shameful to leave Nevermore out in the hallway, Wisborg elected to carry him to his own room. I offered to assist him, but he politely declined—the sight of the body being carried off by dozens of rats was as comical as it was strange.

In turn, we all returned to the lounge. I naturally expected that we would start discussing this unexpected incident, but Brooks, Zamira and Dolly Penumbra all retreated to their usual spots in the room, seemingly content to while away their time as usual.

Not even I could stand that level of careless disregard.

“Umm, everyone... shouldn’t we do something?” I suggested, mustering up the courage.

“What, specifically?” Zamira’s question immediately knocked the wind out of my sails.

“Err, I don’t know, but...”

“It’s certainly regrettable that something like this has occurred,” Brooks replied, “but if it’s anyone’s place to take offense to this, it would be the presently missing Lord Nachthem. Anything more would be overstepping our bounds.”

The soothing tempo of his voice almost led me to acquiesce, but my common sense valiantly fought back.

“B-but... he might be dead, you know!?”

At that, everyone viewed me with blank stares. Like I was some kind of nutcase and I’d finally said something too outrageous to ignore. A sense of anxiety constricted my chest like a snake, but I stammered out more justifications to blot out the silence.

“I mean, it’s possible, isn’t it? He looked... his wounds weren’t healing! And isn’t that why we all came here to begin with!? What that letter said—this could be a bona fide vampire killing!”

As if she couldn’t hold back anymore, Zamira’s back lifted off the sofa as she began giggling. “You never know what these kids will say, huh.”

For his part, Brooks muttered with an awkward smile, “I suppose that’s what human common sense would dictate.”

“But... it’s possible, isn’t it!? If it wasn’t, none of you would have come here, would you?”

“Unfortunately, that’s not exactly the case. We’re here more for formality’s sake than anything. I for one have never thought of that letter as anything other than overdramatic hyperbole,” he replied.

“You know, establishing a nation isn’t easy—I’ve suffered more than a fair share,” Zamira added. “And yet, none of it killed me. I’m still here. I still exist, even a thousand years later. That death would find me here of all places is laughable.”

There was nothing I could really say to that. I hung my head. I couldn’t be satisfied with their conclusion, but I was far from a place where I could convince them.

Just as I was about to back down, however, a hand firmly pressed on my shoulder. It was Sin. “Don’t be so meek, man. I’m not sure I buy that the pest is really dead, but for what it’s worth, I think there’s some merit in thinking about it.”

“Hmm, it appears that some anxiety over death still remains when you’re at an age like that, still within the lifespan of a human. I wish I could remember what that was like,” Brooks laughed.

“...If you’re so sure, then how do you explain his state?” I asked, somewhat grumpily.

“I believe their assumption is that Nevermore is merely in a catatonic state,” Gin said, joining the conversation.

“What do you mean...?”

“You’ve lived a pretty peaceful life, right? I guess you don’t know, then.” After thinking over how to explain it for a moment, Gin continued. “Have you ever wondered what would happen if you lost a limb?”

“Huh? Umm... Well, it would take quite a while, but it would heal eventually, right?”

“Correct. Even if I cut off your arm, provided I didn’t keep it close so you could reattach it, a new arm would eventually grow in its place. But, here comes the question: why is it that a new arm grows on you, instead of a new you growing on your discarded arm?”

“What? I mean... isn’t it natural?”

“For an arm, maybe, but what if I cut your head off? Or what if I bisected you perfectly in half?”

“Uhh...” To be perfectly honest, I couldn’t recall ever having pondered such a question. Or maybe I had at some point and merely forgot. Either way, it should probably go to show what a peaceful—or maybe, thoughtless—guy I really was.

“...Is it based on mass?” Rafi asked, proving that she had actually been listening despite giving no sign of it.

“Haha, that’s a good guess! Still, if we think about the case of a perfect bisection, where each half of the body would have an equal mass, that would leave things up to a coin toss. Seems a little too arbitrary to determine which one deserves to be called ‘you’.

“Indeed, how it actually works—is that it is all determined by the heart.”

“The heart?”

“Well, I just call it that for convenience. For most, it is the heart, but for others, it’s the brain, and still yet there are more unorthodox examples—but either way, what I refer to is the core of a vampire’s being.”

“Core of our being...?”

“For us immortals, it is that component which is fundamental to our continued existence. It’s why the Sealing Sacraments that the Church uses affect the heart predominantly—in actuality, what they affect is that core.

“In other words, everything else is auxiliary, from our limbs to our eyes to our bodies as a whole. Even if they are torn apart, they will grow back. And that core is what they will reform around.”

What kind of monsters are we? That’s what I honestly thought, hearing that kind of thing. I’d never once considered any part of my body to be disposable, even knowing that no injury was permanent. But this almost made it sound like I was some kind of insect wearing human flesh. It made my skin crawl.

“Just laying that kind of thing out won’t be enough for a boy like him to really believe it. How about I give a demonstration?” So said Zamira, getting up from her sofa.

And then, stepping a little closer yet still keeping her distance, she *plunged her hand into her chest.*

“U-uwah!” I almost fell off my feet. Rafi, too, looked on in open-mouthed amazement. I clearly heard the crunching and tearing of her flesh and ribcage as she dug through her own body, blood flowing out through the gaps. For her part, her expression didn’t change in the slightest as she found what she was looking for and began dragging it out—*her own, still beating heart.*

“As you can see, this is what I really am. As long as I have this, I am myself.” As she spoke, crimson organ in hand, my eyes were drawn to her breast. I could see the wound slowly begin to close, flesh healing from the edges inward. *What if she can’t get that back in?* Idiotic thoughts like that flooded my mind even looking at such an otherworldly spectacle.

“I wouldn’t recommend you try this, by the by. Ordinary kids like you would probably faint from shock and incapacitate themselves.” *Thanks for the warning, but I wasn’t going to anyway.* I wasn’t sure I even could perform that

kind of violence on myself, from a practical standpoint. “Anyway, now take a look at this. Jack, some assistance, if you’d mind?”

“Someone of your stature should probably conduct themselves a little less messily, but... Ah well.” Brooks, top hat in hand, extended his other palm with a bitter smile, and Zamira gently placed her own heart in it—and then, the moment she lifted her hand, she froze solid.

Not a moment later, she toppled over like a broken scarecrow.

“If she really trusted me with her heart I’d blush, mind you, but when she is this crude with her own body, even for education’s sake, I can’t help but frown,” Brooks calmly explained, still gingerly holding onto the heart as it bled on his hand.

Reluctantly, both Rafi and I approached the prone Zamira. Her expression was still the same, but there was no trace of life. Her wound had stopped regenerating too. She was, for all intents and purposes, a corpse, no different from Nevermore.

“I believe that’s about enough of that.” Saying so, Brooks crouched (with some difficulty) and inserted the heart back into the hole in her chest. It all seemed a bit too haphazard for me, but the next moment, sentience immediately flickered back into Zamira’s eyes.

“Now you understand, right? Excuse me, but that took a lot out of me, so I’ll be lying back down.” And with that, she approached the sofa, chest still bleeding out, and sat down.

That was all a bit too much for me to just roll with, you know? Still, when they laid it out like that, it seemed very likely that what had happened to Nevermore was the same kind of case.

Still, even if he wasn’t dead, it was still assault, wasn’t it? *I suppose such rules don’t mean much to immortals...* I also couldn’t deny feeling somewhat relieved that a maniac like him wasn’t free to roam around anymore, as barbaric as the sentiment was.

“Even so, Vio’s right. We can’t just let that go.” Sin, however, stood his ground. “Someone here whacked that guy, you know? Honestly, I wish I could’ve done it myself, but it’s still not right. It won’t lead to anything good—if being in the right is all we’ve got over a crook like that, we can’t stoop to his level, you know?”

Here I thought he’d have been celebrating after how hostile he’d been to Nevermore, but it turned out that Sin was a surprisingly sensible guy.

“Surprisingly sensible... from you.” Rafi muttered.

“The hell’s that mean?” Sin asked, glaring at her. I wished she’d harmonize with me like that a little more on matters of common decency too.

“It’s not just that,” Gin joined in, ignoring the kids fighting next to him, “but there’s another element to this incident that makes it far more inexplicable. Haven’t you all thought of it?”

Everyone’s attention gathered onto Gin. He once again took it upon himself to elucidate all of us.

“It’s simple. *Is there anyone here who could actually beat Nevermore in a fight?*” As expected, there were no answers in the affirmative. “The reason why we have to coexist with him in the first place is because he’s powerful, right? Add to that, most of us here aren’t the fighting type.”

“Oh heavens no. It’s precisely muscle like Nevermore that I employ to do the violence for me, typically,” Brooks said, sounding all too pleased with himself.

“If monarchs had to actually fight for their people there’d be far fewer kings in this world, you know?” Zamira said offhandedly, face turned away from us.

“Right, that’s what I thought. If there’s anyone here who might stand a chance against him, it’d be Miss Valpurga, and... perhaps Miss Penumbra as well? I don’t really know.”

Dolly Penumbra continued watching silently from the sidelines, paying no mind to her name being called.

“...I didn’t do it,” Rafi felt the need to add.

“Even then, in a one on one match, he would still be likely to win. Otherwise, if all of us together jumped him at once it’d be a different story, but of course, that’s not the case either. To add to all that, while I can’t say that I examined him very closely, I didn’t notice any particularly deep wounds on him. Could someone really have incapacitated him and stolen his heart under these circumstances?”

“...All right, all right, I hear you. I suppose it would be irresponsible to leave all that alone. What do you propose, then?” Brooks relented.

“It’s simple. I will perform the investigation.” Gin smiled confidently, pulling on the rim of his hat.

“I’m getting in on this too, bro!” “A-ah, me too!” Sin immediately declared himself assistant, and I also impulsively raised my hand. In fairness, I could say I had prior experience in this area, somewhat.

Gin nodded back at us, then turned to the others once more. “We’ll find out what happened to Nevermore and resuscitate him. And beyond that, well—one of us may have attacked him, but if we’re the ones to save him as well, then that should be enough basis to avoid total hostility.”

“You think so, son?” Brooks chuckled. “If that lad’s the same one I know, his pride will probably be in tatters. I don’t think we’ll get out of it unscathed.”

“Whatever the case, it’s better than just abandoning him. We’d really have no excuse then.”

“Well, do as you please, I don’t mind. Just be careful about asking me for help—don’t want to end up owing me, now, do you?” Brooks winked back at Gin, a piercing emerald gaze peeking through from the opened eye.



“Are you sure you want to help out? I’d feel bad, making you tag along on this ugly affair even though it’s your first time here.” Gin looked apologetic as he addressed us.

“Oh, not at all! It’s me who’d be glad to help out in any way! I just can’t sit still at a time like this,” I said, rubbing the back of my head.

“This is more interesting anyway,” Rafi added.

“So, what now?” Sin asked. “Do we dust for fingerprints or what?”

“Well, there’s someone we should talk to, before anything else,” so he said, eyeing a rat running along the side of the corridor.

So, we set out to look for Nosferius Wisborg. And it didn’t take long to find him—or, more accurately, for him to find us, sending a deep bow our way. “How could I be of assistance?”

“Valakia, you saw Nevermore last night around eleven, correct?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t sense that there was anything wrong with him at the time.” *Aside from his personality, of course.*

“He’s the last person we know to have seen Nevermore before he was attacked.” I had told them about it earlier—part of me worried that I’d be suspected, but there was no way anyone would believe a weakling like me could defeat that monster. “So, Mr. Wisborg—could you tell us about everyone’s movements between eleven last night and one in the morning? Everything that your familiars caught, of course.”

“...I hesitate to violate the privacy of our dear guests, but I suppose there are more important matters at hand. Very well.” Wisborg took a few moments to think, unblinkingly staring out into nothing, probably to sort the

large amount of information in his mind. “Allow me to start with those whose actions I can directly verify. Lord Valakia was in the library from eleven until half past midnight. After that, he returned to his room, and wasn’t seen leaving until the morning. Lord Brooks, too, can be accounted for: he was alone in the parlor, and only left after one o’clock.

“Now, as for Lady Valpurga, she entered her room before eleven o’clock and was not seen until the early morning, around five o’clock to be specific. Lady Zamirage is in a similar situation, but I cannot pinpoint the exact time she went to sleep and woke up, only that she wasn’t seen between eleven and six in the morning. And you, Lord Glib the Elder, were seen entering your brother’s room after dinner, where you stayed until approximately two in the morning, after which you returned to your own room.”

“You were together?” I asked.

“That’s right, we shot the breeze for a while,” Sin answered. “May not seem like it, but we haven’t seen each other in almost three years, you know?” *Three years, huh?* That was around when their names started popping up in the news, so I guess they hadn’t seen each other since the Hematolegion incident.

“So you can vouch for each other, then?”

“Well, as much as you can trust our word. We’re family, so it would be natural for us to cover for one another,” Gin said with a wry smile. “By the way, what are the chances that someone did sneak out of their room at some point and wasn’t seen?”

“Lord Nevermore indiscriminately destroyed every familiar he caught sight of, so the disturbance was trivial to notice. On the other hand, if someone skillfully avoided being seen and only destroyed a few familiars, it is possible that they could sneak by.”

“What about multiple people?” I asked.

“Well, if they were traveling as a group, that might be more difficult. It would certainly increase the chances that I would notice them.”

“...In that case, that shark old man should count as two people too.” Rafi murmured quite the indiscreet statement.

“Hmm...” I turned to the Glib brothers. “Of course, I don’t doubt you guys or anything, but just to be sure, is there any way one of you could have slipped out unnoticed when you were together and returned later?”

“No way, man,” Sin replied. “Sure, we weren’t talking constantly, and I was also flipping through a book occasionally, but I never stopped paying attention long enough for him to leave for more than five minutes, maybe.”

“You...read books?” Rafi asked, eyes wide.

“What kind of question is that? Yeah, something wrong with that?” Sin asked, shooting her a glare.

Rafi grabbed my sleeve. “Vio... Give me a book to read later.” *Well, if that’s what gets her motivated, I won’t complain.*

“Err, it’s the same with me,” Gin added. “I was on the couch next to the door for most of that time, so if Sin wanted to leave, he would have had to pass by me. There’s no way I wouldn’t have noticed that.”

“All right, sorry for the weird question.”

“...What about that girl?” Rafi asked. *Right, Wisborg hasn’t mentioned her.*

The servant hesitated for a moment. “..If you mean Lady Penumbra, the truth is, I do not know. In all of her time here, my familiars have only rarely caught sight of her. I’m not sure if she has been destroying any of them, but in all likelihood she is a naturally elusive individual.”

“Um, if I may ask, who exactly is she? No one else appears to know anything about her... But your master invited her here, so she must be a notable person, right?” I’d been wondering about that for a while, so I took the chance to satisfy my curiosity.

“Yes... I believe Lady Penumbra is an old associate of the Master’s. She hasn’t been seen in thousands of years, but has recently resurfaced, and so the Master extended his welcome to her.”

“I see... Do you know anything else about her?”

Wisborg slightly narrowed his eyes, the wrinkles on his face deforming even further. And then, after some time, “...My apologies, but I cannot recall anything more. Her last visit here was before my time.”

“It’s all right, I understand.” *The enigma of Dolly Penumbra continues, it seems.*

Gin, hand to his chin, had been pondering something during our exchange. He addressed Wisborg again. “By the way, none of the familiars caught sight of Nevermore from eleven to one o’clock, right? Does that mean he was unharmed until the tail end of that interval, and had been destroying the familiars passing by the whole time until then?”

“Not necessarily,” Wisborg replied. “Knowing how much the familiars were disturbing Lord Nevermore, I made it so that they would avoid him to the best of their ability. In other words, if they sensed that there was a place in the mansion where a mass slaughter of their own was occurring, they would avoid it.

“Ordinarily, I try to make it so that every part of the manor’s two wings and the guest-accessible portions of the main building are surveyed by one of my familiars at least once every half hour. But it is possible that, in trying

to avoid Lord Nevermore, they may have missed his unconscious body for an hour, maybe even an hour and a half.”

Gin nodded to himself a few times. “Then, is it perhaps possible to track Nevermore’s movements last night by considering every area that wasn’t surveilled for a significant amount of time?”

After another pause to sort the information out in his head, Wisborg reported the following: “There was no sign of him until around halfway through dinnertime, at nine o’clock. He must have been in his room until then. After that, he left and went to the tower in the right wing, where he spent about an hour and a half. Then, he went to the courtyard from the exit in the right wing tower, and he spent half an hour there. After that, he returned to the manor and crossed through the corridors of the right wing and into the lobby, and then entered the third floor left wing. I believe that is around the time you ran into him, Lord Valakia.”

“Okay,” Gin nodded once again. “Thank you very much, Mr. Wisborg. I apologize for distracting you from your work.”

Wisborg bowed. “If you require anything else, anything at all, do not hesitate to ask.”

And so, the hunch-backed servant disappeared into the darkness of the manor.



Having decided on our next course of action, we headed for the right wing. In the meantime, we tried to sort out our thoughts.

“That Penumbra woman is clearly the most suspicious, right?” Sin said flippantly.

“I don’t want to jump to conclusions, but... She is also really old, right? Then maybe she could be strong enough to beat Nevermore,” I added.

“A vampire’s age doesn’t necessarily correlate to their strength, you know?” Gin mentioned. “Just take Miss Rafflesia as an example. She’s the youngest one here, but she’s far stronger than us, Mr. Brooks and Queen Zamira.”

“Hmm. If anything, isn’t her being old a good sign that she’s not that strong?” Sin said. “Think about it: none of us have heard a thing about her, right? If she’s lived that long and was that strong, word would have spread, I imagine. Just like it did with Rafflesia over there.”

In fairness, she hadn't exactly been exercising her strength in a particularly subtle manner, but still, Sin's argument was compelling.

"It's best not to get stuck on one point of view," Gin advised. "For all we know, Wisborg himself might be the culprit. In that case, none of what we've heard would be indicative of anything."

"What? That's nonsense, man. Why would Lord Nachtheim's representative do something like that?" Sin shot back.

"It's not like I think that's the case, but you've got to go through every line of reasoning. If you get stuck on one perspective, you might miss many clues that would have otherwise pointed you to the truth."

That was some salient advice, I thought. I'd certainly experienced something to that effect in the previous incident Rafi and I went through.

"All that aside, here we are," Sin said. We all stopped in front of the door, identical to every other one in the corridor and yet somehow exuding a different kind of pressure. Of course, that was simply because I knew what was on the other side.

We had gone to Nevermore's room. We couldn't go on without a more in depth examination of the body, after all.

After collectively sharing a hesitant glance at one another, Gin stepped forward and opened the door. The interior was not particularly different from the guest room I was assigned. And of course, regardless of how much of an outlaw he'd been, Nevermore hadn't gone so far as to trash it just to make a statement.

We approached the bed. Carefully placed on it was Nevermore's body, still bearing every wound we'd previously seen. Ironically enough, in our circumstance, that was a lot more miraculous than if it had sprung back to life.

Gin took out a knife that he had borrowed from Wisborg and used it to cut open the tattered clothing covering his body, revealing Nevermore's pale, muscular torso. It was covered in cuts, scrapes and bruises, but it lacked the essential point we looked for.

"There's no wound around the chest. Nothing that would suggest his heart being removed, at least." Of course, we took a look at his back too, but again, nothing.

"What the heck, man? Was it the brain instead? Did they scoop it out his ears or what?" Sin was taken aback. Of course, nothing about his head suggested that his brain could have been removed either.

Gin gazed at the state of the body, his palm to his chin. "This is something I just thought of, but—if the culprit wanted to remove the heart without leaving any trace of a wound, then they could have done so. After

extracting it, they could hold it against his skin just long enough for the hole to heal.”

“What? But, wait, wouldn’t all of the small scrapes heal first, before that?” I asked.

“In this case, these wounds take on a different meaning: what we see now is what remains after they *did* heal. In other words, the wounds would have to have been much more severe previously, even more so than a direct hole straight through his chest. And the reason for that could be clear: insurance for the culprit. They would need to keep Nevermore immobilized even as the wound healed, so that he couldn’t wake up and strike back.”

“Okay, but what’s the point in doing all that? It’d be one thing if we found him without a single injury: that’d be creepy as hell, at least. But when he’s covered head to toe in wounds, what’s one more?”

“...You’re right,” Gin said, looking distraught. “Even supposing that my theory was true, some of these wounds don’t look like they could be partially healed. Any worse for some of these deeper cuts on his arm and it would have been severed entirely. That would probably heal differently.”

“What about the drained blood?” I asked.

“Ack, I almost forgot about that,” Sin exclaimed. “That’s weird as hell too. You could say that was also a ploy to keep him immobilized, but then there’d be no point to the wounds. Maybe the culprit was just feeling low on blood.”

“Surely no one here would have felt bloodlust so strong that they’d need an entire human body’s worth, though,” Gin said.

“Is that even possible?” I asked. “Drinking an entire body’s worth. Wouldn’t, uh, wouldn’t that make you very full?”

“It’s not as though there’s any need to actually metabolize all that blood. You should be plenty familiar with the concept of property as a vampire, right? As long as it becomes part of you, you can manipulate it at will—at least, a reasonably powerful vampire could expel that excess mass in the form of familiars, perhaps. And there’s no clearer sign of something becoming a part of you than consumption.”

The more I heard, the more I felt like I was part of a considerably messed up species. At the same time, I felt like I was owed an apology for all those times my stomach hurt after overeating.

“Still, so many things just don’t fit together. At this rate, simply trying to reason it out might not be enough...” Gin said, rubbing his temple.

“Then—why not just check?” Rafi asked, joining the conversation for the first time. “It’s simpler that way.”

“Huh?” I couldn’t quite compute what she was suggesting, but without giving me a second thought, she walked closer to the bed, and raised her arm—and in the next moment, the sleeve of her dress was dyed black. And then, it began to disintegrate, falling apart from the cuff and leaving her entire forearm bare, as the fragments reformed into the shape of inky black bats.

I hadn’t seen her use such a technique before. Normally, she had no problem making familiars out of her surroundings, but it seemed that this was another effect of the mansion inhibiting her powers. So I thought as I watched the scene unfold before me.

Then, their objective decided upon, the bats flew up towards the ceiling, and without hesitation—swan dived below, their crimson eyes leaving a trail as they scored a direct hit on Nevermore’s chest.

Even though a human body should normally be able to withstand that force of a bat flying into them, Nevermore’s chest was instantly obliterated, the bats piercing through skin, flesh and bone with no difficulty. Thankfully, there was no blood to spray, but fragments of his body still flew all around—I would have certainly appreciated a timely warning so that I could avoid the splash zone.

In the next instant, however, those concerns evaporated—before even being given the time to be shocked at Rafi’s savage act, her finding dealt yet another blow.

The bats flew up out of his body—dragging out with them a still lump of meat. It was his heart.

“So,” Rafi turned to the rest of us, “what now?”

The Glib brothers, too, looked at her in wide-eyed shock. The first to recover was Gin, fixing the angle of his hat as he let out an awkward laugh. “My goodness. The thought crossed my mind too, but I didn’t expect you to just go and do this.”

“What’s the harm?” She asked bluntly. “If he’s alive, he’ll just heal, and if he’s dead, it’s not hurting him anyway.”

Both brothers shot me a glance. I could only smile painfully. *Is this how a parent feels when their child acts ill-mannered in public...?*

“Well, whatever,” Sin said, “more importantly—I guess the obvious conclusion was the right one. If there’s no way to remove the heart, that means it’s still there. So what, should we check the brain now?”

“Let’s refrain from any excess violence,” Gin quickly replied, perhaps trying to anticipate another brusque maneuver from Rafi, who had unceremoniously dropped the heart back into the chest hole and was busy recalling her familiars and reforming her sleeve. “It’s clear something else is

at play, but I doubt the body will reveal it. Either he really is dead, or there's something we're missing here."

"Well, there's one more thing I'm curious about," Sin said, taking the knife and approaching Nevermore's face. He lifted the locks of hair flowing down the front of his head, and cut the bandages that covered the left side of his face—revealing the mutilation that lay below.

"Ugh." I couldn't help but wince instinctively—even amidst the backdrop of his mangled body, his face was particularly disturbing. Dark red, leathery skin with the texture of a prune stretched from the left of his nose up to his forehead and right ear. And at its center, a gaping hole which had once housed an eye, filled only with an exposed nerve ending and a mushy, yellowish substance. Whereas the wounds on his body were clearly fresh, this appeared to be an old, irreparable scar.

"Guess the rumors are true," Sin said, a bitter look on his face as he covered the sight back up. "Seems like it's possible to give even a vampire scars. I've got no sympathy for this guy, but I sure don't envy this."

"If you wake up every day seeing that in the mirror, you'll begin to think it's a part of you—eventually the scar becomes more natural to you than its absence. It's certainly a grim ordeal to go through," Gin remarked.

Natural, huh? I could only wonder what a mass murderer would consider natural. Then again, despite all of his self-gratifying talk, I suppose no one could keep hold of their values in the face of suffering like that. Pain to make even the insane go mad—the thought made me shudder.

Perhaps to get away from that thought, I voiced another question that came to mind. "Sorry, I guess this isn't exactly related to the investigation, but—what's the point of a 'core' anyway? Why do vampires have such a thing?"

I fully understood the irony of asking about something which concerned my own body like it was some alien concept, but I couldn't do much else about my ignorance.

"Hmm. Well, I can't give you *the* answer. I don't know why we are the way we are. But—if you want my opinion, I don't think we could exist without something like that. We need something necessary, you know?"

"Something necessary?"

"For a mortal being, things are relatively simple. They have a bunch of organs, each one does its specific function, and if you lose any, well, you'll probably stop functioning and die. But we aren't like that, you know? It might look like it on the surface, but everything about us is ornamental—we don't need limbs or senses or organs. It's something we might prefer having, sure, but if all we're concerned with is life, then it's just set-dressing.

“But that’s a problem, you know? What even are we, at that point? Sure, we might be immortal, but if no part of us is essential then we might as well just collapse into mist for all of the difference it would make—no, we need something to keep us together, and the image of there being at least one indivisible, essential feature is what fulfills that purpose.”

Something essential, huh? I wondered what my core was supposed to be. If you asked me, I’d tell you that every part of my body was essential in its own way. And that explanation made all of it sound like some kind of coping mechanism either way—unless I ever really did wind up getting stabbed or having my organs removed, I figured not worrying about it was probably the wiser option.

“...What happens if you cut the heart in half, then?” Rafi asked.

“It won’t heal unless it’s brought back together. Apparently in ancient times, that was the method used to eliminate vampires until the Sealing Sacrament was invented. It wasn’t a foolproof method, however. There are cases where a vampire can still maintain consciousness, albeit with greatly reduced abilities, even with a piece cut out of their heart, so long as it still retains most of its mass.”

“That’s confusing...”

“Haha, sorry about that. That’s just how it is with vampires. Each individual is so unique that it’s difficult to get more than a general rule of thumb.”

After that, we searched through Nevermore’s belongings, hoping for some kind of clue as to what exactly he’d been up to. Whether it would really lead us to the culprit was doubtful, but we were in desperate need of information, and beggars can’t be choosers.

“He’s not the type to helpfully leave behind a diary filled with all of his thoughts, is he?” I mumbled as I looked through a wardrobe.

“You really think this guy would be that diligent?” Sin snorted from beside me as he checked behind a cabinet.

“Hey, it’s not good to judge people based on appearances. That’s only gotten more pertinent since I’ve arrived here.” Of course, I wasn’t really expecting any such convenient developments, but it couldn’t hurt to hope.

“Well, it’s not a diary, but I may have found something interesting.” Gin’s voice reached us from the other end of the room. Turning around to look at him, we saw a piece of paper in his hand.

“What’s that?”

“It looks like a map.” Spreading it out on the desk, we saw a map of the Dukedom of Grimgrave. Atop the yellowish paper and faded ink contours of every major city, we saw a few marks clearly drawn on top of the completed

map. More specifically, about five cities had circles drawn over them in what looked like pencil. And another circle had been drawn over a different region—the Cursed Forest of Heartpfahl. Beside it, scrawled in nigh illegible handwriting, was a single word—‘Bingo’.

“Well, what to make of this...?” There was no other hint as to what the circles were meant to represent. This may have been enough for the man himself, but from an outside perspective it was difficult to piece together what the intention was. I could tell that not all of the circles were written with the same implement, so he must have likely been updating this map over time, whatever it meant.

“Well, this sure is an old map. Outdated, too.” Sin remarked.

“What do you mean?” I asked. Instead of replying, Sin just pointed at one of the circled cities—it was only then that its name finally clicked with me.

Ruthven Port—it was a city that no longer existed on any modern map. To put it plainly, it was a ghost town. And that was because every single one of its residents had been killed—or, more accurately, swallowed up by the Legion three years ago. It couldn’t have been a pleasant feeling for either of the brothers to have that fact pointed out to them, however.

“If I’m not mistaken, Nevermore escaped Church captivity four years ago. He must have acquired this map before that city’s destruction. Perhaps these have been his destinations since then.”

“That ‘bingo’ makes it seem like he found something he’s been looking for here, though.” Sin said. “I guess he showed up to the conference for the first time in all these years because he was searching for something.”

“What could a guy like him want, though?” I asked.

“Who knows? Money, power, something like that? Immortality doesn’t make people’s motivations any less petty.”

“Thinking about it from his perspective, it seems likely that after twenty years spent captive, he would have been searching for a foothold to reestablish himself in the world.”

“Establish himself? What, like, get a job?” I tried picturing it, but I just couldn’t imagine it. “...Are you sure? He seemed like too much of a renegade to me.”

“Even renegades need a place to belong. Humans can’t truly live alone, and neither can vampires. Not entirely, at least. He would have probably wanted to earn more influence. In that sense, perhaps showing his face here was the goal in and of itself—by reminding us that he existed, that he was an active threat, and that he had a say in our matters, he could build back some of that influence.”

Gin's words made a lot of sense, and yet at the same time I was struck by the obvious simplicity of his point: so even someone who lived in absolute freedom, robbing and killing whoever he pleased, had the need to prove himself to others.

Keeping that thought in the back of my mind, we finished searching the room and, discovering nothing else of importance, we left it behind.



The four of us gathered around the sofas arranged next to the spiral staircase in the right wing tower. We were on the third floor, having taken the hallway connected to Nevermore's room. The top of the tower supposedly held an observatory with a telescope artifact. I was curious to see it the moment I learned of its existence, but I would have to find a more apt moment than the middle of a murder (?) investigation.

Rafi and I sat on the sofas next to each other, while Gin and Sin leaned on the railing around the stairway. Gin was deep in thought, as ever, while Sin just looked tired. Of course, we'd hardly run around enough for him to be feeling physical fatigue, but it was likely the result of mental fatigue. I couldn't blame him—this incident was troubling enough, and contrary to me, who was still more or less an outsider, he was likely also considering all of the political ramifications this might have on their community.

Since we were taking a break, I figured I'd distract them a bit from their worries with a question that had only just now come to me.

“By the way... I'm a little curious, but what do you guys usually do? Err, as an occupation and all.”

In work-centric human society it wasn't uncommon for the first question that adults asked one another to be about each other's respective jobs. But I had spent most of my life pretending to be a child, and on top of that, this abnormal setting had blinded me to such common sense. I already knew that Brooks was a loan shark, being a former queen was likely an occupation in and of itself, and her job was the least prevalent of the mysteries surrounding Dolly Penumbra, but I had yet to ask anything about the brothers.

“Heh, it's refreshing, hearing such a normal question now of all times,” Sin said with a wry grin. Gin looked similarly amused. “Well, not sure if it's

considered an occupation or what, but I spend most of my time helping vampires blend into human society.”

“Oh?”

“There are a lot of weirdos and deviants between our kind, but there are also plenty of normal folk who just want to live regular lives next to people without the fear of being excommunicated. And as far as this nation is concerned, I’m the guy to turn to if you wanna find a job where you won’t attract much suspicion.” Sin wore a proud smile as he spoke. “Well, I guess you haven’t needed any of my services before, but some of the older folk without any humans to trust usually come to me.”

I guess I’ve just joined that category myself. In that sense, I must have been quite lucky to run into someone like him.

He chuckled. “You look pretty surprised. What, I don’t look like I’d be doing a serious job like this, right?”

“Wow...” Rafi, too, looked at Sin in wide-eyed surprise. “I thought you’d be taking care of the coop. You seem like the type.”

“What do you think I am, exactly!?” He said, glaring at her.

“She’s not making fun of you, I swear,” I said, raising my palms up. *Her impressions of the working world are just a little biased.* “Anyhow, I guess I just didn’t peg you as the activist type... Sorry, is that rude?” If I really gave it any thought, I should have realized that he must probably have been an important member of the community for him to be invited to this kind of gathering.

“Well, no wonder if I haven’t seemed very active. Not like I’m raring to waste my time here. If you haven’t noticed, these old farts aren’t prone to sorting out their affairs quickly. We may live forever, but that doesn’t mean there’s nothing better I could be doing right now.”

“Oh, come now...” Gin said, a bitter smile on his face.

I stifled a laugh. Perhaps that’s what they meant by ‘the liveliness of youth’. That did remind me, however—“I’m surprised you’re in charge of something so important given how young you are, though. Err, relatively, of course.”

“Well, it’s something my parents used to do. You shouldn’t think of it as a family business or anything—it’s mostly just something they did to pass the time for a while. But, well, I figured it was a pretty noble one as far as causes go, so why not, right?” he said, shrugging.

It seemed that Sin was a much more admirable person than I’d first given him credit for. *Though it was probably rude of me to not give him that credit to begin with.* Regardless, I was clearly no match for him on that front.

“That’s about it as far as I’m concerned. As for bro...” He grinned impishly. “What do you think?”

“Huh? Oh, well... Same as you, maybe?”

“Oh, no, I’m far too antisocial for that kind of work,” Gin said, waving his hand. He certainly seemed personable enough to me, but maybe he was surprisingly introverted.

“...Teacher, maybe?” Rafi ventured a guess.

“Close enough, I guess.” Sin said, satisfied, as he crossed his arms.

“You think?” Gin said to his brother, before turning to us. “I don’t know if I would call it an occupation as much as it is a hobby, but I’m a scholar, I guess. To be exact, I’m doing research into vampires.”

“Research?”

“There’s certainly a lot to wonder about when it comes to us, don’t you think? Everything from our origin to the nature of our versatile, immortal bodies, it’s all so fascinating.” That spark I’d seen before had once again taken over Gin’s eyes.

Suddenly, his patience in answering all of my ignorant questions had begun to make sense. I’d been unknowingly asking for expert opinions left and right! I was assailed by a wave of retroactive embarrassment at my irreverence, but Gin didn’t seem to notice one way or another.

“As you can see,” Sin said, “he’s quite the fanatic about this stuff.”

“Oh, well, I suppose many would view me as a callous layabout for spending most of my time on this. Immortal though we may be, we certainly face plenty of problems out in the world. But I’m just endlessly curious—I want to know everything about this wonderful existence I’ve been given.”

“Wonderful...?”

Gin raised his palms as he looked up towards the ceiling, his eyes seemingly fixated on something far beyond it. “Of course, I’m sympathetic to humans as fellow forms of life living in this world, but I’m not envious of them, you know? I think we’re quite privileged, to be honest. We are given the option to explore the world for centuries and beyond, gaining all of the knowledge we desire—our bodies can take any ideal shape we yearn for, and even extend itself far beyond the reach of what any other form of life is capable of. That’s something anyone should be envious of, don’t you think?” So he said, briefly glancing at us, before turning his eyes back above. “I want to reach the limits of what this life can achieve.”

“...You mean like, becoming strong?” Rafi asked.

He shook his head. “Violence is only useful for boring, practical things. I’m looking for something a little more abstract.” He paused for a moment,

then continued with a bashful smile. “Well, basically, I’m just looking to be the best version of myself I can be.”

I chuckled. “That’s a hard enough task, whether you’re human or not.”

I didn’t let it show, but his words had definitely unsettled me. The reason was as shallow as ever: whether unconsciously or not, even a year into living as a fugitive vampire, I still put myself in the same category as humans. I had never once thought to offer them any pity—the thought had crossed my mind more than once that I wished I could just be a regular human being.

And yet, when push came to shove, I had selfishly decided to keep living. It was something that humans certainly couldn’t do. I would have to confront what I was sooner or later, but the self-deprecating little voice in my mind knew me all too well: *Even in a hundred years, I’ll probably still be buffoonishly calling myself a regular citizen.*

Rafi looked down. “You two really deserved the invitation here... A lot more than me, at least.”

“Hey, they say your strength is beyond compare, even at your age! You’re an exceptional vampire,” Gin said.

“But you’re the one who said that violence was boring.”

“Err...”

“C’mon now,” Sin cut in as his brother stiffly trailed off, “I told you how pointless this whole charade usually is. Don’t feel bad over this stuff.”

“...Don’t get me wrong,” Rafi said monotonously, her eyes fixed into the darkness beyond. “I’m happy, being treated to yummy food and a good bed. It’s my first time being invited anywhere—I’ve never even seen a house this big. Those are all things I’m glad to get. But maybe... we shouldn’t have come.”

“Why?” Gin asked on behalf of both brothers, their expressions equally serious.

“Um...” Rafi paused. She wasn’t good at speaking, so it took her some time to decide on the words. “My presence here is probably a nuisance. Since it looks like I’m the culprit and all.”

“—Huh?” I let out an involuntary yawp. The others also looked wide-eyed at her.

“Hearing those alibis, me and that doll-like lady are the most suspicious ones. I could probably avoid being detected by the familiars, if I was careful.” Rafi added, still as unaffected as ever. “But I’m the only one here likely to be able to beat that guy, as far as we know. And I also have a motive—since he was trying to bully me.”

I didn’t know what to say as I stared at her profile. Of course, I knew that while she was ignorant about many things, Rafi was by no means

thoughtless, but still, I didn't imagine for a second that she had been thinking about that the whole time. Of course, I thought that I could safely rule her out as a suspect, but whether the others would trust her was a different matter.

"So did you do it?" Taking a step forward, Sin asked that blunt question without any fanfare.

"No... But there's no reason to believe me."

"Didn't think so." Sin heaved a sigh, looking the picture of an exasperated older brother despite being the younger one. "Look, as far as I'm concerned, we're all in the same boat—I don't wanna treat or be treated any differently regardless of age. Still, if you'll forgive me, I'm going to condescend to you a little, just this once."

"Huh?" And then, with his palm up, he formed a fist much like one would when knocking on a door—and he knocked right on the top of Rafi's head. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I felt like I heard a sound not unlike a knock on a door, too. Rafi didn't make a sound, though she did hold a hand to her abused cranium as she glared at her attacker.

"Heh," he grinned playfully. "That's a nice, honest reaction. You're a good kid. So I believe you." Nodding to himself in a self-satisfied manner, he continued, "Of course, I don't doubt that you could kick that guy's ass if you put your mind to it, and I'd root for you if it came down to that. But I don't think you'd go about it like a sneaky liar."

Losing the anger in her eyes, Rafi could only stare at Sin in disbelief. "Why... do you think that?"

"It's an informed decision. Based on your general behavior, and my own gut feeling." He winked, then tussled her hair, much to her chagrin. "So don't worry so much about it. For now, we're a team."

She resumed glaring at him as she put her hair back in order, but I had no doubt that there was plenty of relief mixed in with that annoyance. I sat up and joined Sin's side next to the guardrails. "Thanks for that. I didn't think she had those kinds of worries." *Usually it's my job to be insecure*, I thought, but decided to leave unsaid.

"I just said what was on my mind," he shrugged. "Cute kids like her shouldn't be stressing out so much."

"Couldn't agree more."

I could only hope my weak-willed constitution wasn't rubbing off on her. Whatever the case, I could tell that Sin's words had reached her. Though it would look no different to anyone else's eyes, her footsteps as she walked alongside them would be much more assured.

And what a wonderful thing that is, I thought, seeing the darkness of the corridor from the corner of my eye.



“I need some time to collect my thoughts. And we’re still in need of information—how about you all search the mansion, in the meantime?”

Aimlessly looking for clues, the last resort of the desperate—not that I was unfamiliar with the feeling. Gin hadn’t really specified what exactly to look for, and the smart thing to do would be to keep an open mind and take in every detail—but I think all of us had the same vague idea of what we really wanted to find.

Whatever shape it took, Nevermore’s true heart had to be somewhere. Although it was doubtful that we would just stumble upon the thing stashed in some drawer somewhere.

Nonetheless, menial work like that suited me far better than relaxing in a nobleman’s estate. I decided I would tour the labyrinthine halls of the manor’s central portion.

“You sure,” Rafi asked, “...about going alone?”

I smiled. “It’s more efficient that way. Don’t worry, I won’t get lost, at least.”

And with that, I was off. We had walked through the halls of the central section before, but the layout felt just as unfamiliar, as if the halls and rooms had shifted around just to disorient me. Of course, that was nothing more than an illusion, and the traversal had gone undeniably smoother than previously, but the sense of alienation was just as strong.

I had released Morry, my sole familiar, out to speed up the process. I would leave some rooms to him, while I searched others. When we had previously checked it out, we hadn’t entered every room, but now that I did, I became aware of a certain unsettling reality: most of these rooms were empty.

If not totally bereft of physical objects, they were certainly bereft of meaning. Rooms enshrining sole pieces of furniture or rooms with tables totally lacking in chairs or rooms with floors so full of various minute objects as to render them untraversable.

Dim and gloomy as they were, all of the guest rooms were undeniably opulent, but there was nothing that fit such a description here. A pointless amount of rooms was something to expect in a large, luxurious mansion, but this was a different beast.

When I thought of the prospect that these rooms held some kind of unknowable purpose, a shudder didn't fail to overwhelm me.

Soon enough, though, even that disappeared by virtue of the sheer monotony of it all. It hadn't taken long to conclude that we would find no clues here. They say that you should hide a tree in a forest, but I thought that anything left behind by a culprit acting rationally here would immediately stick out—this place was unfit for things which hold discernible meaning.

Still, I dutifully continued my search, if only just to rule all of this out.

My thoughts began to wander as I passed through the countless rooms and corridors—and as they did, I belatedly managed to put a finger on the strange, unsettling feeling that had taken over me ever since I had arrived here.

This might be a comical thing to realize so late in the game, but I'd only just noticed it—I noticed that I hadn't taken an invitation to someone else's house in many, many years.

Of course, it wasn't like I had never entered another person's residence—only a year ago, I had been welcomed by Rafi's parents during my stay in St. Purgatorio village. However, that had been an unavoidable act of self-preservation. Similarly, I had taken shelter in other people's homes before, and I'd certainly done so over the last year spent on the run. But all of that was different.

The reality was that, whenever I had been extended a friendly invitation to stay at someone else's house, if provided an alternative, I had always refused. Many times, after Vince and Tina would help someone in trouble out, we would all be cordially invited to a hearty dinner, but I had always stayed out of it.

The excuse I'd always used was that I didn't want to get too close to a stranger and have them find out what I was, which was certainly a real concern I had, but it wasn't like I avoided every social event. I attended meals at restaurants and excursions to the outdoors before—but, for over thirty years, I had avoided stepping over the boundary line of others' homes unless strictly necessary.

It occurred to me that I disliked other people's houses. I had lived in many, many houses over my almost seven decades of existence, certainly more than the average human might, and I knew what I liked in a house. And so, being in a place owned by someone else—to be honest, it annoyed me. I always wished that I could rearrange the furniture around to my liking, but, of course, something like that would have been the height of rudeness. Beyond anything else, that was probably my biggest reason—a petty, childish reason though it was.

This was another legend among the many that mortals spread about us: that a vampire could not enter someone's home without an invitation. Naturally, that was nothing more than wishful thinking, a way to suppress the fear—if it so desired, a powerful monster would need no invitation.

And so, snickering to myself, I thought that I could reassure them at least: this monster won't enter your home, whether invited or not!

Though the meandering corridors continued on, my meandering thoughts were interrupted. A rhythmic thump echoed through the halls. Again and again, a blunt, soft sound, like a ball bouncing on the marble floor.

I followed the sound, like it was my guide in a labyrinth. I turned one corner, then another, then another. It was easy to trace, surrounded by perfect silence save for the noise of my steps.

I made one last turn—and then I saw it.

"..." I froze in my tracks, my mouth wide open. Finally, I understood the source of the sound. That soft thump—it was the sound of feet hitting the marble floor.

Before me was a small girl in the midst of dancing. Her shoulders were bare, and she had taken her shoes off. Her long hair glided in the air around her like a bright trail—and so too did her long shadow dance beneath her, the dim lamp mounted on the right wall letting only enough light out to emphasize its presence.

Her movements were perfect. Even though the spins and large gestures would have been physically taxing on a normal person, she didn't show a single sign of strain as she performed her routine, the tips of her feet striking the ground in perfectly calculated fashion and departing just as soon.

Of course, there was no music. She was like a ballerina in a music box that continued spinning even after the song ended. Surely once there had been a melody to accompany her dance, but now it only existed behind her tightly shut eyelids.

She, Dolly Penumbra, danced like a half-forgotten memory.

And then, after what could have been moments or hours which I spent entirely transfixed, as her routine seemed to accelerate towards some climactic finale, spinning again and again in preparation for a grand jump—her dance abruptly ended.

There was no bow to the audience. Perhaps had I heard the musical accompaniment, I could have discerned a conclusion to the story that her movement told, but without that, it seemed as if she had arbitrarily decided to cut it short.

And then, paying me no mind, as if I was transparent to her, she simply walked over to the corner of the corridor, where she collected her boots and jacket and put them on.

After that, she just started walking. In my direction, and yet without looking at me even once. She was just about to pass me by when I managed to squeak out a word to call her attention.

Though I had managed to stop her from leaving, I had no idea what to say. What words could I follow that with. ‘So you like dancing, huh?’ I felt stupid just thinking about how asinine every comment I had was.

“...That was beautiful.” In the end, that was all that I could say.

And, without a single sign of acknowledging it, she resumed her walk.

What should I have asked, then? ‘Excuse me, what were you doing while Nevermore was attacked?’ Would that have been the smarter course of action? What kind of answer was I expecting, anyway?

“Vio Valakia.” As I stewed in regret over words unsaid, she called my name. I could scarcely believe that she would have remembered it, but my ears didn’t lie. I turned around to find her looking at me, for the first time since I had seen her here. Her golden eyes trapped me in place.

And then she spoke again.

“One day... You, too, will feel complete.”

For a moment, I couldn’t breathe.

That had been it, though. She had no more words for me. For just one moment I had been opaque to her, and now I had returned to transparency.

She twirled around in the other direction and walked away, turning the corner and disappearing into the darkness.

I was still transfixed by her afterimage, however—by her gaze.

As she said those words to me... did she smile reassuringly? Or was her face devoid of expression? Even though I had been looking directly at her, strangely, I couldn’t tell.



I finished my search not long after. I hadn’t explored all of the mansion—if that was even possible, as its layout grew increasingly obtuse—but I had seen enough. It had all begun to grate on my mind.

I met up with the others in the lobby. None of them had found anything of importance. Gin was still deep in thought, and none of us had any idea how

to proceed, so we just decided to stand by until someone had a better idea. In other words, faced with a difficult problem, we gave up for the moment.

And like that, a few hours passed doing nothing of particular importance. Before long, it was time for dinner.

The sense of strained tension was unsurprisingly still there, but if anything, it felt underwhelming given the circumstances. Their minds hadn't changed—it did not appear that they would ever take the threat of death seriously.

Gin was quiet for the most part. He must have still been contemplating, though on my end I was struggling to find a single thread of reasoning to grab onto.

And like that, dinner passed in unremarkable fashion.

“Man, what a drag,” Sin yawned. “At this point I’m afraid I’ll die of boredom.”

“There’s certainly no shortage of time to stew in my own thoughts,” I added, smiling bitterly.

“Unfortunately, it seems that tolerance to boredom only strengthens with age. Don’t count on the Conference making any real progress any time soon,” he added, shrugging. “So on that note, Raff and I talked about going up to the observatory. I don’t do well with sunlight, but the night sky never gets old in my book. Wanna come with?”

I’d noticed Sin and Rafi chatting earlier. I was glad to see her getting along with other people without me having to smooth anything over.

“Thank you, but I’m pretty tired right now. Go have fun without me.” I certainly had been feeling pretty drained, in more ways than one. I didn’t think I could keep my spirits up around them.

“All right, suit yourself. You’re not getting out of it next time though, you hear?” Sin pointed, grinning.

“Yeah... thanks.” It was at times like those that I appreciated his consideration.

And so, I was alone. I truly was tired, and I could have immediately gone to my room—but my gut instincts rejected that proposal. My only memories of that room were squirming, sleepless nights—I had begun to resent its luxurious gloom.

For a while, I spent some idle time in the lobby. However, the vast space, its ceiling high enough to be obscured by darkness, was overwhelmingly unsettling, and doubly so when I was alone. And so, in the end, I decided to head for the parlor room. *Maybe I’m starting to understand Queen Zamira’s preference for that couch.*

Upon opening the door to the parlor, I found the evening quiet perturbed by the consistent sounds of chewing. It took a full scan of the room until I saw the presence of another deeper in the room, the ceiling light not fully reaching him. It was Jackal V. V. Brooks, sitting at the counter of the bar, next to the wall. He had a whole roasted duck on a plate in front of him.

“Oh, hey there, son!” he said, hearing my footsteps. “I was so absorbed in my midnight snack here that I almost didn’t notice you!”

“Right...” Not commenting on his ‘snack’, I approached him as I spoke. “Sorry to disturb your meal, I was just looking for a place to unwind.”

“It’s no problem at all! How goes that investigation of yours?”

I frowned instinctively. “It could be better. All I see are question marks at the moment. Not that I’ve exactly been pulling my weight.”

“Well now, don’t lose any sleep over it. As far as I’m concerned, you could very well give the whole endeavor up and it wouldn’t cost me any.”

That might have seemed like a suspicious line in any other circumstances, but I didn’t think the actual culprit could sit here looking this completely relaxed. Or perhaps that was just the peace of mind afforded by all immortals of a certain age. Either way, it didn’t make me feel any better.

“Oh, my apologies. You’re tired, my chatter must be bothering you,” Brooks said, maybe taking note of the bitterness in my expression.

“Oh, not at all,” I said. And then figuring I’d take the opportunity, I threw him a question. “By the way... How exactly did you know Nevermore?”

“I believe I’ve already addressed this, though?” he said, seeming unperturbed.

“I know, but... Forgive me if I am mistaken, but it was my impression that you knew him better than the others did.” His answer back then had seemed pretty evasive, so it remained on my mind.

“Hardly,” he chuckled. “But I suppose we used to share a not insignificant connection long ago. You see, he used to work for me.”

“Really?” *That sure is a not insignificant connection.* Not that it made him any more of a suspect. He had a solid alibi.

“It was over a century ago, but yes. He used to be my debt collector. That’s something he’s long since put behind him, however.”

That was something to ponder, for sure. My mind awash with new possibilities, I inadvertently asked him a rather pointed question. “Are there any unsettled matters between you two?”

He grinned widely, making me aware of just how accusatory I’d accidentally sounded. Before I could blubber a retraction, however, he replied. “Excellent. That’s the best sort of question to ask me. I must disappoint you, however—every debt between us has already been paid.” And then, giving me

a wink, he added, “You’re quite the spirited one, aren’t you? Impressive. He was quite similar, in that respect. A single lifetime was nowhere near enough to mellow him out.”

I must have visibly scowled, since my face prompted a fit of laughter from the old debtor. *Who’d want to be compared to that messed up guy?*

“Ha ha, it seems I’ve said a little too much, my mistake. You wanted to rest, yet here I am harassing you. Not good, not good. I’ll be out of your hair in a moment.” Brooks insisted, nodding his head up and down. “Before that, though, if you’ll allow me, I’d like to offer you a tiny bit of friendly advice.”

“Hm? What is it?”

And with the same light-hearted, cheery demeanor, with his eyes on his meal, he said this to me:

“If you wish to put that young miss in your debt, you will have to give it more effort than this.”

I froze. Sending him an unreturned stare, I could barely squeak out a word. “What?”

“This is merely my impression, but I believe that her budding ego will grow very powerful. I can see it in that resolute gaze of hers—a will strong enough to trample over a flimsy debt. It will take a lot more than that to keep her within your grasp.”

“...Is that what you think I am, Mr. Brooks? A calculating opportunist?” Balling my hands into trembling fists, I mustered as cold a reply as I could manage.

“It sure seems to me like you have a good head on your shoulders, son,” he replied, unperturbed. “Who wouldn’t want to maintain a reciprocal relationship with such a promising individual?”

I turned my back to him. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t try to push that way of thinking on me, sir.” I fully intended to leave the parlor, but he stopped me with another jovial remark.

“Now, now, don’t take offense, lad. I don’t mean to insinuate anything untoward about your character,” he said, chuckling. “No, far from it—what I speak of is common sense, ingrained in any and all, whomever they may be.”

“...What do you mean?” Peeved though I still was, I couldn’t help being curious.

“Listen now, boy,” Brooks looked me in the eye. “It’s because I am a money lender that I am particularly attentive to relationships of obligation between people. What I have come to realize is that inside every sentient being there exists the aptitude of the debt collector.

“To put it plainly, the only relationship that can exist between people is that of debt: to owe, and to be owed. Everything else is merely an extension

of that. Now, human beings are fundamentally materialistic—what matters most to them is having a bite to eat and a roof over their head. Under these circumstances, what gain is there in expending their finite resources, be they time, money or food, on others? The answer is clear: the expectation of something in return. Kindness is quid pro quo—it is the creation of a debt, which shall be paid in goodwill and future aid. That is the meaning behind every human relation.”

It might have been foolish to expect anything else from Jigtime Jack, possessor of a fortune built on the collection of debts, but I was nonetheless stunned by his worldview, which he espoused with a perfectly even countenance, devoid of any sign of hyperbole.

“You appear unconvinced,” he chuckled. “But tell me—you seem to me like a decent fellow. You must have helped at least one person out in your life, right?”

I had, of course. And more than that, I had borne witness to Vince and Tina, born meddlers, helping out countless people in the past.

“So, then, what was their response? I’m willing to bet it was goodwill, in most cases. It would be unnatural otherwise, no? You would find it deeply repulsive if your own kindness was met by a disproportional level of goodwill, or indeed even malice. You might even begin to question why you’d bothered to help in the first place. That reaction would be most appropriate—there is hardly anything more troubling in this world than an unpaid debt.”

“I—it’s normal to expect to be treated well when you do something nice for someone, but that doesn’t mean people only do good things because they expect something in return!”

“—Is that what you truly believe?” he asked, giving me a piercing glare. “Have you ever done something for someone else with not a single expectation of recompense? Or do you merely believe that there must exist some saintly individual out there who does?”

“...”

“Respect, camaraderie, love—these are not mysteries. They are measurable, calculable debts. That is the clockwork which this world runs on, hidden in plain sight.”

There was no use contradicting his point of view. There was nothing I could say that could refute a philosophy which had lasted seven hundred years. So instead I asked a simple question. “...Why be a money lender, then? If you say you know the perfect formula to gaining recognition from others, why not spend your life doing that? Surely you’ve no real need for all of that money.”



That was the first thing which gave Brooks pause. His smile hid a trace of consternation. “Unlike humans, you know, vampires are not bound by materialism. We are blessed with an infinite amount of the ultimate resource: time. Fostering a debt of gratitude which might hold firm even in the face of an eternity is a difficult task indeed. Hence my warning to you.

“Ultimately, a material debt will simply hold much longer against the sands of time. It is a sad day indeed that I have to collect on said debt—I only do it because otherwise the strength of the relationship will be put into question. Even as the substance of gratitude melts into nothing, the ink signed on a contract holds strong.”

“How...” I hesitated, my head held low. “How is it possible that being loved and being hated hold the same value to you?”

He took another bite of his meal. “—I have been given an eternity in a world not built for it. I refuse to spend this existence sleeping with my eyes open. I must have a place in this grand system. But all things weaken with time, all things deteriorate. All except for interest—that alone shall only grow.”

So he said, his smile wide and carefree—and his eyes like empty holes, with no trace of anything behind them.

“Now then, if my advice has been of any use to you at all, just remember if you will, son—you’re in my debt, now.”

His meal finished, Brooks sat up, leaving the large empty plate behind on the counter, and with no other words, passed by my couch and left the room, walking close to the wall—smile still plastered on his face.



After an indeterminate amount of time spent staring blankly at the wall, I decided to finally head to my room. I was dead tired, but I had no doubt I’d be unable to sleep—my racing mind made that much clear.

I saw no one as I navigated the hallways. The darkness and deathly silence made the mansion the spitting image of an abandoned ruin. A few minutes of dragging my feet later, I was in front of the large door to my room.

I stole a glance to the neighboring room’s door. Had Rafi returned by now?

A tremor passed through me. I felt my mouth dry up. My legs wobbled as I was assailed by the pangs. I had inadvertently walked over to her door,

and my hand involuntarily reached toward it, but—I stopped before I could knock.

“I wouldn’t want to wake her up,” I whispered, making excuses to no one in particular. For whom was I putting up appearances, I wondered.

I wobbled back to my door, and stepped inside. Immediately, I collapsed face-first onto the bed. As expected, I couldn’t see myself falling asleep any time soon, but I also didn’t have the energy to do anything except lie there. You might call it the worst of both worlds.

Turning myself over on my back, I called out to my familiar. The cute, small bat popped his head out of my shirt and energetically flapped his wings above me. I had to thank him for all that work I’d made him do earlier.

Maurice, or Morry for short, as named by Vince and nicknamed by Tina, had been with me for so long that I hardly remembered a time when he hadn’t. It was back when I myself first realized I was a vampire, before even Vince or Tina did, that he first manifested. After I heard some rumors about vampires and their scores of familiars, I did my very best to create my own. I no longer remember how long it took, but knowing me, it must have been quite the struggle.

Come to think of it, I guess one might call that the first and last time I had ever tried to use a vampiric ability—up until that day, next to her deathbed. I suppose I’d never had a reason to, after that, having found those who would accept me.

I was all right with that, though. If we’re talking about special abilities, then familiars must truly be the best. It was like a pet that you could call out to play with you whenever and wherever you wanted, with no extra hassle. Of course, someone like Rafi could easily conjure up a hundred of those suckers, but I wasn’t jealous about something like that. It was a matter of quality over quantity. So I thought, as I rubbed Morry below his ears, listening to all of the pleased squeaks he let out with a smile on my face.

Conversely, I’d never gotten particularly attached to any other animal. We’d kept plenty of pets over the years—the usual, like abandoned cats or injured birds, and even some huge, exotic canines that Vince had distressingly dragged in. But I’d never really been able to connect with any of them. This is a rather humiliating thing to admit, but I always felt awkward around them. When I tried to speak with them, it always came out overly formal. And when they looked at me, I couldn’t help but feel like I was being judged. When I think of it that way, it was truly impressive to be so insecure that even animals made me feel self-conscious.

But Morry never made me feel like that. I could play with him without worry, and I could be sure that he would always be happy to help me out in a pinch.

So I thought, a wide grin on my face, and then a moment later the grin was gone. I took my hand away from him, and called the familiar back into me. And then I sat perfectly still, showing no impropriety.

Still, I couldn't help but shiver—because once again, I felt someone's eyes on me.

I crawled further into the huge bed, burying my face in the soft pillows, but it didn't help. That if you just closed your eyes, no one else would see you—I could only dream of being birdbrained enough to really believe that.

While I'm here anyway, laying all my faults bare, I might as well admit to something else I'd never want anyone to know.

That villainous, greedy philosophy that Brooks had espoused to me, while plainly incomplete and refutable by even a child—while I was disgusted by it, there was also a tiny part of me that found it so incredibly fascinating, if only it were true.

Because it would mean that the bonds which Vincent Valakia and Valentina Valakia had forged were a simple, concrete affair. A calculable transaction of services, helping someone out and in exchange being liked by them. It would mean there was nothing inherent about those two which made it such a trivial effort for them to connect with others. It was simply an action and its predictable reaction, a law of nature, even. And it would mean—that if only I followed the exact same steps, I too could achieve the same result.

Wouldn't that be so wonderful and easy?

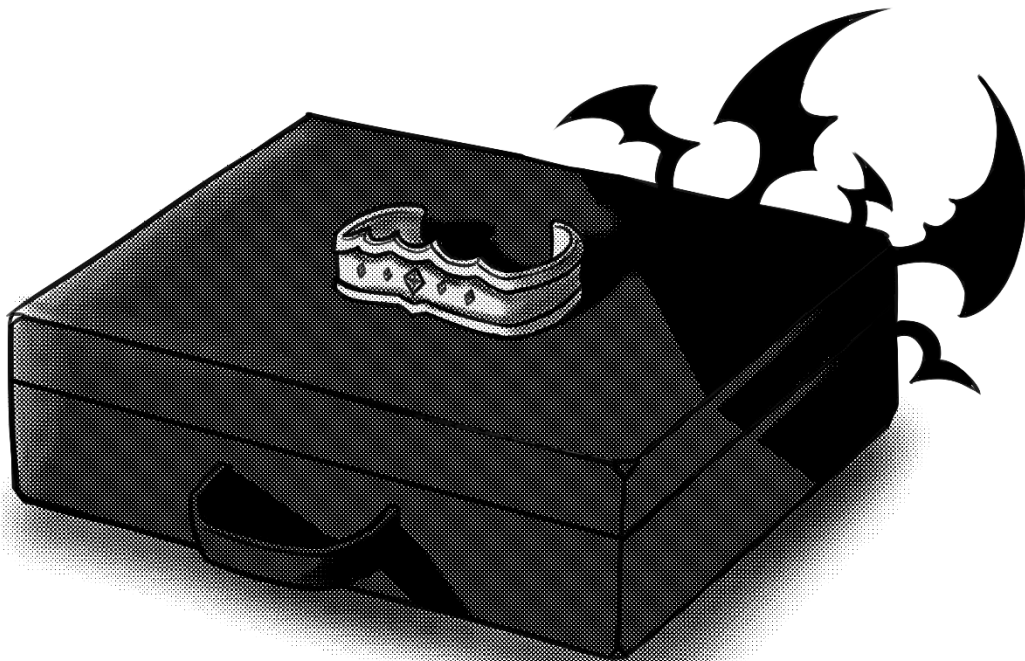
I don't know when it was that I fell asleep that night. I only know that, at some point, the Devil gave me his wisdom:

Follow a principle. Even when love fades, your body will recall the motions.

◆ Record 10 ◆

Dead End Day

「 The Devil
in the Details 」



My eyes snapped open.

That violent transition into wakefulness was the only thing which proved that I had really slept. I had no memory of when I'd managed to fall asleep.

I felt an unusual sensation, but for the moment I decided to ignore it as I tried to ascertain the circumstances. I walked over to the thick, opaque curtains on the room's sole window and lifted them, allowing me to see that the sun was high in the sky. It appeared to be past noon. I had overslept, again.

Rafi didn't wake me up today, huh? Pondering that fact, I brought my hand over to my chin, and in doing so finally noticed the source of the discomfort I had been feeling.

Something of foreign origin was around my face.

I ran over to the room's private restroom, which held the only available mirror, to look over myself. I could only stare at my own face in wide-eyed surprise.

My mouth, chin and cheeks were caked in dried blood. I looked like I'd been forced to eat tomato stew with my hands tied behind my back.

"What the heck is this...?" Needless to say, I had no memory of how something like this could have come about. Was this just some sort of prank?

However, I also felt it first-hand. Compared to the previous day, I felt much more composed and at ease. My urge had been sated.

Did I... do this? I pondered the idea of having done something and forgotten it, or perhaps having sleepwalked, but none of it seemed likely. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

How am I supposed to ask about something like this? Wondering that all the while, I wiped my face clean.

After spending some time making myself presentable, I stepped out of my room. My door had been locked, a precaution I'd made a habit of. First, I knocked on the neighboring door to Rafi's bedroom, but there was no reply. Cautiously, I reached for the doorknob and, finding it unlocked, I cracked the door open and poked my head inside. It was empty. I didn't hear any sounds suggesting that Rafi was in the bathroom, and the messy unmade bed was in the exact form I would expect her to leave it in.

I guess she already left. The blood from earlier left me in an anxious state, but there was no reason to suspect anything bad had happened. And so, I decided to head for the parlor room, as had become customary at this point.

And when I got there, sure enough:

"Good morning."

"Oh, hey, you're finally up."

Rafi greeted me, followed by Sin. Zamira was there too, waving half-heartedly at me from her sofa.

"Hey, what are you guys doing?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing much. Just playing some cards." True enough, they each held a couple of cards in their hands. "This kid's unpredictable as hell, not to mention that poker face of hers. She has the potential to become a master at this stuff—if only she'd learn to have a little foresight." Sin grinned as he revealed his hand. It seemed that he'd won, because Rafi sent him an icy glare in response as she let her own cards fall onto the table.

"Oh? Are you trying to look cool, boy?" Zamira asked from the back. "Boasting like that, even though she has about the same number of wins as you do."

"Hey, the peanut gallery ought to keep quiet!"

I chuckled as I watched them, before turning to Rafi. "Err, you didn't wake me up today."

She gave me a blank stare. "I figured you wanted to sleep more. Should I have?"

"N-no, it's fine. Sorry, I'm still having trouble sleeping here."

“The vibe’s a little gloomy for sure, but I for one can’t complain about the bedding,” Sin added. “Not like I’ve got a permanent home with a bed I can miss these days. I’m sure it’s the same for you.”

“True enough,” I nodded. “By the way, where’s Gin?”

“Guess he’s still asleep. He was up late last night thinking about the case.”

I once again felt a pang of guilt leaving everything up to Gin. Shaking that off, I decided to try and ask about the blood, but as I tried to come up with a good way of broaching the subject, my train of thought was interrupted by the door to the parlor being opened.

“Speak of the devil, eh?” Sin remarked. It was Gin, looking as composed as ever, though with an undeniable trace of fatigue on his features. After we all shared greetings, he spoke to everyone present.

“Unfortunately, our biggest problem in solving the case is a lack of information. I’ve come up with plenty of possibilities, but there’s no way to prove or disprove any of them. If we want to progress, we’re going to need a new angle. So, to that end, though this might be a somewhat desperate approach, I want to hear everyone’s alibis from their own mouths.”

We had been relying on Wisborg’s testimony as far as establishing alibis went, but there was still merit in interrogating everyone directly. In the best case scenario, the culprit might slip up and contradict something.

To that end, Gin called for Wisborg’s assistance in getting the other two absentees to show up. Once everyone had gathered, we would go from there.

At the very least, that should have been the case. We had all been naive in thinking this would be the end of the quagmire.

The Devil’s banquet wouldn’t end so easily.



The location was the private room of Jackal V. V. Brooks. Wisborg had located Dolly Penumbra after a while, but Brooks was nowhere to be seen. After consulting his familiars, it turned out that Brooks had not been observed leaving his room since he’d turned in the prior evening. We eventually decided to wake him up, which led to the discovery that had all of us standing stock-still in his doorway.

We had all only been called there after the fact, but according to Wisborg, his door had been unlocked. And behind it—an even more frighteningly alien sight.

The room was bright. Bright enough that for a moment I was shocked—I'd gotten so accustomed to the perpetual dim gloom of the manor that this relatively normal light level left me squinting.

And in the center of the room, lying crumpled on the floor was a large black silhouette. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust enough that I could discern its exact shape: the prone figure of the loan shark.

Jackal V. V. Brooks was lying there.

That was the extent of what I could say. There was no other information at my disposal.

Unlike the previously discovered body of Nevermore, Brooks appeared entirely unharmed. His face was stuck in the same expression of mild amusement he always wore—that he appeared so normal only drove home the abnormality of his immobile state even further.

He truly looked like he had merely *stopped*, and that he would get back up and act the same as ever any second now.

Was this—what death looked like, for a vampire?

“What... What do we do about this, huh?” Sin wore a shaky grin on his face as he scratched the back of his head. His conscious attempt to seem in control of himself was transparent. He was clearly disturbed. Whereas the attack on Nevermore could easily have been rationalized as a comprehensible action with an understandable motive, this was something far different. He must have felt it in his gut, just as I did—there was something horribly wrong at play.

Gin looked on in shock, his mouth flapping open. Not even he could ever have anticipated this. None of us were much better—only Dolly Penumbra could maintain her statuesque neutrality.

“...We need to... we should examine him.” Eventually, Gin managed to squeeze that hesitant suggestion out.

Wisborg and Gin performed the act while the rest of us simply watched. The results were as haunting as we had feared: Brooks bore not a single wound.

“...Haha.” A dry laugh escaped my throat. It was almost unconscious. I had simply come to a certain realization.

Even though there was no locked door in either case, what we were dealing with was a case of serial locked rooms.

The hearts of these two vampires were locked inside their chests. Therefore—how had they been incapacitated?

Framing the question like that was a way of comforting myself, in a sense. After all, locked room murders don't truly exist, they are merely tricks. And so, in thinking of it that way, I removed the most horrifying possibility of all.

That what I bore witness to was the true death of a vampire.



After we had all calmed down to the best of our respective abilities, I volunteered to help search the room, just like before. Most of us did—only Zamira and Penumbra opted to sit the search out, disappearing somewhere off into the hallways of the manor.

While I filed through some empty cabinets, I addressed the servant. “By the way, Mr. Wisborg, why is it so bright in here?”

“It is nothing particularly unusual,” Wisborg said. “Aside from the regular candles, each room is fitted with a light-giving artifact. The brightness can be adjusted to your preference.” He pointed a bony finger to the center of the ceiling, where a light fixture was located. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of laying my eyes directly on it, which I imagine must not have been too unlike staring directly into the sun.

“Would you like me to show you how to adjust the light in your own room?”

“Eh? Ah, no thanks.” I wouldn't have minded a little more light in this dreary place, but having only my room be this bright would have just made the contrast with the rest of the manor that much worse.

“Any luck over there? I can't find a single interesting thing around here,” a haggard Sin said. Unfortunately, I had no good news to offer: the room seemed almost untouched. With five people searching, it was unlikely that we would have missed any kind of clue, but far from a clue, there weren't even any belongings to be seen. I would have expected a rich man to bring more luggage with him, but the only thing we could see which separated this room from an unused one was the presence of one briefcase.

“Well, shall we?” Gin made sure to ask.

“If the old man's got a problem with it, he'll have to sit up and give it to us straight,” Sin grumbled as he knelt down and grabbed the handle of the briefcase. We all unconsciously leaned closer in anticipation as he fiddled

with the clasps. A moment later, with a satisfying popping sound, the case was open, its contents bare for all to see.

“...” Far from elucidating us, however, they only thickened the fog we found ourselves in. After all, the briefcase was completely empty.

Having uncovered nothing, we dragged our feet back to the parlor, where we found Queen Zamira and Dolly Penumbra waiting. I guess whatever questions they might have had, our expressions already answered, because they didn't say anything. So instead, Gin hesitantly stepped forward.

“Things have only gotten more and more complicated, but, well, how about we start with what I called you here for to begin with.” He eyed everyone there one by one. “Could everyone say what they were doing last night, and the night before?”

“No need to be so tactful.” Zamira flapped her hand back and forth, her head on the sofa's handrest. “It's me and that girl you really want to hear from, right?”

“...Now that another incident has taken place, we are all in the same boat.”

“Incident, huh?” Zamira muttered, grinning.

“Surely you too must agree that something very unnatural is happening by now. None of us can afford to leave this unchecked anymore.”

“Sure, sure, I'm in full agreement. I won't object, whatever you propose.” So she said, but she didn't appear to be taking this any more seriously. *Even after seeing that, she's not worried at all?* I for one couldn't wrap my mind around it.

“...I'll start with myself. Mr. Wisborg, please confirm whatever you can.” Gin explained both his and Sin's alibi for the night of the Nevermore attack. “As for last night, I've been in my room since dinner.”

“...I saw Mr. Brooks late at night in the parlor,” I said. “He left before me, around midnight. I returned to my room at about one in the morning.”

“This girl and I were at the observatory 'till midnight. We walked back to the left wing together, then split off to our respective rooms. You went straight to yours too, right?” Prompted by Sin, Rafi nodded, then explained her alibi for the previous night.

“Suppose it's my turn, right?” As if expending great effort, Zamira sat upright on the sofa and faced us. “Two nights ago I retired to my room early, before the crime happened. You should know that much. I was asleep the entire night; I don't have any better excuses than that. As for last night, those two can attest that I was at the observatory when they got there. I left shortly

after, and went on a late-night stroll through the courtyard. I came back to the mansion at two in the morning, and spent the rest of the night on the couch in the parlor; I'm sure Wisborg will have seen me at some point."

"..." Rafi narrowed her eyes for a moment.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Gin bowed.

"Oh, spare me." With an ironic twist of her mouth, she laid back down.

"...I will begin by stating that I was alone in my quarters during both nights. Forgive me, but my word is all that I have to give." Wisborg spoke, his slow, wispy voice sounding as if every methodical word he got out took great effort. "As regards everyone's testimonies until now, there is no inconsistency that I have been able to ascertain—however, there is one distinction that I must point out."

Feeling his tone to be meaningful, we all paid close attention to his next sentence.

"To be perfectly accurate, in the case of Lord Nevermore, I have not been able to confirm the exact moments of Lady Zamirage entering and leaving her room, nor of Lady Valpurga leaving her room in the morning. But I've not spotted any inconsistency in her testimony either, and the locations where they were first and last spotted match their word."

"Since Nevermore had been occupying the left wing, Mr. Wisborg's familiars should have been concentrated in the right wing, where Miss Zamira's room was situated." Gin said, a hand to his chin. "Do you have anything to add?"

"Not particularly." I thought she would leave it at that for a moment, but after stifling a yawn, she continued. "It's not like you made those critters explicitly spy on us, did you? Them not seeing the exact moment of my opening my door isn't so strange; same with that girl. Unlucky for me that it would happen twice in a night, but the odds are not so low as to make it impossible, are they?"

"...Lady Zamirage is correct." He bowed his crooked back. "If my foolhardy observations have served to cast aspersions on your reputation, I can but offer my deepest apologies."

"All that aside, this one still hasn't said anything." Sin pointed at the small shadow in the corner of the room. I had almost forgotten about her being there—so weak was the presence of Dolly Penumbra, who hadn't offered a single word. Even as the room's attention was poured on her, she continued her steadfast silence. Eventually, Sin's impatience must have gotten the best of him, as he raised his voice at her. "Hey, did you hear me? That was your cue to start talking, lady."

His rude tone might have upset her, or it might not have had any effect at all. Perhaps her golden eyes had narrowed a little, though I wasn't sure of even that. All I can attest was the fact that she wordlessly stared back. That alone was enough to make the brash Sin swallow whatever other words he had.

Looking back on it, I don't think that was the result of any particular gesture she had made, any sign of intimidation she exerted. I think it was just the natural result of looking her in the eye, of acknowledging her presence. She faded into the background, out of mind even as she lingered in the corner of one's eyes—but her gaze felt like it could swallow you whole.

It wasn't for long that we were subjected to it, however. Shortly after that, she turned around and began walking. It took a few moments of staring at her in disbelief before we realized that she was heading toward the exit of the parlor.

"H-hey, wait! Where are you going?" Somewhat regaining his cool, Sin yelled after her, but Dolly Penumbra only left us one last backward glance before she disappeared from the scene.

Needless to say, we didn't know what to make of that. Soon enough, the sound of Sin's foot stomping on the floor echoed around the parlor. "What the hell is her deal!? She might as well be admitting she's the culprit, don't you think?"

Gin placed a hand on his brother's shoulder as he made a troubled smile. "We can't draw conclusions just based on that. You know how uncooperative old vampires can be."

"Still though... *Tch.*" All he could do was click his tongue and cross his arms.

After that, we discussed Brooks' movements on the previous day, but there wasn't much of interest there. He did in fact enter his room shortly after he had parted ways with me in the parlor last night, and he wasn't seen again until we found him that morning. Everything else he did before that seemed unremarkable.

We also theorized on the state of his body, but that was even more hopeless. In the end, the only plausible theory anyone could posit was that Brooks was simply playing dead. With seven hundred years under his belt, it was possible he had learned how to consciously stop breathing. But dismissing all of it as a prank didn't sit right with any of us, and it didn't explain Nevermore's state besides.

Feeling not the least bit like we'd made any progress, Gin reluctantly said that we could all go our separate ways for the moment, not without

urging us to be careful. What being careful even meant, none of us probably knew.



Using a door situated at the back of the kitchen storeroom, I stepped out into the backyard of the manor. It was the only way of reaching the backyard from the main part of the building, without either using the doors at the base of the towers or simply walking around the building. I had found that odd, but once I actually laid eyes on what constituted that backyard, it began to make a lot more sense.

To put it simply, it was nothing. An empty plot of land filled with yellowish grass rising above one's shins, it was only made distinct from the wild land around it by the lack of trees. Even the building itself seemed bereft of detail from the back—without any intricate facade to speak of, it only looked like a looming behemoth of stone.

I hadn't come out here looking for a fancy gazebo to admire, though, so that suited me just fine. It was still midday, and the sun was high in the sky—that wouldn't do my skin any good, but I wasn't the type to burst into flames either, so I would bear it. I set out on the footpath splitting the yard in two, the only place where the foliage wouldn't get in the way.

I had come here to talk to a certain someone that I'd seen making her way outside. I quickly noticed her near the border between the yard and the wild forest beyond. The looming shadow just barely failed to reach her. Consequently, her back was bathed in sunlight, a long shadow stretching out from her feet and into the wilderness beyond. As I made my approach, stopping just in time to avoid the direct rays of the sun, that shadow stirred—Dolly Penumbra craned her neck in my direction.

"I'm not here to accuse you of anything," I began. "But, why did you refuse to talk? Won't you tell me?"

Silence stretched on. I grew certain that she would walk away just as before, but perhaps on a mere whim, she spoke back.

"It is pointless."

"Is that so...?" I frowned. "Is that because they wouldn't believe you, no matter what you said? Or because you don't think we have any shot of solving this?"

No response. She just stared at me, back still turned. I coughed drily, then tried a different tack. “Um, what do you think about the case?”

She shifted her gaze to the manor behind me. Another long silence, and then, “...Still haven’t found it.” Her muttered response resonated meaningfully to my ears.

“I thought that you must have been looking for something in this manor. You won’t tell me what that is, will you?”

Silence again. It was too much to hope for. I didn’t push her.

“I won’t get in your way. Maybe this is foolish of me, but I trust—I trust that whatever you are here to do will help solve this affair. Something that will help us.” Perhaps I didn’t sound convincing even to myself, because words kept pouring out of me. “I—I know it must be selfish to push that onto you. I don’t have any good basis for it. But it’s how I feel, so...”

My gaze was directed downward, so I couldn’t see her face, but I felt for a split second that I saw her don a smile. When my wide-open eyes darted up, however, all I saw was the same expressionless visage that she’d always maintained. Had I merely imagined it? At that moment, I couldn’t be sure.

Now, though, I think I have a good guess.

She scrutinized me with her mesmerizing golden gaze—at the very least, that was what I felt as I bore her look for an agonizing minute.

In the end, we had no more words to exchange. It was her who had decided it so, because she turned her side to me, and began walking to the right. Following along the wall of trees beside her, she walked the whole right half of the yard’s perimeter, eventually reaching the entrance of the tower and entering the manor.

Rooted to the spot, I watched her for that entire time. I wasn’t sure why, but I couldn’t take my eyes off of her at that moment. Perhaps it was due to her ephemeral nature, like she would vanish the very second your eyes left her—I felt that if I lost sight of her then, I would miss something very, very important.

It was only when I noticed that the shadow of the manor had very subtly widened, signaling that the Sun itself had moved, that I awoke from my reverie. A feeling of something being amiss still nagged at me, but I would achieve nothing if I just let my thoughts ferment like that.

With a sigh, I turned away from the light and walked back to the Homesick Manor.



I used the same door that I'd come out through, which took me into the pitch-black storeroom at the back of the kitchen. I had to walk slowly with arms out to my sides in order to avoid bumping into anything. After about a minute of that, and another minute of fumbling around the wall, I finally took hold of the doorknob and opened the door into the kitchen.

I involuntarily breathed out a sigh of relief as I regained the use of the most reliable of my senses. In doing so, however, I took note of a difference in the kitchen. Something about it had changed. Late by a few seconds, my eyes were at last drawn to the source of that alteration.

A dark pole standing at the center of the room—that was my brain's split-second interpretation of the sight of Nosferious Wisborg, standing stock-still with his back turned to me. It took another moment for me to consider why I found the sight of him so odd—yes, he hadn't turned to me. He would naturally have heard me enter, but he didn't so much as sneak a glance in my direction. When someone enters a room, it is a universal instinct to look their way. This was strange.

I called out his name, but he showed no reaction, not even a shudder. It was like he hadn't even heard me.

My heartbeat accelerated. Instinctively, I shuddered at the recognition of this unnatural situation. Still, I couldn't freeze in place over something like this. I began to approach him.

With careful steps, and with my head inclined so as to see as much of his face as I could, I walked closer. Rounding the corner of his crooked back, the side of his pale bald head came more and more into view.

A shiver started to build up in my spine as his facial features came closer and closer into focus—and it completely overwhelmed me as his visage was fully revealed.

His sharp teeth clenched and unclenched visibly inside his open-mouth, from which saliva dripped like water from a faucet. A raspy hiss emanated from his throat, like someone was rubbing sandpaper on his vocal chords. His nose was wrinkled in a snarl, deepening the crevices on his face, and his eyes were rolled into the back of his head, dark purple veins so clear that I thought the connecting tissue between his eyeballs and his skull must have snapped entirely.

I couldn't understand what could have driven this man, any man, to make an expression as monstrous as that. Perhaps that in itself frightened me far more than the view itself.

With a whimper, I stumbled backwards, hitting my back against one of the kitchen counters, my flailing arms knocking several pots around in the process. I suppose the clatter was finally enough to snap the servant out of whatever had possessed him—his eyes returned to their regular positions, snapping onto me. Gradually, he regained control of the rest of his face, and soon enough it returned to its normal state.

He panted wearily, taking some time to compose himself. And then, he turned to me, and bowed deeply.

"I am deeply sorry that you had to see such a disagreeable sight." I don't know exactly what I was expecting, but Wisborg seemed to be his usual self. Noticing that, I also regained my composure, fixing my posture and putting everything I knocked over back in its place.

"N-no, that was terribly rude of me. I just wasn't expecting..." I trailed off. Now that I had calmed down, my mind had begun to sort together what I'd just seen. A certain hypothesis had floated up to the surface, overtaking the chaos.

Wisborg raised his head, and our eyes met. He seemed to be able to tell what I had in mind, but said nothing. And so, I decided to put it into words myself.

"Umm, Mr. Wisborg, could it be that... you haven't been drinking any blood?"

Far stronger than the desire for food, vampires have an urge to drink blood. It could even be called our core characteristic, second only to immortality. Bloodlust is only a psychological impairment—the effects of fatigue after prolonged neglect of this need are merely the mind limiting the body. Still, I couldn't imagine trying to suppress it—if anything, I felt like it had only gotten stronger the more I aged. Indeed, over the course of the past year, it had become clear that Rafi needed way less blood than I did to suppress her urges.

Given that, though, I had to imagine that not drinking blood would have been even harder on Wisborg than on myself. He appeared tranquil, however, as he pondered my question.

"At my age, I've come to rely on the presence of hardships much more than desire their alleviation," he finally responded. "Please, worry not for my sake."

“But, that...” It looked like much more than a simple hardship. “Is it because your master hasn’t been around for a while? You haven’t been able to rely on him for blood?”

He let out what sounded like a raspy chuckle, though it was difficult to discern smile from scowl on his face. “I do not bother the Master with such trifles. I typically source blood from the wildlife in this forest, but I have been preoccupied with maintaining the house for you guests as of late.”

“Wildlife? You mean... animals?” I couldn’t hide my shock. It was possible to drink blood from animals, but it wasn’t something that many did. It may have been because the memories of an animal simply weren’t compatible with the human mind, but animal blood tended to leave a bad feeling in its wake, and it wasn’t as efficient in assuaging bloodlust either.

Besides, the forest had seemed deserted while we trekked through it, so much so that I hadn’t even been sure there were any animals to be found here to begin with.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You shouldn’t neglect yourself for our sake, you know?”

Wisborg returned a blank stare. Perhaps my insistence was troublesome to him. A moment later, he bowed once more. “Thank you for your kindness, Lord Valakia, but you shouldn’t worry for my sake. I have my principles, just as you surely have yours. So long as it is within the bounds of the pact I have made for myself, suffering and joy are one and the same.”

Principles, huh? Something about that wording stirred in the back of my mind. Anyway, it doesn’t look like he’ll be convinced any time soon.

“...I see. I’m sorry, it looks like I’ve undermined your conviction with my paltry worries.”

“Not at all, your generosity is a gift that I hardly deserve.”

“I know I’m a guest and all, but don’t treat me too well, or it’ll go to my head, okay?” I smiled, and though I still couldn’t entirely decipher his expression, I thought that he did as well. “That aside, there’s something I was curious about.”

It had crossed my mind when I went outside earlier, and Wisborg’s mention of the forest earlier reminded me of it.

“The only way to reach this mansion is with an invitation from Lord Nachtheim, correct? How does that work, exactly?”

“The master cast a spell on this forest thousands of years ago, when magic still existed in this world. Even now it holds strong—as long as these woods are not razed, it will likely maintain its power forever.”

“That much I figured, but I was wondering about something else. The invitations bore our names on them, so—will they work only for us, or could anyone that happened to obtain these get the right of passage?”

Perhaps it would only have served to confuse things further, but one way to explain the two vampire corpses we had on our hands was if they were never immortal at all. I had never seen Brooks display any vampiric abilities, and while Nevermore’s gun could have been explained by the use of familiars, it could also have been some strange artifact merely meant to trick us. It was a far shot, and I couldn’t comprehend the reason why two mortals would masquerade as vampires only to die, but I had to consider the possibility. And that possibility was only on the table if our two impostors had somehow gotten their hands on the invitations.

I wasn’t sure if Wisborg knew where I was coming from, but he simply shook his head. “The invitations will only guide those to whom they rightfully belong. If an unrelated party got a hold of your invitation, they would not find their way here.”

“I see...” *Back to the drawing board, I guess.* It was a far-off possibility anyhow. “But how is it that the forest can tell the invitee is genuine? There’s no way the invitations themselves are magical artifacts, right? After all, they were just signed. Unless it’s the paper itself...?”

“No, the invitations themselves are ordinary objects.” Wisborg paused. Perhaps he wasn’t sure if he should tell me the secret behind it or not. Eventually, though, he continued. “...The one who cast the spell was the master, so my knowledge of it is limited, but as far as I am aware, the forest as a whole is a mechanism to assess the legitimacy of the invitee. While it is traversed, the forest will read one’s soul—what is used to assess a rightful visitor is their very memory.”

I couldn’t hide my shock. I felt myself getting goosebumps, and crossed my arms tightly against my chest in order to avoid shuddering. I had felt strange during that entire trip, not in small part thanks to how creepy the forest was, but to think that it was peering into my heart that entire time—it felt disgusting to think about.

Wisborg bowed again. “I apologize for keeping it hidden from you. It is the Master’s decision to keep his abode safe, but I understand that it must be offputting from your perspective.”

“It’s okay,” I said, straining a smile. “No use crying about it now. But how exactly does it read memories?”

“As I said, I do not understand the precise logistics of the spell, but I believe that the only thing it will check is the presence of the Master’s signature, and whether the identity of the invitee matches that on the

invitation. So long as these two factors are deemed correct, the path to the manor will be opened. It did not pry into your heart any further than that, so please feel at ease in that.”

That assurance didn't do much to dampen the sense of violation, but at the very least I knew how it worked now. Certainly, a system that verifies legitimacy through one's own memories is almost foolproof—unless someone was able to deceive even themselves, they would not be able to enter, and they would need to know about the system in the first place to do so. As convenient as it would have been, I had to rule out the possibility.

“Well, sorry for taking up your precious time. Please, take care.” I had a lot to think about, so I decided to part ways with Wisborg. He gave me another deep bow, his gaze not leaving the ground until I was gone. *I wonder how long he would've been in that state if I hadn't interrupted him?*

Maintaining the entire mansion must have taken a lot of time. Then again, I doubted that anyone here would pressure him about time, however long he decided to take.



From the kitchen I exited into the lobby, and then took a ninety degree turn towards the entrance to the first floor corridor of the right wing. Brooks' room should have been a little further in.

“Oh, hey.” Before I could get there, though, a diminutive figure blocked my path—Rafi, her black hair almost fading into the darkness of the hallway from a distance.

“...You ran off earlier.” She seemed a little peeved. At least, that was the sense I got, since her face didn't particularly spell it out.

“Oh, did I? Sorry, guess I got tunnel vision.” I had wanted to go talk to Dolly from the moment she walked out the door during our discussion, so I suppose I left as fast as I could once we had wrapped up.

“...I saw you out the window. From up there.” She pointed to the other end of the corridor. She must have been referring to the observatory at the top of the right tower. True, there were few windows in the manor outside of the guest rooms, but that place probably had a good view of the entire grounds. “...What were you talking about?”

“Oh, not much. Or rather, it's tough to claim that it was much of a conversation at all. It was mostly just me saying one-sided things.”

“So the same move you used on me?”

“Don’t call it a ‘move’. I’m an old man, okay? I can’t help wanting to talk people’s ears off.”

“I don’t think you can use that line here anymore...” After that well-timed retort, she looked away, as if hesitating.

“What’s wrong?”

“...That woman... I think you should be more careful around her.”

“You mean Penumbra?” I raised an eyebrow. “Why? Well, I get that I should be wary around everyone here at the moment, but why her specifically?”

“I don’t know how to explain it... I just have a bad feeling about her.”

“Hm, really?” I felt like I ought to defend her for some reason. “Sure, we don’t know much about her, but she stepped in to help when Nevermore was picking a fight with you, right? She doesn’t seem like a bad person.”

Rafi just continued to stare at the wall in silence. Her brows were ever so slightly furrowed—it seemed like she maybe wanted to say more, but didn’t know how. I felt a little guilty all of a sudden.

“Well, you have a good intuition. If you say so, I’ll keep it in mind. All right?” I smiled at her.

Rafi finally looked back in my direction and gave a curt nod.

With that settled, I continued walking through the corridor, and Rafi followed suit. Not long after that, we arrived at the door with Brooks’ nameplate. I could ever so slightly hear the sound of voices behind it. Without delaying things any further, I twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open.

“Oh, Raff. You sure came back quick,” Sin said, his brother standing next to him. Rafi must have passed by them earlier when she came down from the tower.

“Hello,” I said. “I thought you’d be here. Mind if we join?” What we needed more than anything else at this point was information. We couldn’t be picky about our means anymore. I figured the brothers would also feel that way.

“I don’t mind, but... are you certain you want to?” Gin asked, seeming worried.

“Any other time I’d be far away from here before you could even ask that question, but...” I said, my eyes drifting down towards the floor, where Brooks’ body rested, “more than anything, I just want to know what’s going on in this place.”

“You and me both, man,” Sin said, nodding.

“Very well, then. I suggest you take a step back.” With that forewarning taken care of, Gin put his hand into his coat pocket, from which he withdrew a knife, the same one that he had borrowed from Wisborg earlier.

Had the heart been removed from Brooks’ body without leaving any wound behind, or was it still there, and some other phenomenon was at work? If we just speculated, we’d never get anywhere. We had to check—as unpleasant as it was.

Gin kneeled before the fallen giant, his abundant abdomen still out in the open from the earlier examination, and with a practiced hand dug the blade into Brooks’ flesh, at a point just slightly above the chest. From there, he moved the blade to the left, then making a sharp turn downward, tracing a rectangle around the front of his torso. No blood poured out of the wound—it appeared that Brooks, too, had been drained. That didn’t make things much better—the *squish-slosh* noise that the knife made as it tore apart skin and muscle made me dizzy with disgust.

After a few minutes of careful slicing, the wound met a point near its origin. And with that, Gin put the knife aside—and stuck his hands into the wound, lifting up the flap of skin now barely connected to Brooks’ body, and revealing the viscera beneath.

Bile rose up into my throat. I held my mouth shut with my hands as I crouched down, desperately trying to keep myself together. If there was any blessing to the whole thing, it was that I hadn’t eaten anything for breakfast, and so had nothing to expel but saliva and gastric juice.

Rafi crouched down beside me, gently patting my back. I looked up to see her face. As composed as ever. Not even something like this could shake her. Sin looked like he’d bitten into a particularly sour lemon, but was otherwise mostly unaffected. And Gin looked so at ease that I couldn’t help but wonder if he, as a scholar of vampires, had ever dissected one before.

Swallowing everything down, I forced myself back onto my wobbling feet. I was the one who’d chosen to be here for this, I couldn’t be the one dragging everyone else down with my weak stomach. I steeled myself for a few moments, before looking back at the anatomical display before me.

“Just as I feared...” Gin said grimly.

There was nothing out of place. Everything was wrong in all sorts of ways, but as far as his insides went, no organ was missing. The heart was in its rightful place.

“Tch. Looking at this guy I half expected his heart to be in his stomach, but even that’s sitting right where it should be.”

No one was of any mind to laugh at Sin’s tasteless joke. Gin briefly wiped his brow with a handkerchief and took a deep breath, before once again

fastening his grip on the knife and kneeling next to the body—this time, his aim was the head.

First, he made a round incision around the top of the head, removing the scalp. Then, he laid the knife aside, and grabbed a chisel—that was about all I saw before I hit my limit. My legs carried me off to the room’s private bathroom, where I coughed out the meager contents of my empty stomach. I didn’t dare come out for a while after that, though I heard the sounds of a hammer striking the back of a chisel, like you would expect to hear from a sculptor’s atelier.

Even if I wasn’t there to see it with my own eyes, the results were no different: Brooks’ brain was properly contained inside his cranium.

“Sorry about earlier.” I hung my head as we left Brooks’ room. I felt pathetic, all the more so since I’d left Rafi behind to view that grotesque sight without me.

“Don’t beat yourself up over it, man. It’s not the kind of thing a regular person should see,” Sin said.

“...You seemed pretty unaffected,” Rafi pointed out.

“Oh, trust me, I was gritting my teeth hard enough back there that I was worried they’d crack,” he said, grinning bitterly. “Still, I’ve seen messed up stuff before. Between hunters and vampires both, there’s some twisted bastards out there.”

I didn’t feel like asking him to elaborate. Once again, I was forced to consider just how different the worlds we’d lived in were.

“Anyway, we’ve been able to confirm the facts. That’s valuable information in its own right. Still...” Gin sighed, rubbing his temple. “It’s all so inexplicable.”

“We checked Nevermore again, earlier, too,” Sin explained. “His brain and other organs were all there, we couldn’t spot any internal damage.”

“Should have just let me do it from the start,” Rafi mumbled under her breath. *Is that really what you ought to be getting hung up on here?*

“I worry that in its current state this might be an unsolvable problem. After exhausting all other avenues of thought I figured the key would be with the bodies, but whatever the trick is, I don’t think I can find it.” Gin said. It must have been a tough admission to make, after nominating himself as the detective and everything.

“Well what do we do, then? Just give up?” Sin asked.

“No, of course not. But...” he hesitated for a moment. “Whatever person or force is doing this, they’ve already struck twice. I believe it’s fair to

assume they won't stop here. Our only option is to be proactive—set some kind of trap for the culprit, make sure that we get as much information as possible from their next move.”

“Hmph, easier said than done,” Sin sneered. “Putting us aside, those two probably won't be very cooperative. Not a care in the world for anyone or anything...”

“I'll try to talk to them.” Gin smiled as he put a hand on his grumbling brother's shoulder.

“Umm,” I said loudly, getting everyone's attention. “First of all, that's a good idea, Gin, tell me if there's anything I can help with. And also, this might not be helpful for anything, but I had a thought earlier, and I figured I'd share it with everyone.”

“Oh? Go on.”

“Well, don't you all think it's really weird that Lord Nachtheim hasn't shown up yet? It doesn't feel right to just dismiss it as a vampire being careless about punctuality anymore, I think. And you guys said he was supposed to be a shut-in, so where would he have even gone?”

“Mm, well, you might have a point. What about it?”

“Umm, well, I was thinking this—what if Nachtheim already *is* here in the mansion?”

“Oh?” They stared wide-eyed at me. “You mean that he's been hiding somewhere out of sight the whole time?” Gin asked.

“Well, that could be a possibility too, but I actually thought it could be something else. It struck me when I was talking to Wisborg earlier. What if—what if it's actually him?”

“Huh?” Sin scratched his head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean—what if Wisborg is actually Lord Nachtheim himself!”

“_” “_” Both brothers gaped at me.

“Well, think about it. Isn't it strange how Lord Nachtheim always sends Wisborg as a proxy for these meetings? That implies that Wisborg knows a lot more about the important affairs of his master than the average servant would. Plus, with those familiars, he can easily take care of the manor by himself. He wouldn't even need someone else to take care of that for him. And Wisborg said that he subsists off of the blood of the forest animals, but would he really be doing that if he had his master around to share his blood? It would make much more sense if he did live alone, with no access to human or vampire blood. So you know, since nobody's ever seen that master in the flesh, I just thought, um...” I rattled off all of my arguments at breakneck speed, but seeing their reactions, I trailed off. The initial surprise having worn off, they just looked at me with bitter smiles.

Sin chuckled. "Well, that's not a bad idea. It would be a real surprise, that's for sure. You should make that into a play or something, people would love it. But," he said with absolute certainty, "that's impossible."

"Why... do you think so?"

Sin sent an awkward glance to his brother, who began speaking while fiddling with his hat. "This isn't the first time the Conference is taking place at Nachtheim's manor, remember? He also hosted the event thirty years ago. And back then, I saw him with my own eyes."

"-Huh?"

"Mr. Wisborg was there too, naturally, so it's not like he could have simply changed his appearance in between Conferences."

For some inexplicable reason I felt like mounting one last effort. "Um... Is it possible that Wisborg is somehow Nachtheim's familiar?"

"Hey, hey, Nachtheim may be eighty thousand years old, but I've never heard of any vampire capable of making a familiar that can talk or operate intelligently like that. Familiars are meant to obey simple orders, you know?"

"And that aside, while I don't know how old Mr. Wisborg really is or how long he has been serving here for, I think it's impossible for him to have subsisted off of forest animals for anywhere close to eighty thousand years. He would certainly have gone mad. Absorbing the memories of beasts for a prolonged period of time will have that effect... Err, sorry."

My cheeks burned in embarrassment. In retrospect I wasn't even sure what had made me certain enough of that theory to proclaim it out loud; his wording had merely caught my attention, that was all. Maybe I was just desperate to contribute to the conversation. "...I'm sorry. I must look like a real fool right now. I think this place is messing with my mind."

"Hey, I get it, don't worry. You're right to question everything about what's going on here, at any rate. Better than taking things for granted." Sin said, giving me a thumbs up.

"Thanks." I gave him a weak smile, before turning to Gin. "Um, what was he like, anyway? Lord Nachtheim, I mean."

Gin put his hand to his jaw. "He wasn't very talkative. Or maybe he found the act of talking in itself difficult to manage. That was my impression. He mostly stuck to his prepared arguments and didn't join in the conversation much beyond that. He also never really showed his face outside of the formal discussions, so I can't say I got to know him personally at all."

"Well, leaving that theory from earlier aside, isn't it still likely that Nachtheim is somehow involved in the case? Everything about this is fishy."

"You're not wrong, but that'd imply that Mr. Wisborg is, too. I find it unlikely that he wouldn't have his servant assist him." Sin crossed his arms

and wrinkled his forehead. “I know doubting everyone is the correct approach, but I’d still feel bad suspecting him.”

“There’s still the possibility that Nachtheim could be acting alone. If Wisborg was complicit, it would be bad for us as well. What alibis we do have all rely on his testimony.” Gin smiled bitterly. “Not that the truth has to be convenient for us. If Wisborg just happened to see his master walking around here suspiciously at the time of the crime, I find it highly unlikely that he would report that to us.”

We were all in a funk. Nothing was certain—every path of reasoning led to another unanswerable question. Like walking in the dark, our only guideposts the walls we happened to bump into.

I looked at Gin. He was as much of an expert on vampires as you could find. I knew I’d be putting him on the spot, but I decided to lay the question on him anyway.

“Hey, Gin... What do you think about the possibility that there is no trick? That they really are dead? You said you’ve studied vampires for a long time, so... Could there be a way to kill a vampire?”

He furrowed his brows. “Well, the only definite answer I can give you is that nobody has found one yet. There are no records of any vampire that has not come back to life given enough time to regenerate. I guess common wisdom would dictate that if being torn apart and ground into a fine mist won’t kill you, nothing in the world will. But—” He leaned against the corridor and crossed his legs while standing. *He’s entered into lecture mode, huh?* “—if you want a more satisfactory answer, then we have to ask what death even is in the first place.”

“Huh?”

“It’s just... no longer living, isn’t it?” Both Rafi and I tilted our heads in reaction.

He grinned. “Is it really so simple? The biggest trait that we attribute to death is permanence, right? It can’t be called death if you can revive from it. And so, even when a vampire’s body is destroyed, we don’t consider that a ‘death’. But you know, medically speaking, there have been instances of people who came back to life after dying. Even if the heart stops for a few minutes, as long as the body is in the right condition, people can be revived.”

Rafi looked on in amazement. I vaguely recalled reading something like that in a newspaper at some point.

“I’m partial to defining death as ‘an irreversible loss of information.’ The information that makes up who you are, your memories, your personality, everything about you—if that’s gone, then you’re dead. But that definition brings with it problems of its own. For instance, how do we know

for sure that information is gone for good? It could be that we are merely lacking the means to retrieve that information at the moment. There's no guarantee that someone in the far future won't have invented a method by which the seemingly lost information of every person that has ever lived is regained—if that were indeed possible, then the whole of humanity would be retroactively rendered immortal too.”

“But, that's impossible, isn't it?” I argued, desperately trying to keep track of the conversation.

“It could be. But it could also not be. The lines are uncertain—if you think with the mind of an infinite being, then even things which seem definitive come into question. But you're right, it could very well be that the permanent loss of information is inevitable—in that case, there's no guarantee that vampires are immortal either, you know? It could be that our lifespan is simply so unfathomably long that no individual member of our kind has ever reached it. Or it could be that whatever force powers our endlessly regenerating bodies is sourced by the planet itself. There have been some who have theorized as such. In that case, whenever this planet is destroyed, we too will go along with it.”

“Bro, that's too longwinded.” Sin, who had seemingly zoned out, called out to his older brother, who by now was wildly gesticulating as he spoke with vigor. “I'm used to your sermons by now, but cut the newbies some slack, okay?”

“Err.” Returning to his senses, Gin looked awkwardly at us while scratching his cheek. The topic sure strayed from my original question. *Are all academics like this?* “In any case, what I mean to say is that the answer to your question will depend on how you approach it. If you put some holy significance on the concept of death, then I'm not quite sure what to say, but at the very least, it's possible that some magical artifact or new kind of technology could be used to irreversibly pause or interrupt the regenerating process. According to the writing from that period, there were some spells with similar effects back when magic still existed.”

“Right...” I considered the possibility. It certainly seemed less terrifying when explained in such a dry, objective way. Even if it was just the false comfort of believing I knew, I still appreciated it. “This manor has many old artifacts in it, we saw them when we went around the upper floors of the central building. There could be something here with an effect like that. I doubt it could be anything as handy as a remote killing mechanism, though.” In the end, we probably still had to search for a culprit who could have physically done the deed.

We continued sharing ideas for some time after that. In the end, it was decided that Gin would try to convince the difficult guests to cooperate with the investigation. The rest of us were on standby for the time being, so wishing him luck, we parted ways.



It was only noon, but I felt about as exhausted as after a full day of work (which I admittedly hadn't had many of). The incident had swallowed up my entire morning, and I didn't think the rest of my day would be great with a start like that either, so I figured I should take it easy for a while.

As a first order of business, I had to fill my crying stomach with something. Rafi and I both went to the parlor room, where Wisborg had already prepared a meal for us. I felt a pang of guilt run through me, since I'd just spent the past half hour arguing for his guilt, but he was none the wiser, or at least showed no sign of knowing.

After that, I spent the next few hours not thinking about the case at all. I could hardly blame the others for being complacent given the circumstances. It's not like I didn't have any sense of danger, but spending my entire time paranoid and scared would only fry my brain even more, and after my earlier blunder, I decided I needed some time to cool my head.

Consequently, I spent the afternoon talking to Rafi while flipping through some books at the library, and after laying on the couch for a while with a book in hand I unceremoniously fell asleep. After all the restless nights, my body took the first chance it could to get some sleep in.

When I woke up, I was alone in the library. Rafi must have slipped out at some point. After getting my bearings, I found a piece of parchment on a table next to where I was sleeping which had a message scrawled on it in clumsy, childish handwriting.

'Going to play cards with the little brother.' I smiled to myself. I appreciated the notice; it's not like she was a lost child I had to guide by the hand, but worrywart that I was, I still would have probably wound up looking for her without that.

Well, what to do now? I could always go and join them, but at the risk of sounding anti-social, after spending my whole morning tagging along with

others, I felt like I needed some alone time. As a result, I settled on finally visiting the observatory, which I had yet to see with my own eyes.

I would have to travel from one end of the manor to the next, which was a pretty significant distance. That was just how big this place was. I descended to the third floor of the left tower, passed through the left wing, then the mezzanine in the lobby, again through the right wing corridor, furrowing my brow as I passed Nevermore's room, until I finally reached the right tower. Similarly to its twin, the first three floors of this tower were occupied only by a large spiral staircase. Making sure not to look down at the over fifteen meter drop, I reached the trapdoor which led into the observatory.

Pushing the heavy wood panel aside, I was met with—light.

The contrast between the dark trunk of the tower below and the well lit room above was almost blinding. Of course, these were not artificial lights; the madder red glow I bathed in came from the Sun as it set below the horizon, its rays penetrating through the see-through dome that covered the room. The walls were only opaque up to about three meters in height—above that, everything was made of clear glass. At the center of the room sat what was undoubtedly the star of this place—a massive telescope, its metallic tube pointed straight up.

I might have suffered some sunburns if it had been midday, but the light of the sunset wasn't strong enough to damage me. I wasn't worried about that in the moment anyway—I was simply struck by the beauty of that sky.

"You aren't burning, that's good to see," a feminine voice said, grabbing my attention. "I'd have felt bad. Unfortunately, there was no 'in use' sign for me to hang on the door. Forgive me, will you?" So said Queen Zamira, a mystifying smile on her face. The ceiling could presumably be made opaque, so as not to harm any vampires that happened to enter this room in the midday.

"Oh, I didn't see you there," I said, walking up to her. She was situated at the edge of the room, beyond the telescope. Before her was an open area in the wall, thick curtains bunched up at each side, which led to a wide balcony. From there, one could look out over the forest far into the distance.

As I reached her side, I was struck by the sight of her form bathed in the waning light. She was certainly beautiful, but that wasn't what had captured my attention. There was something off about the scene, I felt in my gut, but I could not get a handle on exactly what that something was.

After shaking my head to dispel the aimless thoughts, I spoke to her. "You were here yesterday, too, right? I guess you must like this place." I did

my best to seem casual, though I still hadn't entirely gotten over my nervousness at talking to a real queen, even if a former one.

"Yes, I suppose I've taken quite a liking to this sight," she languidly replied, not taking her eyes off the horizon ahead of her. She didn't seem inclined to talk any further, and I had come here intending to be alone anyway, so for a while we just stood there side by side, watching the Sun slowly sink further and further.

I couldn't get lost in the sight, however, constantly tugged at by the awareness of her presence next to me. After some time, thoughts of the case inevitably filled my mind again. I asked a wavering question. "Um, did Gin talk to you earlier?"

"Ah, yes, the boy did talk to me. I suppose he must be truly desperate to resolve this noisy situation—I just can't understand where he gets that energy from."

I felt like I could guess what her answer had been. I bit my lip.

"...Aren't you afraid?" I asked, after some time. "You don't know what's happening, right? Doesn't that scare you?"

"I don't know much of anything at all. There are some truly simple things out there that nobody knew for thousands of years, many more than I have lived. If I feared all of those things, I would have become mad already."

"But you..." I didn't want to hear her answer, but the words had already escaped my lips. "You might die, you know."

But the answer never came. When I looked at her face, all I saw was a ghostly smile. Like an unfinished painting, it lacked some fundamental building block without which not a single feeling emanated from it. Her eyes were still pointed at the sunset. The corners of my eyes saw encroaching darkness—twilight would maybe only hold for another ten minutes.

"...I never asked this, but how did you end up living here in Grimgrave?" Oasia—or at least the territory which used to house it—was further down south, in a land filled with deserts.

"When your home turns on you, it becomes rather difficult to stay there. Too many people would recognize me. It all became so troublesome, I just drifted far enough for it to stop being a problem."

"Don't you miss it?"

She chuckled. "Whether I do or not, there's nowhere to return to. All that I watched them build is gone, by now. I'd rather not ruin my memory of it."

"Watched?" I was surprised by her word choice. "You won't say you built the nation you were queen of?"

Her smile took on a tinge of irony. “What use would there be in lying, now that there’s no one to put on appearances for? Whether back then or right now, I’ve never done much of anything myself. The most use I’ve ever had was guiding others along.”

“Surely that’s giving yourself too little credit. The Queendom of Oasia stood for over eight hundred years, didn’t it?” I looked her in the eye. “Would you tell me a little more about it?”

A shadow crossed over her face for a moment. I hesitated. “Umm, only if you want to, I don’t want to dredge up any bad memories!”

“It’s all right,” she said, waving her hand back and forth. “Relating tales of the past is just about the only use there is for someone like me. It wouldn’t do for me to refuse even that role.”

With that self-deprecating remark, she turned her eyes back to the horizon as she began her story.

“I never set out to be a ruler, you know? It’s not exactly in my nature to do something so *involved*. But...” She sighed. “At first, it was nothing so elaborate. All it started as was an oasis for those who had no other place to belong. And they sought my help for one simple reason—I had experience.

“I wasn’t especially smart, especially righteous, especially strong—but I had already lived for over two centuries. I had simply accumulated more knowledge, and in those circumstances, knowledge meant the difference between life and death.

“In time, though, their reverence for me grew and grew. Maybe I had more of a knack for the role than I thought, or maybe those who served me were extraordinarily gifted, but the modest settlement grew into a bustling city-state, and then a nation strong enough to rival the surrounding powers. And I began to be seen as more than a guide or a leader—I had become a goddess to them.”

Zamira spoke of herself in the detached manner one might of a stranger. There was no trace of arrogance in the recounting of her past glory.

“Perhaps it was a small wonder that things turned out that way. I knew that I was nothing of the sort, but to my subjects, I was an immortal ruler who could directly recount the tales of their ancestors and promise the prosperity of their successors.

“All that the citizen of any nation wishes for is stability. And if only they followed my advice, they would be granted that. Of course, we were not free of turmoil, of famine or unrest. But no matter what, the people believed that I could lead them on the right path. And, yes... for a while, I did too. I thought it would go on forever.”

The smile vanished from her face.

“But it didn’t.

“There was no single factor that caused it, I think. Perhaps it was fate. It happened long before the country known as Oasia was torn apart and erased from all of this world’s maps. To put it simply, the sentiment of the people had begun to shift. That reverence they had for me slowly faded. And in its place came doubt, suspicion—even contempt.

“I don’t think I had turned particularly despotic. I never really had anything that I truly wanted, so there was no reason for me to trample over others in greed. Maybe it’s in the nature of humanity to reject whatever they feel is binding them. I suppose I can’t blame them.

“And yet, the descendants of those I had once laughed alongside and drank and shared passions with now turned cold eyes at me. They no longer respected my decisions. Even as they showered me with surface-level courtesy and riches, they secluded me in the palace, reduced me to nothing more than a symbol.”

“...Was there no one to take your side? Even if the humans turned against you, did you have no vampire ministers or something?”

“I did. But, you see, vampires make for poor government officials, it seems. I guess the same probably applies to me. We’re just too detached from the way humans think. Our emotions grow dull over time. Many lost interest and abandoned their positions, and those that remained had no sway over the people.

“After that, all I did was waste time in luxury for a few hundred years. Poor old me,” she said, shrugging her shoulders sardonically. “Everything became more tumultuous after that, not just for us but for the world as a whole. Some tried coming to me for advice again, but it never went anywhere. Not like a recluse shut up inside a basement for a hundred years would have had much salient advice regardless, but I suppose they were desperate. They were already struggling before, and the disappearance of Magic from this world dealt the final blow.”

Oasia was known to house many powerful magicians, or so I’d read. It was a devastating time for many, but it must have hit them particularly hard.

“The council at the time did everything they could to soften the blow, even as they accepted the destruction of their nation. I don’t blame them, not really. But as a result, they had to surrender to the policies of those with more influence than them. Which meant that my existence could no longer be tolerated, and certainly not worshipped.”

I frowned as I pictured the situation. She said it all without the slightest bit of affect, but I couldn’t even imagine how awful that feeling of betrayal would have been. I suppose one might say I had lost everything too, but



whatever sixty-eight years of life amounted to had the weight of a grain of sand when compared to a Queendom which spanned nearly a millenia.

“Don’t look so down, now. In the end, nothing was lost. I’m still here. Even if I’d had a choice in the matter, if bearing some fleeting pain was the only price to make those remaining people’s lives a little easier, I would have taken it.” She put her hands on her shoulders as she raised her head towards the stars, now slightly visible as only the purple afterimage of the Sun’s light remained. “Borders shift, countries change names, but people continue living. Whether they know it or not, their blood connects them to the past. In that way, something of that place must still be there, even if only as a ghost. When I think of it like that, it’s not so bad. After all, accepting that everything has its end is one bitter drink for a vampire to swallow, isn’t it?”

“...Everything ends, but you alone continue. This might be presumptuous of me to say, but that’s a feeling I understand. Painful as it is, I still believe I’m blessed to have been granted this body. But it’s because I understand just how easily things that felt like they would last forever can end, that I still can’t help but doubt it.” I turned a serious gaze towards the former queen. “Am I—are we really so special that we’d be exempt from this rule? Isn’t it conceited to believe that, just because one has lived for a thousand years or ten thousand years or eighty thousand years, that they will continue that way for eternity?” I swallowed the saliva inside my mouth. “Is there really no part of you that’s afraid? That you might die tomorrow?”

She closed her eyes, the smile still on her face. “I suppose you’re right. It has crossed my mind before. It’s true that I’ve lived for so long I can’t even conceive of the notion of not being alive—but those days which I thought would go on forever have ended too, haven’t they? Yes... I might very well die tomorrow. But.” And then she opened her eyes again, and turned them on me. It might very well have been the first time she had ever really looked at me. “If I do, then I’ll welcome death with open arms.”

“—” I had no words. I could only stare at her with my mouth dangling open. Perhaps I should have considered much earlier that one who had lived for so long would hold such sentiments—perhaps I had, but I didn’t want to think of it. I truly didn’t.

“I’m no more than an ornament, you know? I have no future left. No, that’s not entirely true,” she said, correcting herself. “I have no need for a future, that’s all. It’s just so tiresome, all of it. I’ve done more than enough. My page in the book of history has its beginning and end, and I’m of no mind to make anyone revise it. Yes, if I could spend the rest of eternity lying on that sofa in the lounge, it really wouldn’t be so bad.”

“...If you feel that way, why not just surrender to the Church? If you could spend the rest of time sleeping, it would be the same as dying, wouldn’t it?”

“Perhaps it would, but I have no reason to seek that out. It makes no difference to me. Whether I’m awake or not, the difference is negligible. Some poet or another might have said that existence itself is suffering, but that just seems to me like the blubbing of a kid with too much energy. It takes me the same effort to live as it does a stone to keep itself from crumbling into dust.”

She kept looking at me as she spoke. I wished she would turn back to the sky, but by now there was nothing left to look at—all traces of the Sun had already vanished beyond the horizon. And so, I had no escape route either—all I could do was meet her gaze.

“Although,” she said. “A true death still entices me. I know what it’s like to have your head separated from your body, but that alone I’ve yet to experience. I suppose my heart still has the capacity to produce something like anticipation. That alone has made it worth dragging myself all the way here.”

Her smile widened, but her eyes stayed the same. Deep blue—and empty, like hollow holes to the evening sky above.

I said nothing more, after that. I could say nothing more. I was afraid. Afraid that if I tried to think about her words, if I tried to argue against her mindset, I might find myself understanding her. And above all else, I wanted to avoid that—I didn’t want to believe that the face reflected in my eyes was my future.

She turned away from the balcony, and stepped into the observatory room, passing by the telescope. Now that the Sun had set, I suppose she had lost interest in the view. The evening breeze made the trees rustle behind me, and I shivered. The jolt set my mind moving again. I called out to her before she completely disappeared.

“Before you go, may I ask one more question?”

She said nothing in return, but stopped advancing.

“—Something was bothering me earlier about you being here, but I only just realized what it was. I’m not a historian or scholar or anything, but from everything I read about Oasia, there was something that always stuck with me—they said that Queen Zamira was so vulnerable to the Sun that she would burn up the moment any of its rays hit her. That was why the throne room in her palace was beneath the ground. When I read that, I couldn’t help but think how terrible it would be if I had a weakness like that, but—was that wrong?”

A few moments of silence came and went. And then, Zamira granted me one last look at her smile from over her shoulder—as well as the empty gaze that accompanied it. “If that were true, then I suppose she would have loved to be able to view a sunset like that.”

Moments later, she was gone, her soft footsteps still echoing in my mind.



Once the evening sky made its appearance, I was able to enjoy the observatory the way it was meant to. I (with great difficulty) moved the large telescope towards every star that caught my eye, referencing the materials gathered all around the room and identifying as many constellations as I could. Before the end of Magic, it was said that the great sorcerers could perform almost any miracle imaginable to man, but even they had never managed to reach the stars. Thinking about it like that, I had to give them proper respect.

After I had my fill of stargazing, I went back the way I came, down the spiral staircase and through the left wing, soon reaching my destination, the parlor room.

“Oh hey, you’re back.” Greeting me with a backhanded wave was Sin, sitting at the table to the left of the room. Perpendicular to him and facing each other were the other two expected faces, Rafi and Gin, currently engaged in an intense game of cards. I dragged a chair next to Sin’s and curiously observed their battle of wits.

It seemed that Sin had already dropped out of this particular match, as he watched the exchange with a somewhat indifferent manner. Well, calling it an exchange might have been inaccurate—the most striking feature of their game was that it appeared to be stuck in time.

Both observed their respective hands with the hawk-eyed solemnity of gunmen in a duel, not to miss a single detail. Though it was ostensibly a game of chance, it appeared that this was one of those rare moments where the cards aligned themselves in such a way as to give each player an equal chance. In other words, a single mistaken decision would spell the difference between victory and defeat.

I didn’t know how long that stalemate had been going for until I arrived, but a few moments later time finally resumed flowing. Rafi closed her eyes for a few long seconds, as if her eyelids had become too heavy for her to

support, and then finally picked a card and laid it on the table below. In response, Gin sighed and quickly laid down another card of his own. Rafi stared blankly at it in response for a while, before setting down the entire rest of her hand—evidently, she had won.

Shrugging with the sunny smile of an honorable loser, Gin spoke. “Good play, Miss Rafflesia. I really thought I had it there.”

“...” She just stared in response, some trace of dissatisfaction in her gaze.

“Man, finally. You know how long I’ve been waiting for you guys to wrap it up? Come on, let’s go for another one.” Sin reached out towards the cards arranged on the table, presumably intending to shuffle them, but his hand was stopped mid-motion—Rafi wrapped her small left hand around his wrist, her gaze still fixed on Gin.

“W-what’s up-?” Sin belatedly noticed the intensity in her glare as he retracted his hand.

“...You should have been able to win, even there. You had the right card.”

“Oh? And just how would you know that?”

Rafi merely continued glaring in response. *That means... she counted the cards? Just how competitive has she become in a few hours of playing!?*

“...Well, if you’re correct, that means I must have simply missed it. How careless of me, after all that thinking!” Gin smoothly deflected, his smile the picture of benevolence.

“...Are you going easy on me because I’m a child?” However genuine he might have appeared, Rafi showed no sign of buying it.

“Heavens no. If I really were to be going easy on you—well, it would only be because I think it’s you that deserves to win, that’s all.”

Her eyes narrowed. “...Do you think you’ll ever be happy, doing things like that?”

Gin’s smile vanished from his face, replaced by a look of astonishment. That snapped me into action, as I hurriedly laid a palm on Rafi’s shoulder. For the first time since I entered the room, she looked my way. I didn’t say anything, but the message must have gotten across. It seemed like there was more she wanted to say, but for the moment she just closed her mouth and looked off to the side.

I sent an apologetic glance to Gin, who returned to his usual spirits. “That sure was an intense round,” he said, gathering all of the cards laid out on the table and stacking them in an even mound. “Sorry, Sin, but would you mind taking a little break?”

Sin had raised an eyebrow as he looked back and forth between the two, but before long he let the matter go with a shrug. “Sure, whatever.”

Things had gotten suddenly awkward. It had nothing at all to do with me, but for some reason I still felt responsible, so I spoke up to change the subject.

“Um, I talked to Queen Zamira earlier.”

“Ah, right.” Gin's smile turned bitter. “I guess you know how things went, then.”

“Man, why's she gotta be so stubborn? All we're asking for is the slightest bit of cooperation.” Sin leaned back in his chair, balancing it only on the back legs.

“Well, they made it clear when we began this investigation that they had no interest in helping, and I didn't contest that. I suppose it's unreasonable of me to come asking now.”

Gin's words ended with that lukewarm sentiment. Sin, too, had nothing to offer save for grumbles of dissatisfaction. And yet, that too was liable to pass in a few moments, replaced by some other casual conversation for us to pass the time with. It made a pit form in my stomach. I felt that I couldn't let it go on like that.

“...Is that okay? We're just going to give up?”

“Hm?”

“Someone might die again, you know? Sure, maybe it's impermanent, maybe it's all a trick—but what if it isn't? What if it's something we really can't take back? Do you want to regret that you didn't do more?”

Gin stared back in wonder, his expression not unlike earlier when he was confronted by Rafi. Seeing that made me come to my senses.

“—Err, not to imply you haven't tried, but just, you know...”

“No, you're right.” He smiled reassuringly. “I've been complacent, it's true. I suppose I've gotten pretty old too.”

“Hm. Good going, man.” Sin gave me a rough slap on the back. “Me, I've just about had it with these old fossils, but that doesn't mean we should let them die. Not to mention the fact that whoever's doing this might come for us next. I'm just as much of an idiot for sitting here and grumbling instead of doing something about it.”

“What do we do, then? Force Zamira to help?” Rafi asked.

“Is there any way to force a lazy old hag like that to do anything?”

“Seems like you've forgotten too, dear brother of mine,” Gin said, grinning confidently. “About why we're here, I mean.”

“Huh?”

“This isn't a vacation. We're here on business—for the Conference for the Prosperity of Vampirism. It might be an ineffectual party of lazy elders, but it's still a card we can play. Of the nine vampires in attendance, if half vote

that something requires our attention, she'll have to agree, if only for the sake of formality.”

“Would she really care about something like that?” Sin asked.

“She doesn't—and that's exactly why it might work. She doesn't care one way or the other, and so she'll do what she's supposed to, and refuse anything else. Opposing that flow would be too much of a bother.”

“But there's only four of us here,” Rafi remarked. Eight guests had heeded Nachtheim's invitation. That meant nine total votes, including Nachtheim, so we would need five for a majority.

“I doubt that fishy woman's gonna feel any more inclined to cooperate, y'know?” Sin mentioned.

“Currently, Lord Nachtheim is absent—so, if we get his proxy to vote on his behalf, it shouldn't pose any issue, don't you think?” Gin said so with a wink.

And so, that shoddy plan of ours finalized, we called for Wisborg and, with him in tow, all headed towards Zamira's room. The three walked out in front, while Rafi and I followed slightly behind.

As I tried to match her pace, I noticed Rafi's footsteps slowing. It was like she was actively trying to put distance between us and the others. I couldn't help but question it. “Is something wrong?”

“There's...” With no small measure of hesitation, Rafi whispered out an answer. “There's something I haven't said.”

“Huh?”

“Two days ago, I couldn't sleep...” *So it's not just me, huh?* “I left my room early, around four in the morning, to walk around a bit. And... I saw Zamira outside of her room.”

“Huh...?” I let out a dumb groan as I slowly processed her statement, until it finally clicked. “What!?” I didn't know what hour she had seen her at, but if it was at any point before six, it introduced doubt to Zamira's testimony.

Hearing my outburst, Sin turned back to us. “Something up?”

“Oh, uh, it's nothing,” I said, putting on a crooked smile to reassure him. He didn't seem particularly alarmed, just shrugging and turning away. I didn't particularly intend to hide this new revelation, but playing it off just happened to be my instinctive reaction. More importantly, I turned back to question Rafi in a whisper. “Why didn't you say anything until now?”

“You didn't ask...” She sighed. “No, that's not it. If she's the bad guy, I just didn't want her to get caught because of me.” She looked down, her face clouding over. “...She reminds me of *her*, you know.”

“...I see.” The comparison between a common village girl and the former queen of a long-lasting nation might have seemed ridiculous to anyone else, but I understood. I couldn’t blame her for anything, when she said something like that. “What was she doing when you saw her?”

“I don’t really know. She was just walking. I hid so she wouldn’t see me, but I think she went towards the upper floors of the main building.”

Hmm. I couldn’t immediately tell if there were any nefarious implications to what Rafi had seen, but it was hard to deny that Zamira lying was suspicious. I would have to warn the others later, but there was no point disrupting things now that we had finally settled on a course of action.

I put a hand on Rafi’s shoulder and gave her a smile. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Mhm.” She nodded in return. Her expression seemed to have cleared up a bit. Satisfied, I focused my attention back to the Glib brothers and Wisborg leading the front. I hoped our whispering behind their backs didn’t rouse their suspicions too much, but if it did, they showed no sign of it. It didn’t take long after that to reach the door to Zamira’s room.

Gin took the lead and confidently strode toward it, giving it a few strong knocks. It was his duty to convince a former queen, so he had to project all the authority he could.

However, what he received in return was silence.

“...She’s not ignoring us, is she?” Sin asked, looking annoyed.

“Maybe she’s just sleeping,” Gin said, the wind slightly taken out of his sails. He tried again, knocking more forcefully and calling out Zamira’s name, but the silent treatment didn’t change.

Something was wrong.

I had begun to feel that way, and I didn’t appear to be alone. A trace of anxiety flickered in Gin’s eyes as he tried the doorknob. It didn’t budge—the room was locked.

We all instinctively turned toward Wisborg. Understanding our intent, he fished inside his coat for something—a silver key with an ornate bow. It must have been the master key.

He stepped forward, and spoke to the door. “My deepest apologies for violating your privacy, Lady Zamirage. I will accept whatever punishment I am given.” His raspy monologue over, he introduced the key into the lock and turned it. And then, holding the doorknob, he moved along with the opening door, as if presenting us with the contents of the room like a showman before the raising curtains. That was how I felt, at least, as I joined the crowd intently staring in anticipation.

The first thing that I saw, again, was light. Light so powerful that it reminded me of the setting Sun I had viewed earlier, an alien sight in this manor.

And then, like a showpiece with the spotlights shining on it, I saw Zamira's body, splayed out on her back. No wound marred her flesh, and her eyes were still open, burned by the incandescence above them. She was like a mannequin—a beautiful doll bereft of life. That was all my mind could perceive in that scene.

Ah, would you look at that? As if in mockery of the impossibilities that had been haunting us, here in the final hour we were presented with a locked room murder. As I thought so, I felt an ironic smile about to encroach on my face. I desperately pushed it away, though I knew that no one would be looking my way.

And so, all I could do was tremble.

◆ Record V ◆

Shadowgraph
「 Shapes in
the Dark 」



Perhaps I was cursed in some way. I had begun to give that thought some real credence, now that for the third time someone I'd just shared a conversation with was found... like that. The arrogance of such a belief didn't elude me, however. How preposterous it would be that a life as long and storied as that would be rubbed out by a puny nobody like me. Even still, there was a comfort in it for me, too—that in some way, I could unknowingly have such an effect, even evil and disastrous though it might be. Because otherwise, if immortal titans such as them could be reduced to corpses in a matter of minutes, then what guarantee was there that I was safe?

Thoughts like that flowed through my mind as I absentmindedly watched the proceedings. And yet, a part of me mocked the fear and shock as nothing more than a performance. Did I truly feel like I was the same as the being now lying motionless on the ground, being split open by a knife in some pointless search for a clue? I didn't, not really. Whatever that was, death or otherwise, it had nothing to do with me. After all, even while she still breathed and moved, Zamira was nothing like me, a normal person. She was a monster, and she had been dead long before now in all but flesh, but I was different. I must have been. Even while too ashamed to admit it even to myself, I nonetheless shamelessly believed so.

Things proceeded in a depressingly predictable manner. Zamira was in the exact same state as Brooks before her. There was no sign of any damage

to her body, and her heart and brain and every other organ were all in their proper places. Her room had nothing of importance in it. At once reluctant and relieved, we left the disturbing scene behind and gathered in the parlor. In the meantime, Wisborg had launched a search for Dolly Penumbra, and in time, she too appeared, sticking to the far shadowy corner of the room, as distant from the proceedings as she could be.

Perfunctorily and apathetically, we began to confirm our alibis. Once again, no one doubted my story, even though I was the last to speak to Zamira. Naturally, it wasn't just blind faith in me on their part, though I selfishly hoped that it had factored into their decision at least a little. The real reason was because Wisborg's familiars confirmed my story. The movements that they had seen me and Zamira take matched it.

After we had split up in the morning, Gin's unsuccessful attempt at talking to Zamira came and went, and then after taking a walk to clear his head, he joined Rafi and Sin in their games. Of course, they had all been together long before my final conversation with Zamira, and up until we discovered the body together, so even if we decided to doubt Wisborg at this point, leaving me aside, the innocence of the three was all but guaranteed.

It was then that the mood shifted. No, perhaps it had been like that from the start, but only now had we run out of reasons to confront the obvious. All of our gazes turned to our sole silent participant. Penumbra hadn't taken a single step from her spot near the outskirts of the room. Like a mannequin, she stared back emotionlessly. If she felt at all intimidated, she did not show it.

As we wondered how to proceed, Sin stepped forward, more out of exasperation than anything. "How long are we gonna keep this farce going? I'm going to go ahead and state the obvious, but if anyone's behind all the shit going on here, it's gotta be her."

I looked around, but no one seemed inclined to argue against him. I got the point. She had refused to cooperate, and her movements were suspicious. Any rational person would suspect her. Still... I couldn't just let things pass that easily.

"Wait, but isn't that weird? If she really was the culprit, then why act so suspicious? Wouldn't it make more sense to cooperate so we wouldn't—"

"So we wouldn't what?" Sin asked irately. "What could we do in retaliation, kill her? She's the one that's apparently got the secret to sucking the life out of us or something. And we're all the fools that let a murderer run around freely because we didn't feel like we could do anything about it! If I was her I wouldn't feel like hiding at all, I'd just come right out and boast about it for all the threat we pose." He turned to Penumbra. "So, how about

it? Little late, but you feel like making a parade out of this whole thing after all?”

She said nothing, though she turned her gaze ever so slightly to match his. It seemed that even Sin wasn't immune to the effect her stare had, because he reeled back for a moment, before angrily shaking his head and starting to walk towards her.

“H-hold on!” I rushed forward and blocked his path. Almost like I was trying to protect her, though I'm sure someone like her never needed protection from the likes of me. Rafi looked at me, the neutrality of her expression marred by a strange gleam, though I was not then sure what exactly it was. “I get it, she seems suspicious, but I just don't think we should be jumping to conclusions like this, you know?”

“Huh?” Sin's irritation now seemed wholly directed at me. “Well then who or what the hell else should we suspect at this point?”

“Umm...” I hesitated for a moment. I knew the indiscretion of what I was about to say, but the situation called for it. “There's no guarantee that Mr. Wisborg has not been lying to us, you know!”

Sin's eyes widened. The shock that I would say that in this situation must have temporarily erased the anger from his mind. He, along with everyone else instinctively stole a look at the solemn servant, though the man himself didn't show much of a reaction.

I hung my head as I addressed him. “...I'm sorry, Mr. Wisborg, for saying something so rude after how well you've taken care of us all. But,” I said, looking up again at everyone, “the same goes for Miss Penumbra. Beyond her behavior, we have an equal amount of proof against her as we do against Mr. Wisborg. If, and only if, mind you, he is taking our trust in him and using it to manipulate us, then it would be easy to turn us against someone like her. And... I know how hard it is, sometimes, to speak out. Especially when everyone is against you.”

“You are not wrong to doubt me in this situation, Lord Valakia,” said the servant. “I will do all that I can so that you may regain your trust in me.” I felt even more shameless than I already had, listening to him.

Sin, his anger gone, now just scratched the back of his head awkwardly. “Look, man, I get what you're saying, but...” He wasn't convinced. I could hardly blame him.

“I know. I'm not saying you should forget all of your suspicions, either. But right now, just doubting each other and being unable to work together can't possibly help. More than anything, what we should be doing is preventing any more victims from appearing, don't you think?”

Though reluctant, Sin stepped back. I guess my cobbled together speech made some amount of sense, thankfully.

I then turned my attention towards Penumbra. She hadn't moved an inch during our entire confrontation, her expression unchanged. Gently, I approached her.

"And you, too, Miss Penumbra. I don't know what kind of a life you have led or what your values are, and I don't mean to force you to do anything you don't like, but won't you at least cooperate with us so that no more victims appear?"

She said nothing. I grabbed her right hand and clasped it in between both of my own, prompting her to momentarily gaze down at the point of connection between us, but nothing more. I continued my appeal.

"Please, won't you believe me? I promise, I'm not your enemy. Come on, don't isolate yourself like that." I began to walk backwards as I pulled her along. I was met with resistance, but I put more force into my hand, making her finally take a few stumbling steps forward. "I believe you, okay? And if you just explain yourself, I'm sure the others will too. Then we'll all figure out who's really behind all of this." I dragged her even further as I turned towards the others, their faces lit by the light above. I would lead her away from those dark corners she isolated herself in, into that light alongside everyone else. How wonderful would it be if I managed to do that? I smiled as I imagined it, and pulled her even more strongly as I tightened my grip on her hand. We were almost there—just a few more steps, and we could breach that divide between us.

And then an out of place sound rang out, like something cutting through the wind. Simultaneously, I stumbled forward a bit, just barely avoiding tripping. *What just happened?* As I raised my head, I noticed expressions of shock on everyone's faces, far greater than those they'd worn just earlier when we found the body.

And then, another out of place sound—a loud *splat* from behind me, like someone had tripped and dropped the food on their plate to the ground. *What?* I turned around, trying to locate the source of all these strange noises. The first thing I saw was Penumbra, inching backwards step by step, returning to her original position. *That's strange. I know I didn't let go of her hand.* So I thought. And then I looked down.

Huh? What's that?

There was something on the floor that had not been there a second ago. And so too, there was nothing where something should have been. That was my first thought, as I looked at my hand—at the place where my hand should have been.



Huh? It's not there.

It was not there. My hand was not there. The hand I had been born with. The hand I had called my own for over sixty years. The hand I had held others' with, the hand I wrote my name with, the hand I turned the pages of my books with. Not just my hand, but my wrist, all the way up to just below my elbow, was not there. I couldn't comprehend any circumstance in which something that had to be there was not, something that it didn't make any sense for it not to be there not being there. Suddenly, I felt that all the grief I had ever felt was a paltry caprice not worth a mention. Suddenly I felt not a shred of longing for all that I had lost until now, because compared to the sense of loss I felt in that very moment, all of it was so utterly natural and sensical. That was how I felt in that split second as I viewed my severed forearm on the floor just ahead of me.

The force of gravity acted upon my blood far quicker than the force of recognition did upon my perception. A pool of blood had already formed below me, its source still generously providing more in a torrent. And only then the pain came.

I must have screamed, but I didn't hear it. I just saw my vision blur as my knees gave out under me. My tumbling down must have set time in motion again for everyone, because in the next second they all rushed to my side. Gin held me up, kneeling next to me and getting his clothes wet with my blood. I wanted to apologize for dirtying him, but I couldn't summon more than a moan. Meanwhile, Rafi grabbed my missing limb, my cut off sleeve still covering most of it, and carried it back to me, connecting the two halves together again. She must have recognized my shirt and blazer as her own, because she reformed the severed cloth back together like it had never suffered any damage at all. She was powerless to do the same to my wound, however, and so all she could do was closely press it together and wait for my regeneration to do its work, even as blood still continued pouring out and staining my sleeve from within.

Meanwhile, Dolly Penumbra simply watched the proceedings, back from her place next to the wall. As if none of what unfolded before her had any bearing or relevance to her at all, as if from the audience seat of a theatergoer entirely unmoved. Sin blocked my view of her as he took two heavy steps forward, his fists clenched so hard that his arms trembled. "*You fucking bitch.*" I had never heard his voice sound as livid as it did in that moment. It made his earlier fit of anger seem like a friendly joke in comparison.

I could tell that Rafi, too, was furious. While her hands were still holding my wound tight, her eyes were fixed on Penumbra, and if looks could

kill, then hers might have been enough to deal the finishing blow, even to a vampire.

Can't have this, I thought, even as the pain dulled my mind. I weakly extended my still-functional left arm forward and grabbed onto Sin's pants before he could advance. Though my almost non-existent strength at that moment couldn't have been enough to stop him, he nonetheless turned back to me with a concerned expression instead of continuing forward. I spoke in stilted whispers.

"Please, don't... It's my fault."

"What the-!?" he yelled out, before lowering his voice out of consideration. "You can't be serious, man!"

"I was the one who... dragged her along, forcibly... Please... Sorry."

I did my best to form a smile, although without a mirror I couldn't know just what kind of malformed mess the final result turned out to be. Still, it seemed to have worked, because Sin turned away from Penumbra, though his fists trembled all the same.

Dolly Penumbra, for her part, as if understanding that she was excused and nothing else, wordlessly began to walk to her right, headed towards the door. Although the ire that everyone felt for her had just increased tenfold, she was not at all concerned.

The last thing I heard was the closing of the doors to the parlor. After that, the pain and fatigue finally overwhelmed me.



I next awoke the following day. I wasn't immediately aware of how much time had passed, but I could vaguely sense that I had been unconscious for a while. My first instinctual act was to sluggishly raise my right hand before me and check its state. Naturally, it was back to normal, as if nothing had ever happened to it. Even a weak vampire like me can heal this kind of wound after a good night's sleep. Of course, had my severed hand been destroyed entirely, things would have been much more difficult, but luckily the cut had been a clean one.

Satisfied, I let my limb flop back onto the bed, and aimlessly looked up at the ceiling. A lukewarm light illuminated the room, about as potent as a small candle. I was thankful for it—the sight of strong light inside this manor only brought anxiety with it.

Next, I couldn't suppress a smile as another thought crossed my mind. Laughably, this had been the best night of sleep I'd ever had in this manor. Not that I was willing to repeat the experience just to get another one. And make no mistake, it wasn't a particularly restful sleep, either. It was the kind of numbing sleep that leaves you more tired than before. My body felt like it had been encased in lead, each small movement requiring herculean effort. I don't know how long I vegetated in that bed, barely moving a muscle—perhaps an hour, maybe two.

Still, I couldn't spend the whole day like this. I did not have a right to the human excuse of feeling under the weather—and so, though there was no one in the world who would rush me, I peeled myself off of the bed and began acclimating to motion once again.

About half an hour later, I walked out of the door to my room. And just as I did, I ran face to face with Rafi, who was approaching our rooms from the other end of the hallway. Maybe she had come to check on me.

“Ah, err, good morning.” I put on the best smile I could.

“Are you okay?” She didn't show any obvious signs of alarm, but I knew from the mere fact that she'd bother to ask such a question that she was worried about me.

“Yup.” *I've been better.* “Good as new. Thanks for taking care of me.”

“...That's not something you need to thank me for.”

“...Right.” I had been avoiding her gaze, though I could feel it boring into me. She must have noticed it, but I just couldn't bring myself to confront her eyes head on. So instead, I turned towards the open hallway and began striding forward, as cheerily as I could. “Let's go to the parlor, shall we? I should talk to the others too.”

And so we did, the walk over dominated by silence. Waiting there were the Glib brothers, and no one else. The already small group we had started with now felt massive in comparison. The luxurious common rooms of the manor felt abandoned with so few to fill them. That felt appropriate for this place, in its own way.

Gin and Sin were glad to see me in better shape, but there was also an awkwardness in the air. The reason was obvious. Despite the fact that I had been the one to urge them to act, I had then effectively placed them into a deadlock. They must have felt reluctant to force Penumbra to cooperate after my pleading, but without her there was nowhere else for the investigation to go.

And, hypocrite that I was, I let things pass that way.

Whether the mystery was solved or not, whether the culprit was caught or not, whether anything was lost or not, I would live in the end. I would live

and continue living, until the end of time—and they lived happily ever after, the end. The only story that has no ending is one that’s already ended.

Seeing their faces made the pit in my stomach grow even deeper, so I ran away. Making up some forgettable excuse not even worth mentioning, I left the parlor.

The rest of the day was spent wandering the mansion. Sometimes taking breaks to sit down and admire the desolate sights I’d already grown tired of, but most of the time I would just keep wandering. Whatever pain or exhaustion I felt would heal anyway, and if there ever was anything I could be said to excel in, it would be the act of running away.

That wouldn’t be the most truthful description, however. While it may have been an act of avoidance, I was at once seeking something, even if I wished to pretend otherwise.

I sought her—Dolly Penumbra. I walked and walked all around the manor, well into the night, hoping that I would catch a fleeting glance of her ghostly figure as she looked for her unknown objective.

I never ended up finding her that day, however. Before I realized it, it was midnight. And so I trudged back to my own room, because that was what I was supposed to do. Even though I would likely sleep no better there than in these hallways, any semblance of purpose was something I was ready to eat up.

As I reached my room, my gaze involuntarily flickered to Rafi’s door next to mine. Was she inside her room sleeping by now, or was she still talking to one of the others in the parlor?

I felt a twitch in my leg, as if to urge me to walk over and knock. The moment I actually considered going through with this idea, however, I found my legs once again encased in lead. Only when I finally turned back to my own door did they again decide to cooperate with me.

Goodbye to another day. May all tomorrows be the same.



—From the Devil, a word of advice:

Don’t count the days. Let eternity pass by like a dream.

It's so simple to live. When your body moves, reflecting is unnecessary. Even if you're just going through the motions, that alone is enough to occupy most of your thoughts. Then again, I suppose it could be that my mind is simply particularly narrow. The only time left to regret, perhaps, is while waiting to fall asleep at night.

While I'm here, then, I may as well confess something. It probably doesn't deserve to be called something as grandiose as a confession, but it's certainly something I've never told anyone before.

Sometimes, when in the midst of a relaxing conversation, or while witnessing an amusing exchange between others, or during many other such commonplace moments, I would become aware of a certain sensation. You could call it a feeling, or perhaps more aptly an illusion.

There's a thin film of *something* that exists between me and others. A microscopic layer, transparent and intangible, and most of the time entirely imperceptible.

But sometimes, just sometimes, I might get too close and begin pushing on it. In response, it will twist and stretch to cover my form. Again, it brings with it no sense of touch—and yet in those moments, I perceive it. I know without a doubt that it is there. There's never a moment when it feels slimy or unpleasant—but it is never out of my mind.

I wonder if anyone else has ever felt that same way. I'm an average, ordinary citizen—I don't have any delusions of grandeur, nor do I believe that mine is some kind of singular experience of life that no one else can ever understand. I don't believe that for a second. I think I must have simply lost something along the way. I got careless and lazy and let something slip away, and now too much time has passed and I can no longer have it back.

Gin had talked about the endlessness of vampires, how in truth it might be limited. That made a lot of sense, and it was probably true—but I tried picturing the alternative.

Long after everything else was gone and forgotten, I would remain. Floating alone in the darkness, never to touch solid ground again, drifting farther and farther away into the darkness. Never again would anyone look into my eyes, nor I into theirs.

It was a terrifying prospect. Perhaps death really was a mercy, in comparison. And so it was impossible to admit to myself that the idea seemed seductive in its own way too. At the very least, I would never have to feel that dividing barrier again. And if floating alone could be considered moving, I would not have to keep thinking like this either.

It was like this that the final night of Homesick Manor passed me by.



Labyrinthine corridors stretched around me. Left, left, right, left, right, right, left—? Or was it right? I had forgotten what series of turns had gotten me where I was. Such were the upper floors of the manor, those built only for its master's sake.

As I absentmindedly continued forward, my dulled senses searching only for the next staircase, I was met with a shadow flickering across the already darkened walls, just barely illuminated. My heart stopped for a moment, though what filled it first was anticipation.

I had to hide my disappointment, however, as it revealed itself to belong to Nosferius Wisborg.

“O-oh, hello. Good morning.”

“Good morning, Lord Valakia.” His raspy voice was the same as ever, his unblinking eyes trained on me. “May I ask if you are currently engaged in investigation?”

“Investigation... No, nothing like that. I'm just taking a walk.” I smiled vacuously. “There's some of the manor I haven't seen yet. I thought it would be a shame to leave without having explored it all. That's not a problem, is it?”

“Not at all, Lord Valakia. I only hope that you do not get lost,” he said, still staring at me.

“If I do, I'll just call for you. I'm sure you'll see it and come find me eventually, no?”

“It is so.”

And then, he closed his mouth, though he showed no sign of moving. His eyes continued to be fixed on me. I began to feel nervous as I bore his uneven survey.

“U-um, was there something else?”

“...Lady Valpurga went to check on you not long ago, but she did not find you.”

“Oh, really? Dang, I guess I must have just missed her.” That was a lie, I had been at this since long before the sun came up. “Well, would you tell her that I'm doing all right?”

“...I will do just that.” And then, again, he clammed up, and again did not move. Had my accusations two days ago offended him after all? A bead of sweat began to form on my forehead even within the chill of the corridor.

“The look in your eyes, Lord Valakia,” he ultimately began, after what must have been half a minute of uninterrupted silence, “is one that I have seen before, many times over.”

“Huh?”

“I no longer remember whose faces it adorned. Many centuries have passed since then, and those in whom it dwelt have never shared their gaze with me again after that.”

The cryptic story only deepened my unease. “Were they... vampires?”

“Vampires... yes, I suppose they must have been.”

“T-then that means the church must have gotten to them too.”

“Yes, it must be so. There are not many ways in which one of our ilk can leave us behind.”

“Huh... Well, anyway, if there’s nothing else, I’ll be off now.” Unsure of what else to say but desperate to escape, I briskly walked past the servant and rounded another corner. I never heard him step away. Had I looked back to check, perhaps I’d have met his gaze again.

Now that I was alone again, however, I found myself exhaling a deep breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding. In truth, one of his familiars could still have been watching me from some unseen corner, but that was something I could easily ignore. There was not a single moment spent within this manor where I did not feel as if I was being watched, after all.

I’d begun to enjoy the feeling of disorientation. Every time I discovered a stairway, I would take it. Sometimes it would lead me up, other times it would lead me down. I couldn’t find any windows anymore, so I didn’t even know which floor I was on. It was entirely possible that I’d been going up and down the very same floor, perhaps even using the exact same route.

Spaces which are created for a given purpose compel those who occupy them to conform to the expectation of fulfilling that purpose. Here, though, that feeling was gone. If there was any purpose to this place, it wasn’t something I could understand. And so, perhaps unexpectedly, I felt as if I could simply *be*. It was a sense of freedom that the luxury of my guest room did not permit.

Even that might have faded soon, however. I wasn’t resilient enough to enjoy stumbling around in the dark for an eternity. The alienation would return to me soon enough, and I would begin to feel like I had overstayed my welcome. Before it could happen, however—I caught a glance of silver amidst darkness.

Flowing silver hair trailing behind a dark silhouette. I had finally found her. In a split second, though, she had rounded a corner and disappeared. Darkness again.

I wasn't going to miss the chance, though. I ran to her afterimage. Again, at the end of a corridor, another brief glance of silver. And on and on and on. As if I was never permitted to glance upon the whole of her again.

Still, the chase was leading me somewhere. I felt that I was making progress. If these were the guts of some giant beast, then I felt that I was slowly making my way up its digestive tract. I ascended more staircases than I descended. It was a slow climb, one where you might often lose your footing and slip back down a floor or two, but without doubt you would scale the distance again.

After an inordinate amount of time, I reached something different. A stairway which led to a single door. My instincts told me this was the last step of the journey.

I took a moment to let my breath stabilize, and then, with trembling hands, I grabbed the doorknob and twisted it. I had reached the mouth of the beast.

Beyond—an overcast morning sky. The light of the rising sun just barely reached me, blocked by countless clouds backlit in soft yellow. I hadn't even seen the outside of the manor once that morning, so it had come as somewhat of a surprise.

Not more so than realizing where I was, however.

"This is—" The tops of the jagged trees stretched out into the distance. Both the front and back yards of the manor grounds were visible. At each side, sloping walls rose up, with roof tiles flowing diagonally on their opposite ends. The door I'd come through was on the right wall. I was on a small platform atop the manor roof.

Rather than take in the view, however, my eyes were fixed on the individual before me, her white hair long enough to obscure her entire back. Standing near the edge of the roof, overlooking the front of the property in all its desolate glory was Dolly Penumbra.

"..." I wanted to say something, but my mind went blank. I stumbled one step closer, but she showed no reaction. Perhaps she hadn't noticed my presence, after all. Was she entranced by the somber beauty of the overcast sky?

I hadn't waited for this moment just so that I could stare from afar. I swallowed my doubts, and took another step forward, then another. Her diminutive figure grew larger within my field of view, though she still remained unmoving. And then, as I was about to take my fifth step, standing in the long shadow she projected on the roof, the distance between us now just barely out of reach—she twirled around in an instant, her golden eyes stabbing into me.

Not only did I not complete my advance, but I nearly stumbled backwards. A sharp pain shot through my wrist for an instant. My body had not abandoned its sense of danger. The accompanying mind, however, wasn't nearly as wise.

"H-hey..." I found myself focusing on her lips, as taking on the pressure of her gaze directly felt like it could crush me. "Sorry if I startled you."

She said nothing.

"U-um, about before... I'm fine, you don't need to worry."

She said nothing.

"If anything, I should apologize to you. I was the one who grabbed you like that. I'm sorry."

Nothing.

"Hey, any luck finding what you're looking for? Oh, don't take it as an interrogation, I'm just curious..."

Nothing.

"Oh, I know, maybe it'll help you out if you hear about our side of the investigation. Let's see..."

I kept prattling on while she said nothing. It felt like climbing a mountain, each word I got out a perilous hold that just barely let me hang on. If I were to stop talking, I would fall into the abyss below, and so I manically spat out every useless bit of information I could.

Who was I performing for? Her, myself, or someone else? I wasn't sure, but the judgement that would be handed down were my mask ever to slip was something that chilled me to my very core.

And yet, even once I exhausted every relevant fact, she still said nothing. Lost, my mouth flapped open as I searched for the next gap to grab onto. Gravity pulled on me. I felt the void beneath my feet.

"...Hey," I called out again, my voice now bereft of its prior superficial mildness and instead letting the desperation echo through. "When you said before that I would be complete someday... What did you mean?"

She, her clear eyes still trained on me, which I could feel even from the corner of my sight, said nothing.

I took a step forward, stomping on the ground and producing a tremor which surprised even me. "Please, give me something here! You don't need to speak—just any indication that my words are reaching you at all! Please!"

Not even a blink. It was like yelling at a statue—or a corpse.

The frustration which had been building up inside me threatened to boil over. Here I was, putting on this farce, and she didn't even have the decency to play along with me for a moment? Was I worth that little?

I raised my voice. “Hey, I’m on your side, you know!” I tried to keep the anger from making its way into my tone, but it crept out from the edges. “I’m not blaming you like everyone else! I’m on your side! Do you understand!? Tell me something if you do! Hey, people can’t survive alone, you know! Just express yourself to me! I’ll understand, whatever it may be! If you’re suffering, I can share in it! I may be powerless, but there’s nothing you can do alone either! If only you would open up to me, you’d understand! Do you hear me!?”

I could keep climbing, like this. Just continue talking. Surely I would reach the place I’d been looking for. Even as my words of encouragement bled into enraged roars, I continued believing it.

That was until, in an instinctive motion to communicate my anger, I raised my face from the ground and leveled a glare at her. I had forgotten what my purpose was. My mask had slipped. I had acted on impulse, and that was what would ruin me. Because in doing so, I was once again caught by her eyes.

Clear and yellow like two twin moons in the night. Her gaze hadn’t flickered once since I’d begun. I just knew that to be the case. Her eyes were so, so very–empty.

At once, I slipped and fell into the abyss. I could no longer get any words out. No, I just understood that there would be no purpose to speaking any longer. I shivered. The sky was gray and cold. I couldn’t stop shivering.

And then, like a mirage, with monotone words bereft of emotion–she spoke. “What you need is unclear.”

That was it. After all that begging and prodding, this is all I would get from her. That was fitting in its own way. And perhaps it was in the reflection of myself I saw in her pupils, but suddenly, I gained a sense of clarity I had been painfully lacking. I could no longer deceive myself.

The ridiculousness of it all now plainly apparent, I couldn’t stifle a laugh. It was an odious chortle, no longer curated to please anyone’s senses. I would never have let such a vile expression out before someone else–but what did it matter, now?

I felt the Devil watching me, even now. Sitting lazily on his throne, he viewed me with dispassionate eyes. Perhaps he wondered what sort of reasoning had led me to this point. Unfortunately, I would not be able to give a satisfactory reply, because there was no reason to be found.

From beginning to end, the individual known as Dolly Penumbra had given me nothing. There was no good indication that she was some benevolent soul with good intentions, or that she was misunderstood in some way and that I had to reach out and understand her. The only known act she

had taken to ever help us was that she interfered when Nevermore had picked a fight with Rafi, and even then her motivations could have been any number of things unrelated to sympathy. Beyond that, what was there to cling to? A few cryptic, nonsensical words between pure silence? Obtuse indications of a past long forgotten?

Was that it? That was everything I needed to become enamored, obsessed even? If so, it was readily apparent that any sense of mutual understanding I had felt was something that I created and projected onto her. I disregarded whatever will she may have held, and tried to wrench her heart open for me to have. How repulsive, how disgusting—plainly creepy.

Did I think that it was my duty to untangle everyone's feelings, to understand everyone that didn't want to be understood? Or that just because I put on a crooked smile and worked up a sweat trying to appease everyone, they had some kind of obligation to accept me, to value me? What a joke. What an absolute joke. Even after having my hand chopped off my body, I still hadn't gotten the message. Talk about an obstinate, sycophantic freak.

My knees ached from all the walking, and I could no longer be bothered to try and keep them upright. I sat down on the cold stone of the roof, my eyes pointed downward. What right did I have to look up at her? No, I'd never really seen her to begin with.

Soon enough, I heard footsteps as the boots disappeared from the corner of my eye. She was leaving the roof. Had she gotten sick of my presence? No, that was once again me making everything about myself. In all likelihood, there was simply no more reason for her to be here, now that she had verified the thing she looked for wasn't here. Or maybe she hadn't even really been looking for anything. Maybe that was one more misunderstanding I pushed onto her.

Even when I was supposed to be groveling in guilt over my mistake, the only thing I could think of was still whether she was looking at me or not. I grinned once again as I realized that. Was there anything lower than this?

What right did I have to look down on Nevermore before, to consider him a monster and to think of myself as his moral superior? Sure, he was a dreadful murderer and unapologetic egotist, but what gave me the authority to judge him for it? I didn't like other people one bit. I was simply scared of them, and so I tried to appease them with all I had, tried to be as inoffensive as possible. If I'd been just a little bit less of a coward, just a little more ruthless and powerful, maybe I'd have ended up the exact same as him.

Footsteps still resounded behind me. Reaching the door shouldn't have taken so many steps. No—these footsteps were getting louder, and their timbre was ever so slightly different. The soft footfalls continued until their

owner stopped just a few centimeters behind me. I didn't turn back, but I knew who they belonged to.

"...Hey," I said, not showing my face to her. "I guess Mr. Wisborg told you where I was going."

"...What are you doing?" Rafi asked.

"I didn't listen to you earlier, and look where it got me. Ridiculous, isn't it?"

"..."

"That's not the only ridiculous thing I've done. Not since long before we came here. For a whole year we've been running around from place to place, never opening up to anyone else, with only one another to trust. It should have been terribly difficult. It *has* been difficult. And yet—it's been the happiest I've ever felt in a long, long time. You know why?"

"..."

"Because for the first time in as long as I can remember, I was the most important person to someone else. You had no one else but me. You've never had anyone else who valued you as much as I did. That was the sick sense of pride I held in all that time."

"..."

"And when we got here, when we finally found those that we didn't need to hide from... When I saw you getting along with the others, being respected by them—I never would have said it, but I felt disappointed. Hey, isn't that the most pathetic thing you've ever heard? Of course I should've known better, I did know better, but some part of me really believed that you couldn't live without me, that you needed me in some way."

"..."

"I know you're not really that weak. I'm the one who is. I leeches off of just two people for over sixty years, and in that time I never even considered opening up to someone else. And even then I wasn't fully satisfied. The moment one went away, I tried to make the other mine for eternity, but I failed. She was smarter than to fall for it. She went away, and left me alone. And so I found someone else, someone who was in such a terrible place that being with me seemed preferable in comparison. You can see what I am now, right?"

"..."

"I don't actually value anyone else but myself. I don't look to others because I love them—I just want a room I can redecorate any way I want, that's all. And I've never really had it, because no one else is low enough to accept such a thing. And so I've never felt complete, and I never will. It's taken me

way too long to figure it out, but now that I've dropped all pretenses, I finally get it."

"..."

"So, um, I don't think you should stick around with someone like me anymore. No, it's not that I should be the one to decide what you do one way or another, but, um, if you stay with me, I will just keep trying to change you whichever way I want. You deserve better than that. So, um--"

I had been trembling from the cold as I kneeled on the stone, but at once a warmth spread through my back. I didn't know what to make of it for a brief instant, but then I caught sight of the small hands wrapped around my sides.

"...W-what are you doing?"

"That's what I asked you," she said.

"No, didn't you hear what I've been saying? You shouldn't--"

"You already did change me, you know."

"Huh?"

"I've changed, haven't I? And I'm way happier now like this, than I've ever been. That's because of you, isn't it?"

"No, um, I think you would inevitably have become happier after leaving that village, so--"

"So any bad change is your fault, but if it's a good change, I shouldn't thank you? How does that work?"

"Um..."

"I still don't know much about how people are supposed to act, but... why is it so wrong to change others, or to want to be loved more than anyone else? Back there, before you came... I had to be the one to change for others, I had to care for myself the least. And I didn't know it at the time, but now I know--that really sucked."

I didn't know what to say.

"You can try to change me, if you want. I'll try to change you, too. We can fight about it; that sounds like it could be fun. And after that... I think we'll both be better than we were before."

"That's... that's because you're strong. You're so strong, but I'm not. I'm weak and twisted and boring, so all I can do is drag you down with me. And you're still so young. You should have a real role model to look up to, not someone like me."

"So I'm strong and you're weak, but you need to worry about me? You really can't decide whether you wanna be old or young, huh?"

"Heh..." I had no argument there.

"I'm already messed up, you know? I can't become a proper human now. I'm not even a human anymore, anyway. So," she said, laying her head

on my back, her hair tickling my neck, “someone weak and twisted and boring is a perfect role model.”

“You shouldn’t...” I tried to choke the words out, my voice trembling. “Don’t be so nice. You shouldn’t accept this. If you knew just how terrible I really am, you—”

“I do know. How many times do you think I’ve seen inside your head?”

“...Have I ever heard you talk this much? I didn’t even know you could. I really shouldn’t underestimate you, huh.”

“I couldn’t, not to anyone else. I’m still half-assed... I don’t know how to understand other people properly, and I say the wrong things so much I figure it’s better if I keep what I think to myself, most of the time. But you’re an exception. Because I’m cheating.”

“Cheating...?”

“Both of us are. We’ve been looking into each other’s hearts all this time. We know things about each other that we might never have otherwise.”

“I suppose you must have had a pretty lucky selection, then. Seems difficult to look inside my head and not come out of it hating me.”

“I *have* looked inside your head, so I know that you’re weak, and twisted, and boring—and kind, and considerate, and clever. And I know that you don’t really hate other people, you’re just scared of being rejected. Because even if you hate yourself, you don’t trust yourself either, so as long as no one else hates you, you can ignore it. But you also put other people above you, so you feel guilty about being liked, you feel like you’re tricking other people—and so end up pushing them away, or distancing yourself. Does that sound right?”

I was speechless. All I could do was mumble inaudibly. She continued.

“Those people you were with before seemed incredible. They didn’t stick with you because you leached off of them, you know. They just liked you, and they didn’t let you run away from them. I think that’s what it was, at least.”

I felt something hot in the corners of my eyes. I leaned my head further down. In response, she wrapped her arms tighter around me.

“You know, you’re not the only one who hates yourself. I’m stupid and petty, and I never know what to say or when to say it. I even let a friend feel bad all this time, because I didn’t know what to do. When I think about that, I feel frustrated. I promised her I would get my hands on something worth being envious of, but I still have almost nothing. I want to change. I will change. And if you’re not happy, you should too. I can’t even imagine how, but we have an eternity left, don’t we? We should both have plenty of time to get there.”

I wiped my face with my sleeve. And then, not without the requisite trepidation, I looked over my shoulder. For the first time that day—for the first time in a while, I looked Rafi in the eye.

Her expression was still far from bursting with emotion. Even now, if someone were to look at her, they might not think she had any strong feelings to speak of. But I knew better. I saw her slightly furrowed brow, and the faint redness in the corners of her eyes.

I see. Despite her surprising eloquence, I still wasn't convinced that she was right, that there was much of anything worth liking about me. I still thought she would have been better off learning from someone with all of their marbles together, someone who wouldn't lose it like this over the most inconsequential things, someone who could think less about themselves and more about other people, someone who could set an example and walk forward with confidence. I did think that, but... Still, if she was going to insist, if she was going to go out of her way to stick with someone like me, then it was my responsibility to try and be as admirable as I possibly could. I might as well trick her even more skillfully into thinking I was worth anything. And if a little of her truly admirable self wound up rubbing off on me in the process, then I couldn't complain about that either.

The sky was still cloudy, and the stone floor was still pretty cold. Nothing had really changed. But I wasn't trembling anymore. And strangely, the view didn't look so overwhelming anymore, with someone by my side.



We went back through the door into the stairway. Even in such gloomy weather, the morning sky was bright enough that my eyes took some time to adjust to the darkness again. I looked at Rafi, a no doubt clumsy smile on my face.

“Sorry about all that. Pretty pathetic, needing a teenage girl to cheer me up at my age, huh?”

She just stared back, nonplussed. “...There's no need to keep up appearances with me, you know.”

“...Right. Thanks.” I couldn't win against her.

“So what do we do now?” Back to business. She was perfectly right to ask that, of course. If I hadn't derailed everything with my desperate stunts,

we would have still been trying to solve the case. It was up to me to make up for ruining that.

“...Dolly Penumbra is suspicious. I think if we figure out what she has been looking for, we might get a real clue as to what’s happening here.”

“Oh, really...? You really think so?” She asked nonchalantly, looking off to the side.

“Geh.” *After all those sweet words, now she hits where it hurts!?* “Yes, all right, you were entirely correct and I was wrong! Are you happy with that?”

“I’ve never been mad at all, no idea what you mean,” she said, her blank tone nearly convincing. *Opening up to someone sure is a good way of giving them ammunition, huh?* I couldn’t help but smile wryly.

“But,” I said, getting us back on track, “how do we tail her? Not even Mr. Wisborg’s familiars caught sight of her before.”

“He also wasn’t explicitly trying to find her, remember? But,” she said, putting her hands on her hips, “we don’t need to rely on him, anyway.” Her eyes looked resolute.

Thirty minutes of navigating our way back down later, and we were out in the yard, in front of the manor. Rafi had suggested just jumping down from the roof instead of bothering with that labyrinth of a home, but even with a new-found boost of confidence I wasn’t feeling quite that adventurous.

Her goal in coming out here was pretty simple. While her powers didn’t work very well within the manor, whatever obstructed them in there didn’t exist out here. And so, within minutes I witnessed her miraculous abilities at work again for the first time in a while. With just a touch, trees turned pitch black and melted into swarms of silent, vermilion-eyed bats. Of course, compared to the spectacle back in St. Purgatorio village something like this was almost benign, but it was still more fantastical than what any of the other vampires gathered here had yet displayed.

After she gathered what must have been over a hundred of her winged companions, she confidently directed them back towards our goal, inside the Homesick Manor.

“You don’t think we should have asked Mr. Wisborg for permission first?” This had to have been more than a little intrusive for a guest.

“It’s for the investigation. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

Well, too late to worry now, I guess. She had already been doing it for a while, after all. She hadn’t found me thanks to Wisborg—she’d already been secretly tailing Penumbra with a familiar relatively continuously for two days now. But thanks to the commotion on the roof, it appeared that Penumbra

had managed to slip free of its tail. So now, Rafi had instructed her familiars to comb through every inch of the manor in search of her, so many that she couldn't slip free of them all. It wasn't exactly the most subtle method, but I didn't have any better ideas, and subtlety didn't seem to be vampirekind's most valued virtue anyhow.

After that, all that was left was to wait. Wait to see what she would discover. Now that I was no longer around to annoy her, and now that the investigation had died down, it seemed she had become much more efficient. Only a few hours later, a convoy of a dozen bats returned, flying straight into their master and melding with her. She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she next opened them, she sent me a determined gaze.

Without a word, we shared a nod, and hurriedly made our way back inside with her leading the way.



It felt odd to head back into that maze of hallways with an unclouded mind, but it was also different. This time, I wasn't just heading in random directions, nor desperately trying to navigate my way out; this time, we had both a clear objective and a clear path. Every pointless detour or dead end faded from mind as we focused on the one way forward. In doing so, the mind-bending maze began to feel small and transparent.

It didn't even take five minutes. We ascended to the fifth floor, whereupon we rounded a few hallways, passed by a few staircases, and reached what must have been the outer edge of the manor, though there were no windows to prove it. There, hidden like a tree in a forest, was another staircase pointing downwards.

The darkness made it easy to miss a step, so we continued carefully. And continued. And continued. It soon became clear that this staircase did not lead to the fourth floor. Nor the third. Nor the second. We eventually hit a wall, with the stairway continuing to the right. We shared an uneasy glance. There was no going back now, though. We pressed on, now convinced that the path burrowed its way into the earth below the manor.

There was no risk of Penumbra attacking us, at the very least. The group of familiars that informed us of this place had split off from the rest, that still followed her as she left this place. She hadn't spent long here,

reportedly. Still, there could have been traps or something—we were surely far outside the purview of where a guest should rightfully go.

A second turn had come, and then a third. I didn't know how many steps we'd crossed, but I began to feel as if the descent would last forever. We were surely deep below the ground now, far more so than any regular basement. It didn't make any sense for the foundations of a building to extend this deeply, like the roots of an ancient tree. I dreaded the return trip.

Upon the fourth turn, however, we noticed something different. The steps had ended, replaced by a perpendicular tunnel. It was so narrow that a man the size of Brooks might have had difficulty crossing it, yet the ceiling was high enough to be invisible to the eye in that darkness.

The chill that ran through my spine did not come entirely from the cold. It didn't show on her face, but I knew that Rafi was also scared. I felt her small hand wrapping around mine. How strange, that someone as strong as her should be scared of anything. Knowing that put me at ease just a tiny bit, and so I took the first step forward.

After around a minute of walking, the tunnel opened up into a space the full extent of which it took me a moment to comprehend.

“T-this is...”

The lighting was as dim as ever, provided only by a few small lamps set around the circular wall. The ceiling was out of sight, but from the echo of my voice I could tell that it had to be high, high up, perhaps as much as the height of the entire manor from the ground level, if not more so. That was just how much we had descended. And the circumference of the space was massive, too. It must have been more than double the size of the two towers at the sides of the manor. Aside from the singular pillar extending from the center of the room towards the inky void on top, nothing else could be seen, not a single clue to what this tremendous cavity might have been used for. Nothing, save for *it*.

The barrenness of the space only served to emphasize the lump sitting ahead of us. We couldn't tell what it was, at first. The soft glow of the lamp affixed to the pillar behind it only emphasized the contours of the object, its essence indecipherable. We would have to inch closer to examine it.

The only thing pushing me onward was the feeling of the hand squeezing mine. I didn't want to disappoint her any more than I already had. So, after taking a deep breath and cracking my back, I began approaching *it*.

The *thing* appeared to be covered by a black cloth of some kind, like a museum exhibit about to be unveiled. It had a large hump in the back, and then drooped forward gently. As I got closer, I noticed four tubular appendages extending from beneath the cloth. They were limbs. In fact, the

entire object almost appeared to take the shape of a praying human, or like someone who had fallen on their knees and collapsed. *Almost, but not quite*, I heard myself think between the warning signals. It couldn't be a human, because there was no head there. There wasn't even any protrusion resembling a neck. Placated by that understanding, I reached out towards the object, even as my mind hissed like a pot about to boil over.

Kneeling in front of it, I lifted the top portion of the object, peeking beneath the black cloth.

Seconds later, I threw it back to the ground as I staggered backwards. I desperately suppressed my gag reflex. The reaction was not unlike that of someone as they discover the fruit they'd been holding to be rotten and covered in mold. An instant revulsion, an imperative from the brain to immediately discard the infected object.

It might only have been for a moment, but I knew what I saw. And from the look on her face, I could tell that Rafi had as well.

The head and neck were indeed missing, because everything above the shoulders had been cleaved right off. No blood flowed from the wound, but it was no less brutal—maggots or something wriggled within the gore.

Had Penumbra done this? Or had a separate killer been responsible for all of the mutilations thus far? Was this also their handiwork? What was the victim doing in this underground space? Questions buzzed in my mind like flies around a carcass. But there was just one thing that, despite having no proof, I knew for sure.

I had never met the man, nor was there a face to confirm his identity, but somehow or another, I just knew. That the corpse lying right in front of me was the master of the mansion—the ancient vampire eight hundred centuries old, Lord Fafner Belial Nachtheim.

I had to investigate this place, I had to find if there was any clue left by the culprit, if here, finally, we might find something to lead us to the truth—not a single one of those thoughts ran through my mind. All that I had in that moment was the primal, overwhelming desire to get away from here. My earlier bravado had crumbled to dust in seconds.

Somehow getting back to my feet, I grabbed Rafi by the hand and dashed towards the exit. She didn't resist. Not even the prospect of climbing all those stairs gave me pause. I felt like I would suffocate if I spent another second in that dreary place. My wobbling dash up that staircase, then, was the wild spasm of an organism desperately trying to surface before its oxygen reserves ran out.

I hadn't exerted that much effort since running away from Father Iscario a year prior. The pain of my tendons as they snapped and regenerated

over and over again didn't even register to my exhausted mind. Not even when we finally reached the top of the staircase on the fifth floor did my mind calm down. No, it was only when we finally navigated our way out of the maze and back down to the first floor, only when I left that sordid manor and saw the sky with my own eyes, that I felt like I could breathe again.

Exhausted, I collapsed with my back to the grass in front of the manor entrance. Rafi crouched beside me, seeming perfectly fine save for the beads of sweat on her brow. For a while, the only thing that could be heard in the unkempt garden was the distant rustling of trees and my own pained panting, though even that soon settled down. Eventually, I began to feel the ground against my back. I hadn't wandered into some strange nightmare. This was reality. And so, I couldn't afford to freeze in fear forever.

I met Rafi's gaze. We shared a nod. We could both feel it; we had just gazed upon the final piece. It was up to us to draw the truth out of these scattered clues. And we couldn't afford to wait—for we felt a creeping darkness drawing closer.



And so, that's exactly what we did. We headed to my room, locked the door, took some altogether laughable measures to avoid being overheard—and then we put our heads together to figure this case out. Without hiding anything from one another, even to the smallest or strangest details, like that bloodstain I found on my face the previous morning, we discussed the situation, shared theories, eliminated possibilities, and through a combination of deduction, instinct and a stroke of inspiration—we arrived at the answer.

It struck me just how quickly it had gone, only a scant few hours, after all those days of wasted time and constant wandering into blind alleys. As it turns out, if they didn't leave thoughts half formed, if they didn't let themselves be distracted or avert their eyes from unpleasant or uncomfortable possibilities, people, and indeed even vampires, could be pretty efficient after all.

And once we had uncovered that bone-chilling solution, the chance to check our answers was not very far from us at all.

Some time after that, we finally left the room. My head was spinning. I knew we had to act, and fast, but my impulse to leave simply came from the desire to breathe some different air. Move my body first, and the strategy could come later.

The dim hallways of the manor hadn't changed a bit—even if I could no longer see them the same way. I didn't look to my feet, though. I would have to steel my resolve and face this darkness.

Just as I thought that, the figure of Wisborg appeared ahead of us.

“Good evening, Lady Valpurga, Lord Valakia.” He bowed to us. *I suppose it's already evening by now, huh?* The opaque curtain in my room had been drawn the whole time, so I hadn't noticed sundown.

“I don't mean to disturb you,” he continued, “but Lord Glib the Elder has called for you. Everyone else is waiting in the parlor.”

Rafi and I exchanged a blank look, before I turned back to him. “May I ask what for?”

“He claims to have uncovered the truth behind the case. He wants to announce his conclusion in front of everyone.”

So, it's time, then.

“Understood. We'll be there in a moment.”

Having performed his duty, Wisborg turned away and disappeared in the direction of the parlor. I let loose the breath inside my lungs, and in doing so I felt myself growing unsteady on my feet. We were headed for the dragon's den—no, we'd been there for some time already, and had simply failed to notice the slumbering beast.

Warmth. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

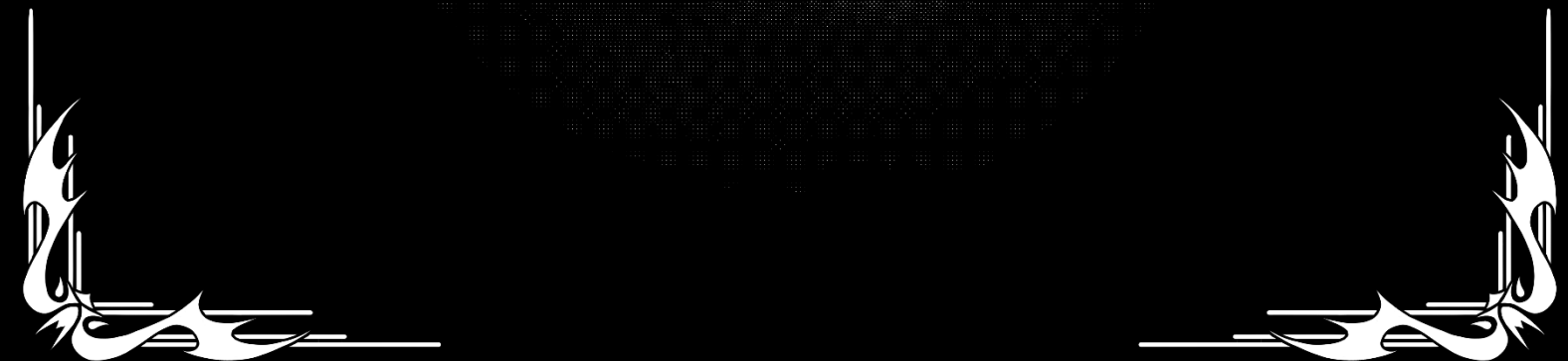
Rafi, her expression as level as ever, gave me the subtlest of nods. I nodded back. And then, we stepped forward—to unveil this miserable farce for what it was.

◆ Final Record ◆

Shadowplay

「 End of the

Puppet Show 」



O rigin Glib stood at the center of the parlor, the illumination above him working almost like a spotlight. He wore the same mild-mannered expression as ever, but his eyes shone with confidence, like those of a chess player about to check his unsuspecting adversary. Sin stood not too far away, his back to the counter of the bar, while Wisborg, who had just arrived, settled to the left of the room near the wall, where he wouldn't be in the way. Dolly Penumbra stood in the farthest corner at the end of the room.

“Good, you're here,” Gin said to us as we entered the room. “I suppose you've heard? I believe I have an answer to every riddle that has presented itself before us. I don't mean to be overconfident, but I think I may have just solved this case.”

A smile crossed my face. “I'm dying to hear it. Still,” I said, taking a step closer, “I don't mean to hog the attention or anything, but I've actually come to an answer of my own, too. Knowing my track record, I'm sure you're much closer to the mark, so would you mind if I stated my own conclusion first?”

Doubt crossed his features as he raised an eyebrow. He gazed appraisingly at me for just a moment, before his features softened. “...Certainly, I don't see why not. Maybe we've both reached the same answer.”

“I somehow doubt it,” I said, before turning to Wisborg and Sin respectively. “I'm sorry, everyone, would you mind if I spoke first?”

“Hey man, if he’s cool with it, I won’t complain. As long as I get an explanation, I don’t care whose mouth it comes from.”

He shrugged flippantly. *Right.* I had a hard time facing him at that moment. As Gin moved to the side and gave me the floor, I walked over with my head facing downward and my fists clenched. I exhaled a deep breath. I heard Rafi take her place next to me. *Can’t put it off any more than this.*

“...I will begin with the incident that started this whole affair: the ‘murder’ of Craven Nevermore. His body was found wounded and drained of blood, and most crucially, seemingly inert despite his heart being in its rightful place. The question of how he entered this catatonic state could be called the ‘strong impossibility’ of this particular case. I call it that, because there exists also the problem that I would term the ‘weak impossibility’—more so improbable than strictly impossible, but a problem all the same. That is, how could anyone have overpowered Nevermore to begin with. As far as established facts go, the only one with a sliver of a chance would be Rafi. But, according to her, she has been unable to use her powers to their fullest extent while in this manor. In other words, she would have been at a disadvantage.”

“Hey, now,” Sin said, raising a hand. “I hate to be that guy, but that’s not the most convincing argument. Sure, I believe her, but she could very well be lying, y’know.”

“True enough. You have no rational reason to believe her. But you believe your own information, right? Every skirmish that Rafi has been involved in could be accurately described as a fireworks show. That spectacle is why she became well-known enough to be invited here. To put it bluntly, she isn’t capable of holding back.”

“...Well, sorry,” she said, crossing her arms and puckering her lips. I clasped my palms and gave her an apologetic nod.

“Anyhow, what I mean to say is that if she had been the one to attack Nevermore, I believe the fight would have been explosive enough that someone would have noticed it. Does that satisfy you?”

Sin raised his hands in defeat. “Hey, I’m with you, I’m just trying to be thorough here.”

“Thanks. Anyway, unless anyone has any objections, that means no one here could have beaten him in a fair fight—no one except, perhaps, the unknown element,” I said, glancing at Penumbra. “Nobody here knows anything about her. She’s strong enough to bite my feeding hand, so to speak, but that doesn’t mean much. I know very well how much of an outsider I am in all this, so I leave it to you to decide: do you think it’s possible for a vampire that strong to exist and yet for none of you to have heard anything about her?”

“It’s not strictly *impossible*, of course—” Gin began.

“—But it sure as hell isn’t plausible,” Sin continued. “There aren’t that many of us out there to begin with, and I’ll be the first to tell you that excess power gets to a guy’s head fast. Or a gal’s. Even if she’s just woken up recently after hundreds of years of deep sleep or something, her name would have been passed down somewhere if she was that noteworthy. That’s my two cents, at least.”

“Ignorant as I am, I’m inclined to agree. And more than that, Nevermore would have already been on his guard against her. She did oppose him during that first dinner, after all.”

Of course, during our entire exchange, Penumbra hadn’t moved a muscle. She—that *thing* probably couldn’t care less about our little show.

“So, we come to our original conclusion. No one could have defeated Nevermore in a fair fight. What about taking him by surprise, then? Could someone have sneaked up behind him and incapacitated him in a single blow, perhaps? You may disagree if you want, but I, for one, doubt it. Even from the little time I’ve had with him, I’ve never seen a more guarded person in my life.” He antagonized the whole world, but in turn he was also ready to make the whole world his enemy. I would never understand him, but he was straightforward in that sense. “He wouldn’t even allow a single of Wisborg’s familiars to escape from his line of sight. I don’t believe he would ever have overlooked an entire person. If he’d been attacked in his sleep that would have been slightly more believable, but the fact that he was found on the complete other side of the manor from his own room makes that possibility highly unlikely.”

“So what happened to him then?” Sin asked impatiently. Even he couldn’t be laid back in this kind of situation. *Not good*. I realized that I was talking in circles precisely so that I could avoid getting to the point.

“...A trap,” I said. “The culprit set a trap for him.”

“A trap, huh?” Gin muttered. “What do you mean, exactly?”

A cynical smile crossed my lips. “I’m sure no one else here was cowardly enough to really believe it, but I’ll just make it clear anyway: the state that Nevermore is in is nothing so terrifying as a truly dead vampire, an immortal being somehow brought to an end through some unknown mystical means. The first conclusion that everyone came to was correct: he is simply in an inert state, because his ‘heart’—his core has been separated from him.”

Both Sin and Gin’s eyes narrowed for a moment. Wisborg, for his part, showed no reaction. A moment later, Sin spoke hesitantly. “Well, yeah, I figured that was the case, but... what was that core, then? His heart, his brain, it was all there.”

“Think back to what we found, and forget your preconceived notions. Was there *really* nothing missing from that body?”

That gave him pause. He furrowed his brows for a few moments, and then: “...! You don’t mean...!?”

I gave him a sympathetic smile. “I always thought something was odd about his history. He was defeated by the hunters of the Heliocentric Church and imprisoned, tortured for over twenty years. But then, he escaped. Isn’t that strange? They had already defeated him, and that was in the wild, when the advantage was his. And yet somehow, after decades of continuous abuse, he summoned the strength to overpower all of those hunters inside their own base of operations, the most secure place of all for them? If he had snuck out unseen I might accept it, but instead he performed a massacre. No matter how you think about it, it doesn’t make sense—unless you consider that, in that time, something had changed. And all of the information that the hunters were working with had become outdated.”

In my first and last conversation with Nevermore, when I implied that humans had managed to change him, he became angry and violent. And yet, when I mentioned the scar that they left on him, that anger turned to amusement. I had found it odd at the time, but it made perfect sense in retrospect. His anger had turned to mockery, because he realized that *I was simply wrong*. There was nothing for him to be angry about.

“It’s pretty silly if you think about it. I assumed that the core was something anyone would try to protect, keep tucked deep inside so that no one could reach it. I think everyone would assume the same. That was exactly what Nevermore staked his strategy on. And with twenty years of nothing but torment, he had all the time in the world to execute it.

“He changed himself. It wasn’t the torture that did it, it was him. He altered his own face, scarring it beyond repair. And at the same time, he changed *his own heart*. He kept his former core, the heart, in form only, and transferred the actual function of the core to a new vessel—one in the shape of an eye.”

I shudder to think of it, but with the ‘experiments’ that the Church had been conducting on him, I figured he would have had plenty of chances to view his own insides. In other words, he had the opportunity to visualize.

“When he staged his escape, all he would have had to do is rip the eyeball from his own chest, insert it into his empty eye socket, and bandage the wound. Then, any hunter that crossed his path and tried to stop him would be working on outdated information. They would try to attack his chest, and no matter how skilled they were, that misdirection would be enough to end them.”

Sin gaped at me. “Is... is that really possible?” he asked, turning to Gin.

“...There have been instances of vampires’ cores changing inadvertently over unfathomably long periods of time. I can’t think of any case where one deliberately performed such a drastic alteration on themselves, but... a state of perpetually heightened sensation and emotion, a long stretch of time where the subject’s only distraction would be a retreat into their own mind; I can’t think of any circumstances more suitable for such a goal.”

Sin staggered, putting a hand to his palm as he considered this revelation.

“After his escape, Nevermore deliberately let the rumor spread, that his capture had left him irreversibly disfigured. Eventually, that became the first thing anyone ever pictured about him. Nevermore the Ravenous became One-Eyed Nevermore. That was exactly the kind of misconception he wanted everyone to hold about him. But unfortunately for him, it just so happened that the culprit in this case reached this same conclusion.”

“Hold on, now. I get Nevermore using this trap to escape from the Church, but you’re telling me he kept his core in the same place after that? In his eye socket, protected by a single measly rag? Why wouldn’t he have stuffed it somewhere safer, like back into his chest or something?”

“I can’t say what was going on in his head, and I don’t particularly want to know either, but if I had to guess—he probably enjoyed the thrill of having everyone fooled. That seems in line with his personality, don’t you think?”

“...Hmph. Yeah, you’re right about that,” he said, a self deprecating grin on his lips. Then he kicked the air and he scowled. “He really is the most infuriating bastard I’ve ever seen!”

“I understand that the culprit used this knowledge of the eye to incapacitate Nevermore, but they would still have needed the strength to reach it in the first place. Just what is this trap you spoke of?” Gin asked. Something about the measured quality of his voice made it clear to me—he was testing me.

“...For the trap to work, the culprit would have needed an accomplice,” I said, looking down.

“Hey now, really?” That grabbed Sin’s attention. “There aren’t a lot of people left here to accuse, you kn—”

“The culprit is Gin.”

That frank sentence, interrupting Sin's train of thought and seemingly slicing through the air of the room, came not from me, but from one right beside me: it was Rafi who had revealed it.

"What... the hell are you on about?" His previous shock over Nevermore seemed like a joke over the expression Sin wore now. That was exactly the face I feared seeing, exactly what I laboriously extended this denouement in order to avoid. But if I couldn't move past this, we would never get anywhere. Rafi had covered for my weakness once again. I gave her a smile filled with gratitude. And then, steeling myself, I faced Sin.

"...Yes. As Rafi says, Gin is the person that, in tandem with an accomplice, incapacitated Nevermore."

"...Hah. Right, I get it." Sin chuckled to himself, before glaring at me with all the contempt in the world. "I've said it plenty of times, how I hate that guy's guts. So I'm the accomplice, right? Makes a whole lot of sense, really--"

"No. You were uninvolved. You had no part to play in this case, and you never said a single lie."

"Huh?" Now the contempt was replaced by pure confusion. "Then what the hell are you trying to say?"

For all of his brother's objections, Gin seemed entirely unperturbed by the accusation. He wore a sly smile as he watched me, his eyes full of expectation. He was at once the schoolteacher watching his pupil correctly answer a question as well as the prankster child amused at his ruse being discovered. "Well," he finally said, "if I've done it and if my brother is truthful, then that's quite the conundrum, isn't it? During the only interval of time when Nevermore could have been attacked, I was in Sin's room."

"Yes, you were—but not *all* of you." I turned to Sin, who was still mystified. "Tell me, you said you spent most of that time reading at the desk deeper within the room, while Gin spent most of the time on the couch near the door, right?"

"Yeah, exactly. That's why I'm saying--"

"So you weren't sitting particularly close to each other. You guys spend a lot of your leisure time playing cards, but you never did anything like that that night, did you?"

"N-no, we didn't. But I'm telling you, there's no way I would have missed him leaving the room or something."

"I know. But during all that time, *did you ever see both of Gin's hands?*"

"Uh—huh? His hands? Sure, I saw..."

“This is really important. Can you swear that you laid eyes on both of his hands during the time you were together. Right and left. Did you properly see them?”

“I... I don’t know. He has a tendency to keep his hands in his pockets, you know? Hey, why are you asking about that anyway?”

“You should see what he’s trying to get at by now, brother,” Gin calmly said.

“...It’s a technique, or perhaps a trick, that I’ve only seen you do, Sin. Remember? On the first night, when you were all playing cards, and you learned that Brooks was cheating.”

“Oh...” Realizing what I meant, Sin raised his hand, and his forearm ever so naturally split down the middle. A dark mist of miniature bat wings emanated from the seams as his wrist and hand hovered a few centimeters above the severed stem of his arm, nothing but air in between them. “This, right?”

“When Rafi blocked up that gap, your hand became disconnected from your body, right? At that time, I remember what Gin said.”

Well, there’s still room for practice.

“‘Practice,’ you said. Practice for who? Did you mean that you both needed to practice that ability more—or that Sin had yet to perfect the ability, *while you already had?*”

“Your point?” Gin asked.

“Unlike Sin, your perception wouldn’t be so easily disturbed. It’s a technique you yourself created. Therefore—even if solid matter obstructed the gap in your limb, *you would still be able to control it.* Do you know if that’s true, Sin?”

“It... it is. I’ve seen him keep his hand steady even with people walking through the gap. I always thought it was incredible, but...” He slammed the counter behind him with his fist. “Come on, man, just make your point already, stop talking in circles. Just how would my brother have done this?”

“Okay.” I drew a deep breath, and then exhaled. “Gin arranged for a meeting between himself and Nevermore, set to happen at that time when he was in your room. The location would be a room on the third floor of the left wing. The only assigned guest room there was Penumbra’s, who was known to not involve herself with others. In other words, the least likely spot to be interrupted, by either guests or the servant of the house. I saw them talking earlier that day—I didn’t hear what they were saying, but that was probably when they agreed on it. However, as you know, Gin didn’t go there himself. Instead, that was the part his accomplice would play: he sent Dolly Penumbra to attack Nevermore.”

“Huh!? Hold on, you made an entire stink about us suspecting her just the other day!” Sin protested.

“More importantly, you yourself argued that it’s highly improbable for Miss Penumbra to have any chance of putting up a fight against him,” Gin added.

“Exactly. Which is why you didn’t send her to win against Nevermore—you sent her to lose. Nevermore would handily defeat her, so much so that he would feel at ease. And then, you bet once again on Nevermore acting like himself—on doing the one thing he has consistently done with every chance he’s gotten:

“He would *look down on the weak*. He would take his time dealing the finishing blow, enjoying the sight of victory with a sneer on his face, not knowing that he’d been carefully led to the perfect spot for your trap to activate.

“Gin, you yourself were in the room with Sin. But *your hand was not*. You left it with Penumbra. And in that perfect moment, she would have led Nevermore to the spot *directly above you*, in the room above Sin’s. Once everything was in its place, you only had to rely on your perception. Your arm is one, even with an entire floor bisecting it. And once she had taken it out, you only had to lunge directly for Nevermore’s right eye socket. It must have been difficult to get the timing right, but then I’m sure he must have been bewildered too, enough to dull his reaction. And that gamble of yours ultimately paid off.

“Of course, if Nevermore really had been found in the room above Sin’s, that might have triggered some suspicions. So you had Penumbra move him to the hallway, and then brutalize his body a little for good measure. It was little more than a form of distraction, I imagine.”

Sin’s face was full of disbelief, of course. I didn’t think he would have easily accepted a story like this. He must have been desperately searching his memories for anything that could refute my claims. Gin, though, just silently stared back, mildly amused. He didn’t push back, but he didn’t confess either. If I showed even the slightest crack, he was ready to pull at it and discredit my entire argument.

“If I may, Lord Valakia,” Wisborg spoke up for the first time, “how did you conclude that Lady Penumbra was Lord Glib’s accomplice? The way you describe it, anyone could have performed that role.”

A grin crossed my lips. *You’re more right than you think. Whichever one it was, it doesn’t make a lick of difference.* “Considering the alibis you provided, it just seemed like the most reasonable choice—”

“From my standpoint,” Gin sharply interrupted, “Miss Rafflesia seems in just the same position, does she not?”

I glared at him, but I didn’t object. If I got caught up in trying to defend her now, I would have fallen right into his trap. I swallowed the words I wanted to utter, and acquiesced. “You’re right. But one way or the other, it doesn’t change your involvement.”

“Don’t talk like it’s settled!” Sin piped up. “Why would he go about it like this, anyway? If he wanted to catch Nevermore off guard, surely there would be better, more surefire ways to do it.”

“Maybe there would be, but... I don’t really like using this sort of logic, but he’s a vampire, you know? He can afford to make a bet like this. After all, losing is of no consequence. Even if he failed, he wouldn’t die—so why fear the risk, when the potential benefits are so alluring?” Even if he failed, he could’ve still achieved his ultimate objective, it would only have been a little more troublesome.

“...What benefits, having me confirm his alibi? Doesn’t sound like it’d count for much. Don’t they say you should always doubt a family member’s testimony?”

“It’s not about you confirming his alibi to us—it’s about *you* being convinced of his innocence beyond any doubt. Because he knew that you wouldn’t rest on your laurels like the rest of us. If you found out the nature of his guilt, you would surely stand in his way.”

“...” He was taken aback. I guess he never really thought of himself that way.

“Hmm.” Gin put a performative hand to his chin as he thought out loud. Everything he did seemed like a performance to me now. “That’s certainly a fun thought experiment you describe. A trick fit for a scholar like me, I can see it. But there’s just one glaring problem.” He looked straight into my eyes. “Tell me, how would you account for the timing? I can accept that he could be led to the exact right position, difficult as it might be, but for this attack to work I would have to strike with pinpoint accuracy. A moment too early or too late and I would miss it entirely. So tell me, just how would Penumbra have made sure that I strike when I need to from a floor away, all without Sin ever noticing it?”

“Y-yeah!” Sin exclaimed like he’d just been handed a lifeboat. “And for that matter, how could Gin have done in the other two? When Zamira was incapacitated, he was here with me, Mr. Wisborg and Raff! And...!” he hesitated. Crossing his arms and looking down, he asked, quietly and yet by no means timidly, “...Why? Why would he do all of this? Between the two of

us, I'm far more likely to have wanted to knock Nevermore out. And neither of us have anything against Mr. Brooks and Zamira."

Here it is. I knew from the glint in Gin's eyes that he was challenging me. The answer to Sin's question lay at the heart of it all. This was where everything would unravel. I inhaled a lungful of air, let it out, and spoke.

"When I hit upon the problem of the timing, I was almost glad. I figured this would finally allow me to rule out this silly theory, to believe in your innocence. Unfortunately, however, I have an answer to that too. There is only one way in which the timing could have been communicated—but before I get to that, I need to talk about the cases of Brooks and Zamira. And the truth is, you're right. Gin couldn't have committed those 'murders'—and that's because *he didn't*.

"I don't mean that Penumbra did them in his stead either. No, what I mean is this: the attack on Nevermore and the attacks on Brooks and Zamira were committed by two entirely separate parties."

"H-huh? What, you mean there just so happens to be another violent maniac in this manor in addition to my brother?"

"No. I mean that the inexplicable incident we've been seeing play out has in reality been a silent battle, one that threatens to swallow all of us whole. And without realizing any of it, we've been squandering all the precious time we had left!"

The ferocity I'd managed to muster seemed to have communicated to Sin exactly how serious I was, but I may as well have sounded like a lunatic. With a sigh, I began to explain myself.

"...What first struck me as odd was the difference in how we'd found the bodies. One was in the hallway, while the other two were in their rooms; but more pressingly, Nevermore was found full of unhealing wounds, while the others were pristine. Of course, there was no way you could have predicted the future, but honestly, if you hadn't made the call to cut Nevermore up like that, I might never have gotten onto this train of thought. The confusion only serves to help you, so we were lucky in that sense."

Gin only made an over-emphasized shrug in response.

"And then, of course, there is the matter of the missing blood. That's strange no matter how you look at it. We may be vampires, but I think we can all agree consumption to that extent is abnormal." I remembered Gin's surprise at discovering the matter of the drained blood. Of course, it was mixed in with his feigned surprise at the discovery of the body, but that part alone was genuine. "Then, of course, there's the matter of Brooks' and Zamira's bodies. Unlike Nevermore, there is truly nothing missing. We have

to explain the phenomenon of their unresponsive state. Not even to mention the fact that we found Zamira in an empty locked room.”

“Ah, that paltry thing? It’s hardly a concern,” Gin said flippantly. “It might be an impossible crime for a human, but to a vampire, a locked door is hardly an impediment. Your little friend, for instance, could very well absorb the entire door and then place it back when she’s done.”

My mouth curled into a wry grin. “Right. This case is one that could only have been perpetrated by a vampire, and only on a vampire. And not a sorry excuse for one like me, with no special traits to my name—but a bona fide monstrosity apart from the realm of man.” *Where to even begin with all this?* That’s what I kept asking myself as I spoke, but ultimately, I would have to establish *that* before all else. “Let’s begin by ruling out any known suspects. If we consider both Brooks and Zamira to be the handiwork of the same culprit, then there needs to be someone with no alibi for both timeframes.

“In the case of Brooks, I was with him in the parlor until about midnight. He left, and I stayed. Mr. Wisborg can confirm that much. We can rule out Sin and Rafi too, as well as Zamira. Gin, Penumbra and Wisborg are the only ones without an alibi. Of course, if it turns out that Wisborg is the killer, he could be expected to lie about his alibis to protect himself, but it would make no sense to lie in order to create fake alibis for innocent people.”

“Hold it,” Gin said. “I can’t help but notice that you’re glossing over the possibility of Wisborg colluding with the culprit. In other words, that he’s not the culprit, but an accomplice. Isn’t that somewhat irresponsible?”

“...If we lose ourselves in ambiguity, we’ll never get anywhere. I’ll ask you right now, Mr. Wisborg—just how long have you been a servant of Lord Nachtheim? Please, tell us.”

“...” He stared at me with his blank, uneven gaze for a few moments. And then, with a solemn bow, he spoke. “How long it has been, I cannot say for I have long since forgotten. However... Not less than half a myriad times have I seen the seasons pass within this forest.”

“That’s...” Sin looked on in awe.

“Over five thousand years, huh? In other words, older than even Zamira. In that entire time, Wisborg has served only one master. Tell me, can you think of anything that could motivate such a man to break his creed?”

“Nothing is impossible, you know—so long as you’re still alive.” Gin said with a confident grin.

“I’ll grant you that much. That’s why I’m not ruling out the possibility of Wisborg having orchestrated all of this himself. But if he for some reason wanted the death, or at least the appearance of death, for Brooks and Zamira, he could have done the deed himself without requiring anyone else’s

assistance. But conversely, if someone had done it and then approached him with the intent to somehow bribe him into corroborating their story, I don't believe that anyone here could have had anything to move a man like him. Does anyone have any objections to that idea?"

Gin shrugged, while Sin gave a nod. It seemed that he was convinced.

"Then, let's move on to Zamira's case. This one is even more clear cut. Not a single one of us could have done it, save for perhaps me or Zamira herself. And neither one of us could have been responsible for Brooks."

"Wait, what about Penumbra? We don't know squat about what she was doing! From what it sounds like to me, you could very well pin everything on her!"

"It sure seems that way, doesn't it? I can't imagine that's an accident. I figure that's exactly what Gin was planning to do with his grand deduction, before I rudely barged in. She's the most suspicious person, so all it would take is some false testimony from your part and we'd all have bought it. No?"

He neither confirmed nor denied it, but merely narrowed his eyes a little as he watched me, smiling.

"Unfortunately, that won't work anymore. Because there is someone who can account for her movements in that time period: Rafi. She had her familiars tracking Penumbra for the past 2 days. While she can avoid Wisborg's general surveillance, she's not invisible—not even she can evade familiars specifically sent to track her."

"What? What's all this now? Why didn't she say anything when you tried so hard to defend her that you got your arm ripped off?" Sin asked angrily.

"Because it hadn't returned yet at the time..." Rafi said. "I didn't want her to notice me, so I only sent one. If I'd made it constantly switch to come back and send me reports, she would probably have noticed it and shaken it off."

"Huh... so you mean...?"

"Yeah," she confirmed. "Penumbra was nowhere close to Zamira's room at the time. She's not the culprit."

"As you can see, none of us could have done it. At least not directly. Perhaps you might argue it was an indirect attack, perhaps through a familiar. What does the expert say? Could that be possible?"

Gin chuckled. "I can't outright deny the possibility, but it certainly is unlikely. It would already stretch the imagination if it happened once, but for this hypothetical remote attack to work flawlessly twice truly does seem unimaginable. Not to mention the locked room in the second case—I can't think of an easy way for a familiar to have made its way in."

“Hmph, I’m glad you agree. What are we left with, then? You must have an inkling of it, right?”

“You mean...*he’s* here?” Sin asked.

Here we are—the crux of the matter. “I’d always thought it strange, you know? That the master of this manor, notoriously known as a shut-in, would be away somewhere. I’m sure it’s the same for you. But what could I do except take it at face value? However, odd things have kept happening. I haven’t had the chance to say this to anyone but Rafi, but on the morning of the third day, before we found Brooks’ body, I woke up with blood on my face. Someone else’s blood. That wasn’t any of your doing, was it?”

Nobody answered in the affirmative. Of course, I already knew as much.

“But my door was locked. The window was closed, too. I didn’t know who could have been responsible for it. But it’s been on my mind, you know. Because I was made to drink that blood, and I saw the mind of its owner. I wasn’t shown concrete memories, but vague, abstract thoughts. I certainly couldn’t tell whose they were—but I couldn’t help but feel like they must belong to someone like the master of this house. That was just the impression that I had.”

The Devil—one that had strayed so far from humanity that they could never return. His thoughts sounded like dark teachings meant to lead me to that very same path.

“And then, earlier today, while we were tailing Penumbra, we found it—the basement of this manor.”

“So you’ve seen it.” Wisborg remarked in a voice of resignation. He didn’t seem upset to learn that we’d found his master’s secret. Perhaps that wasn’t his place, or perhaps he’d lost the ability for such sentiments.

“We found a headless body there. I’ve never seen what he was supposed to look like, but I can’t imagine that to have been anyone other than Lord Nachtheim.”

“What!?” Sin exclaimed. “So he’s been hiding around here this whole time? What, did Penumbra lay him out?”

“And Wisborg lying on his behalf is out of loyalty, I take it? Much more understandable that way, isn’t it?” Gin said.

“No,” I said, “that’s not enough. It doesn’t explain all that is strange about this manor. Like the constant feeling of being watched—it hasn’t only been me, has it? I feel the presence of someone else even when I’m alone in my own room. Or the fact that Rafi’s powers don’t work properly here. Someone else’s ownership of a space has never stopped her from making it her property before—why now, why here? And—the blood drained from those bodies. That’s the strangest part of it all. Even setting aside the problem of

when they would have had the time to do so, just what kind of vampire could drink that much blood at once? A glutton? Or... perhaps one for whom that amount of blood is proportional.”

Peering beyond my listeners’ faces, around the inoffensive furnishings meant to entertain the guests, I looked at the walls which contained us, cold stone dressed up in feeble wallpaper. “I should have considered it from the start, but even picturing it is beyond an average citizen like me—just what a vampire that has lived for eighty thousand years would be like. To my mind, whether it’s a thousand years or a hundred thousand, it’s all so astronomically long that I can’t wrap my mind around it... but of course, there’s a gulf so vast between those two numbers it may as well be infinite. An infinite amount of time to change, and grow—and stagnate, and calcify, into something singular and incomprehensible.”

“Wait, I don’t get where you’re going with this. Gin saw Nachtheim in the flesh at the last Conference he attended! Unless you’re claiming that’s a lie too. But you’ve seen him yourself!”

“That was Nachtheim to the same extent that your arm is ‘you’. Accurate, but incomplete.”

“Nachtheim was able to incapacitate Zamira from inside a locked room, and deliver blood to me directly into my room, and suck up all of the spilled blood, and watch all of us while remaining undetected, and remain hidden in plain sight because Nachtheim is not merely the master of the Homesick Manor—”

“—Fafner Belial Nachtheim is the Homesick Manor!”

Silence. Sin gaped at me with furrowed brows, though Gin only narrowed his eyes slightly. I suppose he had already figured it out. Wisborg, for his part, seemed content to hang his head, his final show of acceptance.

“That... that’s ridiculous!” Sin flared up again. “What was that body, then?”

“His limb. The face through which to hide his secret. I think I can hardly be blamed for panicking upon seeing something like that, but that body we found hadn’t been attacked or anything. He was simply *growing*. He had failed to get his presentable body up and running in time, and so he had to pretend to be away while he finished setting it up.”

“But that’s impossible. It couldn’t just be a familiar, he was talking and everything...”

“Indeed, it’s no familiar. It doesn’t need to be—because so long as his feet touch the ground of this manor, he is connected to his main body. He can

be puppeteered exactly as the master wishes. It's exactly that: a glove puppet, no more, no less."

Beads of sweat rolled down Sin's face as he glared back. He wouldn't be convinced that easily. *I can't blame you.* Even when the possibility crossed my mind, I couldn't believe it. I wanted nothing more than to rule it out. Unfortunately, however, once you've realized it, verifying it is trivial.

I eyed Rafi. She nodded, and stepped forward. Then, she raised her right arm, and in an instant the white fabric of her sleeve became jet black and dripped like ink spilled on the page, except only that it flowed upwards. The entire sleeve and even the shoulder portion of her dress and part of her hair vanished, melting into bats. All of that mass instead coagulated into a dark-red spike shaped like a large rose thorn, connected to her hand and held up like a knight's prized sword.

Without a moment of hesitation, she brought that sword down—right into the floor below her. The carpet tore, the marble below audibly cracked, and then...

The sound of a stool being knocked to the ground resounded in the parlor as Sin staggered backwards. Pale and shivering, he was at first transfixed on the *wound*, before his eyes wildly shifted back and forth between every wall of the room.

Vampire or not, it was a perfectly natural reaction. Anything else might well be considered a sign of insanity, when faced with the red spurt that flowed out.

The hole in the floor *was bleeding.*



Bleeding—it's quite ironic, come to think of it. If Nevermore had ever missed any of his shots when aiming at Wisborg's familiars, he would have uncovered the secret then and there. But it was precisely because his aim was always true that he couldn't notice the abnormality: the spray of blood from the eviscerated rats would perfectly mask the bleeding of the house itself.

"Are you really okay with that, Mr. Wisborg?" Gin asked, still perfectly at ease. "They did just injure your illustrious master, you know?"

"...To the master, that much is no more than a pinprick." Wisborg replied as he sent him an inscrutable gaze. Gin shrugged again.

“...There’s more, right? I’d like to think it can’t get any more nuts than this, but I have a feeling that’d be too optimistic... I’d better sit down for this.” While Rafi returned her clothes to normal, Sin picked up the stool and stood on it, his voice tired enough to match his age for once. “There’s a reason why Nachtheim would have gone on this rampage, and it has something to do with... my brother, and Nevermore, right? Tell me.”

“...Understood.” He looked like he’d aged a decade in a minute, but his eyes were sharper than they’d ever been. He’d begun to accept that his brother was involved, but that didn’t mean his loyalty had been challenged. He was prepared to treat me as an enemy if he had to.

Here is where everything would be tied together, and the true monstrosity of this case unearthed. I desperately kept myself from eyeing the figure in the corner of the room. Once *it* was brought to light, there would be no leeway. I steeled myself.

“Think about what motive Gin might have had to incapacitate Nevermore. Do you think he would have done it out of mere indignation?”

“...No, that doesn’t sound like my brother.”

“If Gin did it, then there has to be a practical reason for why he would have needed to. And now think about Nevermore himself. He’s never once attended the conference until now, so what made him change his mind? He certainly didn’t seem to have suddenly become interested in the community. Would he really have come all the way here to harass us?”

“No. I think he had something concrete to profit from. Earlier we speculated that he wanted to assert his presence as a newly freed individual, but he should have known hardly anyone would show up to a conference hosted here. There’s also the matter of where his body was found. Why had he gone all the way over to the other side of the manor and waited there? Because he and Gin had agreed to a secret meeting. But what did they have to discuss?”

“A hint towards the answer can be found on the map we discovered in his room. Remember what was encircled on it. Among others, the city of Ruthven Port—where you two were unfairly labeled murderers. Think about the timing though. Nevermore escaped captivity four years ago, and the city was destroyed three years ago—if he had in fact gone there, the window to do so would have been pretty small. In other words, it is not unlikely that Nevermore was there, on the day of the city’s destruction.

“And what do they have in common, this conference and the city on that day: for one, the presence of you and Gin.”

“What?” Sin crossed his arms. “That’s a stretch, man. There were plenty of other towns circled on that paper, including plenty we’ve not been to.”

“Well, that much is to be expected: after all, Gin discovered that paper first. We were all on other sides of the room, so he had plenty of time to draw in some additional circles, so he could direct our attention away from the key point. But what he couldn’t do was erase anything from it—including Nevermore’s ‘bingo’. Whatever he was searching for, he had found here.”

Sin crossed his arms thoughtfully. He wasn’t convinced, but he was starting to see the picture.

“This is something you said yourself, Gin. If Nevermore wanted anything, it was power and influence, two things that he had lost after his two decades of captivity. And what’s the best way to gain influence, under these circumstances? For someone like him, I think it’d have to be something underhanded—like, perhaps, blackmailing an already-influential vampire.

“It was a lucky break for him, then, that he got to witness in Ruthven Port that day something that could ruin your squeaky-clean reputation.”

Gin met my glare with an inscrutable smile. One step closer.

“—I need you to confirm something for me,” I said. “Do you remember if Queen Zamira had any major weaknesses as a vampire?”

“Huh? What kind of a non-sequitur is that?” Sin looked irritated by my changing of the subject, but I had to lay down the groundwork.

“Please, just tell me.”

“...She was weak to the Sun, right?”

“Yes, thank you. That is one of her most famous traits. Humans of today talk about her like she was a vile spirit who led an entire nation astray because of it. But then,” I said pointedly, “how is it that I saw her bathing in the Sun without issue in the observatory?”

“H-huh?”

“Gin, tell me, is it possible for a vampire’s weakness to vanish like that?”

“Hmph.” He looked amused by me calling on his expertise at this stage. “There’s nothing definite about vampires, you know? But we still don’t know the nature of this weakness to sunlight, or at least no vampire I’ve ever asked does. Without a firm grasp on the origin of such a trait, I find it difficult to believe that it could be modified.”

“Thank you. That stood out most of all. But then there is the matter of Brooks. Something about him bugged me as well. Remember the game of cards you played that night. He won, and yet he never made any attempt to enforce your debt to him.”

“What? We were just playing around! Besides, he was cheating.”

“Even before his cheating was revealed, he seemed awfully relaxed. You said so yourself, didn’t you, that he’d mellowed out? But we’re talking about a man who gained his riches entirely through debt collection. Would he really have let it go that easily, even something small like that?”

Debts meant everything to him, much more than a simple matter of material profit. He wouldn’t have forgiven it that easily, not if he were his normal self—not if he had any reason left to yearn for it.

“And then there’s the matter of Dolly Penumbra. Supposedly an old acquaintance of Lord Nachtheim, and yet until her reemergence and appearance here, she hadn’t been heard from in millennia. What could she have been doing? What could have caused the change?”

“Maybe she was sleeping,” Gin suggested. “Old vampires sleep a lot, you know? Years at a time.”

“Years, maybe, but millennia? Or do you think she would have done so little in her time awake that you would fail to learn about a vampire this ancient?”

“...Maybe she was sealed and unable to revive. Not by the Church, but in some other way.” Sin suggested.

“Sure, but if a human uncovered something like that, what do you think the chances are that they wouldn’t report it to the Church?” He had no comeback to that. I continued. “There is something off about them. About Nachtheim’s two victims, and about Penumbra. Something deeply wrong. What is it that explains the differences in their behavior, the inconsistencies in their nature, and the method through which Nachtheim immobilized them? There had to be something that explained it all.

“And then I thought back to the invitation. To the reason why we’re even here right now. Nachtheim summoned us here to tell us about the way to kill a vampire, but we didn’t really believe it, did we? I feared it like I would the shifting shadows from my bed at night—all while rationally knowing that the boogeyman couldn’t possibly be there. But tell me, what reason would Nachtheim have to make such an outrageous claim unfounded?”

“You don’t mean...?”

“It exists. There is a way to kill a vampire, and it’s been staring us in the face the entire time. After all—Queen Zamira, Mr. Brooks and Dolly Penumbra have been dead for a long time.”

“What... is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean it quite literally. The three vampires that once wore those names died long before they stepped foot in this manor for this conference. What we saw of them...” My eyes flashed to Penumbra. “What we see of them, is no more than ghosts.”

“Lord Valakia... How could that be?” Wisborg, too, seemed shaken. So his master hadn’t communicated anything to him either. That much was to be expected.

“Remember the spell cast upon the forest that surrounds this manor. Without an invitation from Nachtheim, it is impossible to reach the manor. But, how does the spell work? I asked you about it, Mr. Wisborg, and you told me that it confirms the identity of the invitee through verifying their minds, their memories. As long as their own perceived identity matches that on the invitation letter, the forest will allow them passage—in other words, as long as they believe themselves to be the person on the invitation letter, it makes no difference whether they really are or not.

“Tell me, then. If a vampire wanted access to the manor without being let in, what are they to do? I can imagine a certain possibility: they can *swallow someone who is invited*. Devour them whole, draining them of their blood, their memories, their *entire identity*.

“As Gin graciously explained to me, the core of a vampire comes from their perception of themselves. That is what gives shape again and again to their undying soul, even as their mass is reduced to nothing. But what if a vampire were to relinquish that perception? What if they *ceased to perceive themselves as a separate being*? What if they were swallowed up so thoroughly, their memories and their very personality melded so comprehensively with their dominator, that *they believed themselves to be no different than them*?”

That is the principle. That is the self-evident end of the system that is a vampire.

“—*That*, is the true way to kill a vampire.”

Sin looked sick to his stomach as he clutched his forehead. “But... how could no one have known? If this method really does exist, surely more vampires would be aware of it.”

“...No, Lord Glib.” Wisborg put a trembling hand to his chin, his eyes reflecting a realization of the ultimate truth. “The truth would not have spread. Because the vampires that did learn of it would have chosen oblivion of their own volition.”

His eyes widened. “That’s... impossible!” he screamed out.

“It’s very much possible, brother,” Gin said, ecstatically. “Can you imagine how difficult that would be for me and you? To whittle down someone’s ego, to grind it so thoroughly into dust, to absorb their identity so completely, that they can no longer distinguish between themselves and you? Twenty years of torture might be enough to change the shape of your heart, but I believe not even that would be enough for something so fundamental.”

Sin turned a quivering look at his brother, but Gin didn't care. He was past hiding it at this point. I grimaced. "For you to do it, I'm sure it would take many years. But there are monsters in this world far beyond our understanding, aren't there? Monsters like Lord Nachtheim, or monsters like the 'victim' of his attack.

"I didn't have to think for long. Because I, too, am privy to a first-hand account of the monster that Nevermore saw you tame that day. I know what kind of beast it is, and so I can say it with confidence:

"The Hematolegion could swallow a vampire whole like that. That is something I wholeheartedly believe."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me...!" Sin's hat nearly fell off his head as he staggered. He must have understood it by now, but he didn't want to believe it, that his brother could be involved with such a monstrosity.

I knew just as well as he did what the Nightless Night was capable of. Of course, I hadn't directly encountered the creature, but I had had the opportunity to witness memories of its destruction from one of the few survivors it left behind. So I knew within my very bones that it was a creature so deadly and alien it made Nachtheim look pedestrian in comparison.

"You told me this yourself, Sin, that Gin had almost been swallowed up by that thing. Based on your wording, I imagine you weren't there to witness it yourself, right?"

"...Yeah, I got lucky. I was near the outskirts of the city, so I missed it."

"Well, neither Gin nor Nevermore were as lucky. Gin was swallowed up by the darkness and somehow managed to escape with his ego intact. Nevermore, I imagine, avoided death by luck—perhaps he was simply passing through on a horse at the time. The Legion only swallows humans or vampires, after all. It is uninterested in animals.

"What happened next is what Nevermore witnessed. What exactly *it* is, I confess I can't explain in full confidence, but I have a guess. The reputation of mass murderers that has been falsely attributed to you two brothers—perhaps the grain of truth that the fiction was based on came from here. Perhaps Gin had to offer up part of the survivors as sacrifices to gain the monster's trust. I can't know for sure, but whatever it was, it was terrible enough for Nevermore to regard it as suitable ammunition for blackmail. And what is definite is that it led to your accompliceship in this case.

"Cut to the time before the conference. The monster wants in, but even it is no exception to the curse of the forest. But now it has access to a new weapon—intelligence, courtesy of its new collaborator. He proposes a cunning plan: use those who are sure to be invited. And so the monster brings an old identity to the surface, one long forgotten by all except its ancient

acquaintances, and parades it around for long enough to attract attention and receive a letter of invitation. But that's not enough. Just one is too precarious. And so it swallows up two more of those that are sure to be invited. Now there are three: three of the invitees to this grand conference are no more than shadows of the monster's prey.

"They pass through the forest without issue. Its whole body is so overflowing with consumed souls that it cannot recognize anyone as itself, but here is another cunning suggestion from the new collaborator: by concentrating its memories of just those three swallowed souls into bodies reflecting them as they were in life, they could trick the system of the spell, and they could trick the eyes of the other visitors. *That* is how the three-headed hydra we were deceived into seeing as Jackal V. V. Brooks, Zamira Oasia Zamirage and Dolly Penumbra, was born."

"If that is the case, then why has the Legion not yet arrived here?" Wisborg asked.

"That thing is an unprecedented disaster—it can't move about without leaving any trace. Even its presence anywhere in this country at all would have put us all on guard, don't you think? If it had been anywhere close to this place, I'm sure Nachtheim would have considered cancelling the Conference entirely. That would have put the plan in jeopardy. It was a necessary precaution to put as much distance as possible between here and the main body."

Just like the bats that had delivered our invitations to begin with, I was sure someone rooted in place like Nachtheim would have had familiars all over the country gathering information. Perhaps they were rushing back to bring their master the terrible news as we spoke. Unfortunately, they would never make it in time.

"B-but, it just doesn't make sense!" Sin yelled. "Even for a monster like the Legion, to be able to create familiars that are indistinguishable from humans... I've never heard of anything like that!"

"Yeah, you're right. If something as convenient as sentient familiars was possible to achieve, you would have heard about it. Even for a vampire which must hold innumerable lives inside it, the composition of a soul is probably too fragile to be able to withstand being split apart. There must be a body, a connective tissue—and there was. Make no mistake, Sin, these were not familiars. They were shadow puppets, dancing empty as the hand of their master dictated."

Here we came to the final piece of the puzzle. It was so clear in retrospect, but I doubt I ever would have noticed alone. Darkness has a way

of deceiving the senses. This was a discovery I had to credit entirely to Rafi's instincts and powers of observation.

"Sin, Wisborg, think about it. The only explanation for the state that we discovered Brooks and Zamira in is that they were *cut off from their core*. It's no different than my hand being cut off earlier and me being unable to move it—when separated from its main body, it was reduced to empty matter." It was perhaps not the most illustrative example, considering the Glib brothers' particular ability, but it should have done the job well enough. "There is something that connects these ghosts to the main body of the Legion, something we failed to notice this entire time, be it its presence or absence. Even though the state of the crime scenes was the best possible hint that Nachtheim could have left us."

I noticed the traces of realization crossing Sin's face, and the subsequent desperation in his eyes as he looked back through all of his memories, trying to find anything that could deny the truth. I had gone through the same process myself earlier, so I could feel his struggle intimately. As a mercy, I would confirm it then and there, leaving no room for doubt.

"—It was their shadows. The shadows connected them to the main body."

Anyone who saw the Nightless Night directly would quickly understand. One only had to think about the origin of that moniker. The Hematolegion was known primarily as *the darkness of night which appeared below the daylight*. The ground would turn into darkness and swallow up every human or vampire who touched it, leaving behind nothing but empty mummified husks drained of blood. Knowing now what I do about the nature of vampirism, I can imagine the mechanism is not very different from what allows Rafi to take almost anything around her as her own property and manipulate it at will. The Legion is moving through matter and, like the border of a country at war, constantly shifting the mass that makes up its body. It's like an infection, stealing the land below it and using it for its purposes before abandoning it.

This case was no different. The shadows stretched from below the legs of those ghosts, and stretched further and further, like giant exposed veins, leading all the way over to their main body. Since the matter of the mansion was occupied by Nachtheim, I had to imagine that, rather than directly subsuming the ground, it would instead create a thin layer of darkness that covered it, until at least the shadows left the grounds of the manor. And, of course, the reason why we never noticed it—

“–is because this manor is just so dim! In any ordinarily-lit residence, the abnormality would have been spotted immediately, but Gin had been to previous conferences held here and knew how dark this manor was. And so he came up with this ingenious plot: hide darkness within darkness, shadow within shadow. That is why, throughout their entire time here, Brooks, Zamira and Penumbra have always stuck to the corners of rooms, away from being directly bathed by the few lights here. Because they wanted to minimize the risk of us noticing.”

I suppose my following ‘Penumbra’ around must have been infinitely frustrating. I had seen her in the courtyard and, most damningly, on the roof. If I had paid any mind to her shadows relative to the light at those moments, I may have noticed the abnormality a lot earlier.

“But of course, the rooms of our victims were the biggest hint. Nachtheim had made sure to turn the lights in the rooms to their highest level. It stood out like a sore thumb in this otherwise dreary house, but the point he was making is clear in retrospect: he wanted to make a note of the fact that their shadows had been cut off from the source.”

“Wait, wait, just... give me a second here.” Sin held a palm to his forehead as he thought through all of the revelations. “If what you’re saying is right, then there was really nothing stopping Brooks and Zamira from coming back to life. Sure, Nachtheim caught them by surprise once—I assume he set up a trap in their rooms. It was the inside of his own body, so I’m sure he had that much control. But Penumbra is still here. She could have simply relinked her shadow back to those two and brought them back.”

“Yes, ‘she’ could have, but there was a very clear reason why she didn’t: because they did not understand the principle behind this crime.” I eyed Gin. “The true nature of Nachtheim is something that only Wisborg was likely aware of. Not even Gin or the Hematolegion could figure it out that easily. And until they did, they couldn’t afford to move recklessly. Because if all three of their ghost bodies were rendered inert and the trail of shadows was expunged from the manor, the main body would no longer have a connection to follow, and it would become lost in the forest, never reaching the manor. That was the worst case scenario they had to avoid, and so, until they could figure out the truth behind how they were slayed, they remained cautious.”

“...But Nachtheim must have seen that trail of shadows, even if we missed it. Wouldn’t he have realized what they were from the moment they stepped into the manor?”

“He probably did sense the abnormality, though I’m not sure he immediately understood the significance of it, at least not until he drank Nevermore’s death and saw all of his memories. But even if he had, he didn’t

have a way of immediately responding to the situation. With the form that he's in, I doubt he can make any kind of movements or alterations without time and concentration. The most he could do was lay a few traps." *Or cut himself open to feed me his blood.* "We are effectively inside of his guts right now—he is in the vulnerable position, not us. If it came down to a fight, he would have no way of neutralizing Gin or the Legion's puppets."

"It was a tricky situation for Nachtheim. He had called us to tell us about the secret of a vampire's death. He's likely known about it for a very long time, so I can't possibly know what made him decide to share the information now, but it may have even been related to the threat of Hematolegion." Perhaps he had noticed its changes in behavior as of late, and deduced that it was working with an accomplice. "When he'd realized that very monster was inside his own home, he wanted to follow his principles and protect his guests. But at the same time, he couldn't have the Legion, or its accomplice, realizing the nature of his body: if they did, he would lose his advantage and surely be subsumed and killed. If he made a show of trying to communicate with us directly as he is now, his nature would be easily discovered. And so he had to bide his time—all until his own puppet could be completed and he could communicate to us discreetly."

It's likely that he did simply fail to prepare his puppet in time for the conference. That much was no anomaly, but expected behavior from a vampire so ancient and massive. I can't even comprehend how the passage of time must be perceived by such a being.

"But on the other hand, the wait was also beneficial for Gin and the Legion. The more time we wasted, the closer the main body could get to crossing the forest and catching up to its puppets. And so, Gin took control of the investigation, and made us run in circles the whole way through. He was truly trying to figure out the truth behind Nachtheim's attack, but at the same time he couldn't have us realizing his involvement in the case of Nevermore and deducing his connection with the Legion from there. So, while seeming like the most proactive of us all, he secretly preyed on our indolence and extended this farce for as long as he possibly could."

"Don't forget, you've still got something to explain," Gin said. "You've been doing so great until now, so it'd be a shame to leave things half-done."

"Ah, right. Yeah, I did promise, didn't I? The final piece to Nevermore's case. How could Gin time his attack correctly, when he was one floor below with no way of knowing what was happening? It should be obvious by now, but there was a way for Penumbra to give Gin the signal. Even in the terribly dim rooms of this house, you'd be able to see it if you were on the look-out for it. All she—all it would have had to do was make its tendril of shadow pulse

through the gap at the bottom of the door. From his spot right next to it, Gin would have no doubt seen it, and made his move.

“That’s everything. That is the truth behind this sham of a murder case.” I pointed at him, and Rafi followed suit. “So, what do you say, Gin!?”

His grin was ear to ear at this point. Perhaps he was proud of how well everything had gone for him up until now, or maybe it was just relief at finally getting to drop the mask.

At last managing to contain his glee, he closed his eyes and stretched out his back, like he’d just woken up from a restful sleep. Then, with a casual motion, he inserted his hands back into his coat pockets. His left remained there, but he quickly took out his right—this time, with something held inside the closed fist. With a smooth motion, he threw that something up in the air, letting it fall moments later back into the same hand. He repeated that motion, again and again, playing with what appeared to be a spherical object that glistened like a marble in the faint light of the parlor. Even after explaining everything, even with every piece of the puzzle in place, it took me a moment to recognize exactly what the object was.

“T—that’s...!” Sin was equally appalled. It was an understandable reaction, since the object he so callously threw around was *Nevermore’s eyeball*.

A dull gray pupil gleamed, surrounded by a blackened sclera. There was no severed optical nerve—this wasn’t just an eyeball, it was the core of *Nevermore’s* being. Given enough time, maybe years or even decades, an entire new body would surely grow around that heart, spurred on by his vampiric immortality.

This was proof.

“You really got it all, man. I only just figured out the trick behind *Nachtheim* myself, after my associate found that regenerating puppet in the basement. It’s a downright fascinating case, though I’m disappointed I didn’t catch on sooner.” He shrugged, almost as if hiding his embarrassment. “I thought you’d be too stupid to get everything, though. Oh, excuse me, I suppose ‘too ignorant’ is more accurate. Tell me, how’d you do it?”

“You’re right, I never would have gotten it by myself. There are simply too many moving parts to this case, too many monsters beyond the imagination of a normal guy like me. But it wasn’t just me.” I glanced at Rafi, then directed a bitter smile at him. “I had Rafi: her instincts are nothing to scoff at, you know. And... I had a teacher like you, who gladly answered all of my ignorant questions.”

His eyes widened for a moment. Then, he doubled over, his shoulders trembling as he let out a laugh like nothing I’d ever heard from him.

“Oh dear!” He raised his face, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. “I’ll have to remember that! I suppose my big mouth does me no favors.”

“Gin... Brother, what is this!?” Sin turned to his elder sibling and yelled that desperate question. His voice sounded crushed, but he must have still been hoping that there was some trace of an explanation for all of this. “Why would you do something like—”

“God, just, shut up for a second.” Gin raised his palm in the direction of his pleading brother, a scowl on his face. “Please, just spare me from the headache of your incessant prattling, at least for this moment.”

Then he sighed, and pointed at me. “Look at that guy over there. He’s not screaming like a banshee or making irrational arguments. That’s because he understands a very simple fact: he doesn’t know who the hell I am. He knows only the few shallow interactions we’ve had so far, and his hypothesis for the kind of person I am was just proven wrong by new information. It doesn’t take a genius to get that much: all you can do is recalibrate to the newly unearthed facts. How about you give that a try instead?” He spoke like an exasperated adult telling a child what should be a self-evident lesson. All that Sin could do was stare back, open-mouthed and baffled.

“I... I liked the person I thought you were, you know. I wish it was real,” I said.

“That’s obvious, isn’t it? Because who you thought I am was beneficial to you. Because I was nice to you, and I had enough common sense for your mundane sensibilities. It was a useful, placating personality. Now that you know I’m not only useless but actively harmful to you, you’ll naturally begin to hate me instead. That’s all there is to it, so don’t try to tug on my heartstrings with that, would you?”

I don’t know what kind of gaze I must have looked at Gin with at that moment, but if I had to guess, it held more pity than scorn. This was the kind of twisted person who would take the side of a monstrosity beyond human understanding. It was as repulsive as it was sad.

Gin must not have liked the look, because he scowled in return, with all the possible disdain his facial muscles could muster. It lasted only for a moment. Then, he closed his eyes, and a moment later, his sly grin was back. He clapped his hands loudly.

“Well, on that pathetic note, that about wraps up this play, doesn’t it? There’s no longer any need to perform, so how about all the actors show their true faces?”

At the signal of his grand speech, a noise resounded in the room. It came from the direction of the door. My head snapped to look—there, holding the knob of the opened door and smiling placidly was—

“Sorry about that, gentlemen. Put an uncle like me in a room as fancy as that and I’m liable to snore for days!” Jackal V. V. Brooks guffawed, his eyes empty. He strolled through the doorway, and following closely behind him—

“If not even death will cure you of that terrible sense of humor, there’s truly nothing that will, ‘me’.” Queen Zamira, as composed as ever, strolled coolly towards us, her eyes empty.

“Come now, ‘me’, don’t say such misleading things, you’ll confuse the poor fellas. This whole song and dance is for their benefit, but we’re far beyond the need for words.”

They cut through the center of the room, towards us. I looked at their feet—the shadows danced wildly behind them, wriggling like the tail of a giant snake. Penumbra approached from the other side of the room, also walking towards the center—it was far too dim to see the exact point, but their shadows must have all joined up somewhere.

The three-headed hydra...no, the three puppets all lined up next to Gin. The benefit of hindsight is always misleading, but now that I knew, I didn’t understand how I was ever fooled by their pantomime of life. Their true selves had already been swallowed up by the maelstrom, and so there was nothing behind their eyes. What stood before me truly were ghosts.

“I was just going to wing it and come up with some half-hearted explanation for how ‘Dolly Penumbra’ was behind everything. Dying without ever understanding the truth might have been cruel, but you could also consider it a mercy. Are you sure it was wise to cut that short, Valakia?”

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry that your brilliant show of wit has to come to nothing like this, I really am, but there’s no avoiding it, you know? You’re late, Valakia. If you had somehow brought all of this out yesterday, things might’ve turned out differently. You could’ve been the great detective that saved the day. As it stands, though, I’m sorry, but it’s too little too late.”

I froze. Everything I’d prepared for left my head in an instant. We were going to band together, drive them out, save the manor—all of that had been wishful thinking. I’d been escaping reality again. Did I really underestimate the gravity of the truth I had uncovered? I should have just run away the moment I realized it. Maybe then we would have made it. *I’m a fool, I’m such a fool, I—*

There was a crushing feeling of pressure all around us. Every hair on my body stood on its end. I could feel it. *It was coming.*

And it did come, as suddenly as it promised. With a powerful creak of breaking wood, the door to the parlor was crushed by an unstoppable force—a *black tidal wave invaded the room.*

We were engulfed in an instant. I thought I could see out of the corner of my fading vision, the waves separating before they could hit the sneering Gin. I didn't care. It didn't matter anymore.

Within moments, the person known as Vio Valakia had vanished without a trace.



I found myself floating in boundless darkness. It was at once like an empty vacuum and a dense ocean filling up every crevice of space around me.

I couldn't move. Not because some force kept me in place, but because my lethargic body couldn't muster up the energy to lift even a finger. All of my bodily systems had slowed down to a crawl, my consciousness like a barely lit candle in the wind.

I don't know how much time I spent in that state. My mind perceived days, weeks, maybe months passing, but in all likelihood it was no more than a moment.

Eventually, a change occurred. Something stirred in the darkness. A rhythmical sound echoed, approaching me. It took an inordinate amount of time to realize that the sound belonged to a pair of footsteps hitting solid ground, though where that solid ground came from, I couldn't know.

Soon enough, my eyes perceived a shift. Like a mirage, abstract splotches of light blurred together to form a shape in the absolute black, its contours growing more and more definite as they approached.

I strained my eyes in what felt like a heroic effort. My vision recalibrated to the perception of light, and then I saw that familiar silhouette.

Long white hair, dark clothing, black lips upon porcelain white skin. It was the figure of Dolly Penumbra, though something about it was strange. The impression was all off. I could barely make out her face, but I could still tell.

"How do you feel? Don't worry, you're safe here. Please, take all the time you need."

The few times I had heard her voice until then, it had been mechanical and cold, but now it was filled with patience and kindness. And as my eyes continued to adjust, I managed to just about make out the shape of her lips—a warm smile.

Something was terribly wrong, but my sluggish mind was in no shape to comprehend it.

“We’re sorry,” she said, her features reflecting sadness for only a moment before she regained her smile. “You had high expectations of us, but we failed to answer. You showed us kindness, and yet we couldn’t reciprocate. We were cruel to you. We didn’t mean it, but we’re sorry. Will you forgive us?”

I was in no shape to show any resistance. I could just about follow her words.

“It may be too little too late, but we’re here now. This is what you wanted, right?”

She took a step closer to me. Her face became clearer—I could now see in full detail the bashful curvature of her lips, the evocative movement of her eyebrows, and most centrally of all, her eyes: they were full of affection and tenderness and *life*, like they had the entire universe behind them.

Even in my vegetative state, I was struck by that expression. In comparison to her visage now, every other she had shown thus far seemed like a poorly constructed mask of clay, defective and incomplete.

She was no ghost. She was real. And she showed that face to me.

“Vio, you said before that to be consumed by another is death for a vampire, but you’re mistaken. Two become one, but nothing is lost. Memories are more than just data. The record of memories contained within your soul has everything that you are. Every emotion you have ever felt, every fleeting thought, every impulse. The personality is merely the interface between your true self and the world, filtered through the vessel of your perception. But even if your perception changes, your true self is preserved forever.”

I didn’t know when it started, but at some point during Penumbra’s speech, other shapes had begun to flicker in the corners of my eyes. Using every ounce of willpower I had, I moved my gaze in their direction.

Countless unfamiliar figures were passing through the darkness. Some looked like regular folks: farmers in linen tunics, merchants in decorated suits, women wearing silk dresses or long skirts that covered their ankles. Others still were clearly abnormal: giants with ashen skin or ladies with overflowing golden hair and dresses punctuated with human bones and skulls. Others yet looked divorced from humanity entirely: beasts that walked on two legs, their bodies covered in fur, or creatures with skin made of tree bark and heads covered in leaves.

It was an otherworldly parade, but my hazy mind noted one more abnormality—they all walked in unison, perfectly in sync. The diverse horde all headed in the same direction, all walking next to each other in orderly

rows. Some of them noticed my gaze and turned to smile and wave at me for a moment, but they never lost coordination with the crowd, and soon disappeared into the distance.

“This is merely the next stage of existence in our endless journey.” My gaze turned to look at Penumbra again, but I found Queen Zamira standing in her place instead. The usual sardonic curl of her grin was replaced by a similarly earnest look. “All sentient life starts from loneliness. To experience the world as a solitary mind is the initiation ritual of life, a necessary evil meant to shape one into a proper individual. But to spend an endless life alone is a cruelty that none should experience. The vessel of the human mind is unfit to bear it. The only way to find true happiness in eternity is through togetherness.”

Even in my slow-witted state, my mind raised plenty of objections to her words. By the time I was done processing them, a different figure had taken Zamira’s place. It was Brooks, his eyes now too reflecting the same deep kindness.

“We can understand your apprehensions. You’re afraid of becoming what you saw back there. A ghost, an empty puppet half-heartedly acting out the role it had in life. But that’s a misunderstanding. We’ve changed since the time we were alone. We’ve experienced true belonging, the kind that no solitary lifeform can achieve. We can never go back to how we used to be, and we don’t want to either. That was just the closest facsimile of our past selves that could be reproduced. Change can be a wonderful thing, you know? All three of us became one willingly, because our hearts had already been worn down by loneliness. We’re more alive than we’ve ever been, that we can say with confidence.”

In the blink of an eye, Brooks’ figure disappeared, and Penumbra had returned to take his place.

“Your heart is screaming out for it too, Vio. You’ve always wanted to be understood. You’ve always wanted to look into someone’s eyes and feel that your souls are irrevocably connected, that you are both irreplaceable to each other. You’ve yearned for it, but you’ve never felt it. There’s nothing to be ashamed of. This is something that everyone wants deep down, but few achieve. Doubt will creep into a lonely heart. Insecurities upon insecurities will eat away at any foundation of trust, no matter how sturdy. What the heart ultimately needs is confirmation.”

Penumbra put her palm to her chest as she spoke. At either side of her, a hazy mist rose from the level of her feet, slowly forming the shape of two human figures—figures I knew all too well.

“With them, too, you’ve always sought confirmation. Because no matter how much time you spent together, how many words and acts of friendship you exchanged, you’ve never been able to supplant the seed of doubt within you.”

To Penumbra’s right was my oldest friend whom I always relied on, Valentina Valakia; to Penumbra’s left, he who was like a brother that I could always look up to, Vincent Valakia. The two that I’d spent my entire life alongside, the two that I’d lost forever, now stood there looking the same as I remembered them.

“You’re not broken. You’re not defective. It’s cruel that you were never able to confirm the truthfulness of your mutual love. Together with us, you will never have to face such cruelty again.” I felt her hands wrap around mine. “Every single one of us will love you. Because every single person in this world is beautiful. Their souls all shine like the most precious of gemstones. Hatred, discrimination, shame, these ugly feelings only occur because human vessels are unable to open their hearts to one another. We have no need for any of that here.”

I tried to speak, but my lips only barely wriggled open. It was doubtful that I’d even managed to mouth the words, but she could understand them anyway.

But... they aren’t here.

She released my hands, and took a step back. Her face clouded over, a truly sorrowful look filling her eyes as she looked down.

“...That’s right. Because they died a human death, their souls are lost forever. Lives that could have roamed this universe for millions of years to come were cut short after a mere few decades. The tragedy of it is unimaginable, but it is something we cannot deny.” Her voice shook with true, honest grief. The two figures beside her collapsed into sand and disappeared. They were never truly there, merely projections composed of my memories. She then raised her head, and met my eyes with a powerful look of determination. “That is why we do what we do. You may consider it evil of us to cut human lives short on such a scale, but please understand. We cannot bear the prospect of letting even one life be lost forever at the hands of cold death. Compared to that, cutting their natural lifespan short is preferable, if it means that they will be given the key to an eternal existence together with us. Every one of us will agree that it was the right decision.

“Those you loved may have been lost, but do not resign yourself to despair. That bond can never be replaced, but together with us you will find love that will last for an eternity to come.” She once again stepped closer to me, and without hesitation wrapped her arms around me in a soft embrace. I

could feel her warmth, even through my numb limbs. “You will never again feel isolated. You’ll never again have to distance yourself from others out of fear. You’ll never again feel that barrier between yourself and others. And together, we can preserve that memory which you hold so dear—forever and ever, until the end of time. What do you say?”

As she whispered her sweet invitation into my ear, I could feel every layer of resistance slipping away. I wouldn’t have to fear death ever again, and I wouldn’t have to dread life ever again. As I sank into her warmth, my fondest memories came back to me—not memories of grand adventure or great triumph, but the simple moments spent with those two whom I loved, when my anxieties faded into the farthest reaches of my mind and I was able to feel the simple joy of belonging.

Perhaps... that wouldn’t be so bad. That was what I thought, as I felt my eyelids grow heavier and heavier.



Rafflesia Valpurga awoke in boundless darkness. Her entire body felt numb. Even just turning her head took considerable effort. It was a familiar sensation to her—she recognized it as an extension of the feeling she had while Vio fed on her blood, only much more concentrated.

Though it made no difference within the pitch-black world around her, she closed her eyes and began to sort through her memories. She recalled the events that took place before she arrived here. The telling of the solution, the culprit’s admission, and then—the true colors of the monster.

I see, she thought. I’ve been swallowed whole.

She didn’t panic. The anemia left her too weak for it, and she didn’t feel a need to anyway. She focused on gathering her strength. She concentrated first on her hands, working each finger individually, and then attempting to close them into fists. She couldn’t tell how much time had passed before she managed a weak grip with her right hand, but her absolute concentration allowed her no time to feel bored.

It was around then that she felt a shift in the space around her. She opened her eyes. The everpresent darkness hadn’t weakened one bit in intensity, but something else now showed itself to her, visible despite the lack of any light.

A humanoid shape emerged in front of her. Another one soon joined its side. And then another, and another, and another. Dozens of figures appeared all around her, filling her vision. At first they were obscure, but their features gradually became visible. The faces, full of accepting smiles, were all familiar to her.

Bony, emaciated bodies wrapped in common, tattered clothing. Joyful eyes full of ignorant bliss. Crowding around her were the nostalgic figures of her hometown's residents—every single one of St. Purgatorio's residents.

Off to one side was the mayor, mild-mannered and clumsy. Not far from him stood the one who had betrayed her, now content with her resigned smile. Next to him was a tall priest, his expression stoic. At another end was an old man wrapped in tattered bandages, his mind seemingly somewhere else. And further back, behind the other men and women she had grown up with, she saw a glimpse of the one she viewed as an older sister.

But directly ahead of her, at the front of the crowd, stood an ordinary couple, their expressions carefree. The woman looked plain, but there was a simple joy in her eyes that many would have found enviable. The man was rugged and clearly used to rough work, but his hearty cheer didn't lose to the woman. Together, they—Sapria and Rhizanthés Valpurga—watched their daughter with familiarity.

Sapria opened her mouth, but a motion from her daughter silenced her before she ever got to say anything. Overcoming her numbness, Rafflesia raised her right arm high, drawing it back over her left shoulder. She murmured under her breath, quietly but with an unshakable determination.

“...I'll never go back to that again.”

And then, she drew her arm back with a rapid sweeping motion, as if slicing through the scenery ahead of her. With that one slight movement, the figures of the villagers began to mix together and dissolve like ink spilled in water. Seconds later, they were gone, no trace left of them ever having been there.



At that moment, I was ready to admit defeat. I don't think there's anything wrong with taking the easy path, with choosing comfort over hardship, with giving up on a difficult struggle. I wouldn't judge anyone else for it, and so I won't judge myself either. Not when the bargain was so sweet. In a matter of

moments, Vio Valakia would melt into the embrace of Dolly Penumbra and of Zamira Zamirage and of Jackal V. V. Brooks and of millions of others like them, and disappear from the world having achieved nothing worthy of a chronicle or anything like it.

That's what would have happened, had I been alone.

“_Vio!”

From behind me, I heard a familiar voice yell out in an unfamiliar manner. I opened my eyes with a jolt. It was not unlike waking up to the feeling of falling right as you're about to drift off to sleep.

Suddenly, I felt energy returning to my body. I was still dizzy and weak, but I could at least move. I felt the shackles on my mind fading away too.

I left Penumbra's embrace, and looked behind me. I didn't know where she'd come from, but Rafi stood there, looking at me. She had clearly been weakened as well, but the strength in her eyes was undeniable.

At the same time, however, I noticed a lingering trace of anxiety in her expression. She was not one to show emotion, but that was something I wouldn't miss. I realized that she was afraid. As arrogant as it is for me to say, she was afraid that I would disappear, swallowed up by this great leviathan. She was afraid that she would lose me. And she knew that she would never see me again if I surrendered myself, because she was certain of something: no matter what, she would never give herself up to this monster.

I realized all of that, and then I smiled at her. Her eyes widened for a moment, and then she returned to her usual expression, although I could tell that the fear had disappeared. With feeble but unquestioning steps, I walked over to her side. Taking Rafi's hand in mine, I turned to Penumbra.

“Thank you for the kind offer,” I said, “but I'm afraid I'll have to decline.”

I'm not strong enough that I'd reject such a tempting offer purely for Rafi's sake. My reasoning was a lot more selfish than that: rather than spend an eternity with a bunch of strangers, I'd rather spend more time with her. It was as simple as that.

Penumbra showed an expression of consternation. “...We know that you've grown closer with one another through sharing memories. You've already used the power of vampirism to overcome the barriers of human division. Why refuse this opportunity to deepen your bond to the ultimate level?”

I grinned bitterly. “You're right. Both of us are pretty bad at talking, so we had to resort to cheating. Perhaps we never could have understood each other at all without it. And I don't know if I can last alone forever, either. Maybe one day I'll come crawling back to you, begging for another chance.

But..." I looked at the girl next to me, for a brief moment. She looked back, and nodded. "... I think I'd like to try stumbling along in the dark for a little while longer."

"But why? We don't understand."

I thought for a moment, and then I began speaking. "It might be a struggle to understand others, and I might never get to the point where I can feel satisfied about it, but still... when you discover a new side to a person, when you find out a deeper truth about them and cross the divide between one another just a tiny bit—it feels really nice, you know? If I accepted your offer, I don't think I'd ever get to feel that way again.

"I don't doubt that you really want to save people, and I think that's admirable in its own way, but truthfully, isn't that why you still seek out other people to join you? You know one another inside and out, so to taste the joy of learning about others, you've got no other choice but to swallow them up, right?"

Penumbra said nothing more. I felt like her gaze had regained something of the coldness it had normally. I guess she had decided that I was beyond convincing—at least, for now.

Rafi tugged on my arm. "Let's go."

"...Yeah." We turned our backs to the figure of what had once been named Dolly Penumbra. The parade of figures had long since vanished. All that was left was the darkness—and a single distant light ahead of us. We wordlessly began to walk towards it.

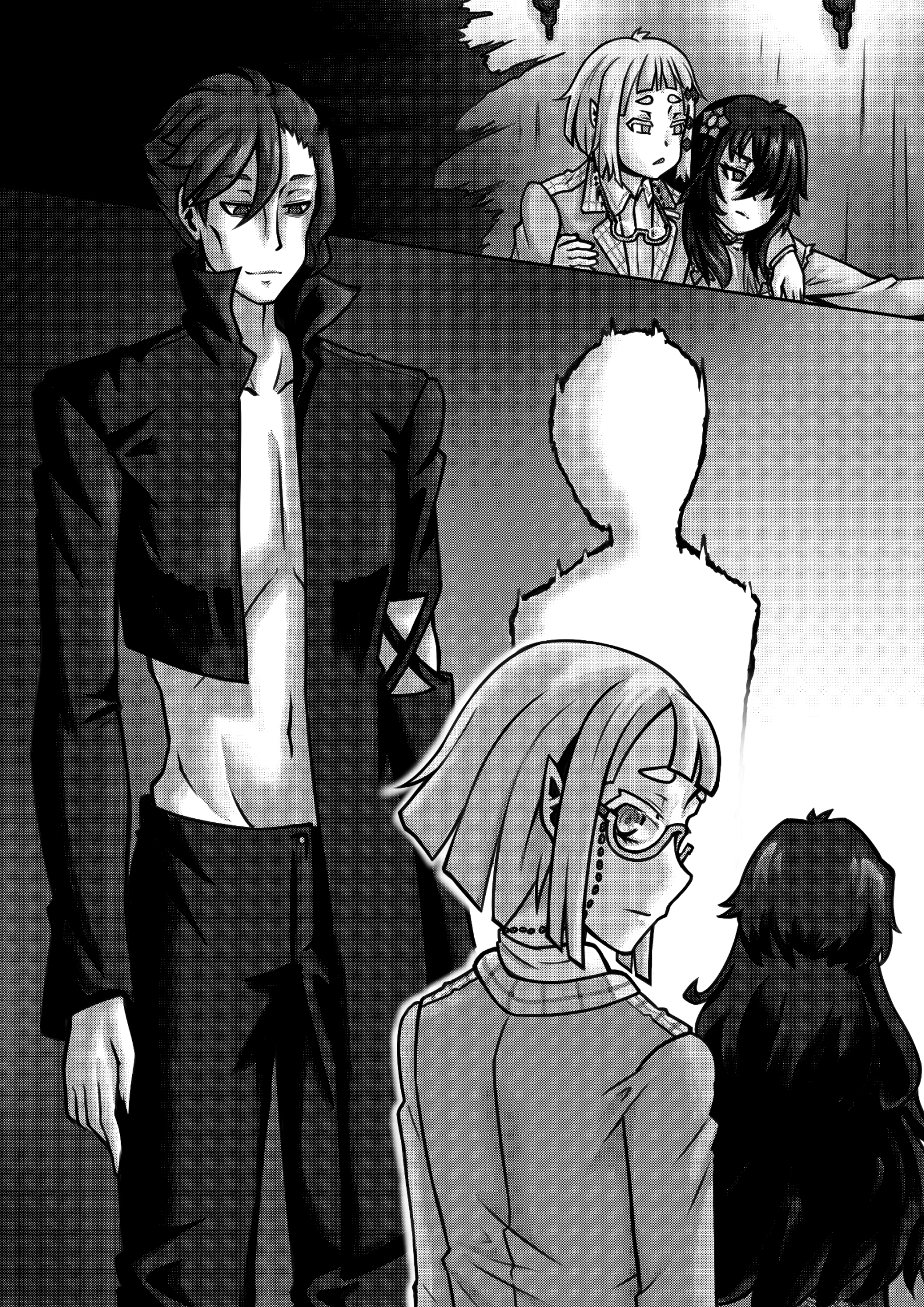
Rafi's face was fixed towards the goal. She'd likely never look back, but I wasn't someone who could be that resolute. After we'd taken a few steps, I glanced briefly over my shoulder. My breath caught in my throat for a moment.

Two figures faced one another. The shorter of the two had its back to me. It could have been Penumbra, but I had a feeling it might also have been someone else. Its outline was hazy, so I couldn't tell for sure.

But standing ahead of it, his body clad in the garments I had seen on the puppet in the basement, was the corporeal figure of Fafner Belial Nachtheim. I had never seen his face before, but somehow I felt certain that it was him.

As if to assert that he too had once been human, a nostalgic smile crossed the Devil's lips as he looked down at the other figure. His mouth moved, and I heard echoes of his voice reach me.

"Long time no see, my friend."



I was curious, but at the same time I felt that it wasn't my place to see any more. I had made my decision, so I had no right to view that scene. I turned my head back toward the light again, and stepped forward with heavy steps. The light grew closer and closer, and soon enough it was close enough to reach out our hands—



We emerged from the shadow gasping for air. As we coughed, black sludge poured out from our mouths. We were in a hallway inside the manor, close to the edge where the shadow ended and the solid marble flooring began. Holding onto each other, we crawled desperately toward solid ground, the shadow around our waists like quicksand trapping us within. I didn't know how long it had been, but after being enveloped by that darkness for so long, the outside air felt cold and unwelcoming. Nonetheless, we greedily inhaled lungful after lungful, like starved children offered a feast. After a few minutes of struggling to advance, we cleared the gap of what couldn't have been more than two meters and, desperately hanging on to the floor, dragged ourselves to freedom.

I was shivering uncontrollably. The Legion had been draining my blood that whole time. I wasn't fully dry, but I could barely feel my limbs, and my mind was spinning. Rafi seemed to be in slightly better shape, no doubt also thanks to her innately powerful regenerative abilities, but she was far from unaffected. For a few moments, we sat there on our hands and knees, unable to do much more than feel the ground beneath our feet.

"We can't... stay here," Rafi said after a while, forcing her tired body upright. I looked behind me—I couldn't be optimistic enough to chalk it up to my imagination. The boundary line between the ground and the shadow had moved closer to us.

After she managed to get herself standing, Rafi helped me up too. We stumbled through the hallway as fast as we could.

Somehow, we had ended up in the hallway of the left wing of the manor. The closest exit was the one at the base of the tower, but it was blocked off by the shadows, so we had no choice but to run back towards the lobby. Close to where the lights were mounted on the walls, we could see spots where the walls and ceiling were being eaten at by the Legion. It seemed that *Nachtheim*

was somehow holding off its advance, but it was only a matter of time until the entire manor was swallowed up.

It was impossible to tell what floor one was on from the hallway alone, but as we neared its end we saw the carpeted floor of the lobby—we were on the ground level. I quickened my pace, eager to escape this wretched place once and for all, but as I turned the corner and my eyes darted to my right, I was forced to a stop. The front entrance, along with the entire wall that housed it, was now bathed in black. The wall opposite to us, leading to the right wing, was in similar shape. All exits were gone—all save for one.

“I’m glad to see you are well, Lord Valakia, Lady Valpurga.”

The sudden interruption of a calm, raspy voice interrupted my thoughts. I turned around to see Wisborg nonchalantly standing in one of the areas that had yet to be swallowed up, facing towards what used to be the entrance as if ready to welcome a new guest.

“Mr. Wisborg! You’re all right, thank god!”

“It is thanks to Lord Cycasin Glib’s quick thinking. As soon as the true body of the Nightless Night appeared, he grabbed me and then took hold of the chandelier to avoid the shadow on the ground.”

He had seen the thing with his own eyes before, so he must have known just how cautious he should be. Still, it was impressive that he was able to adapt so fast. I almost wished I’d been sitting next to him instead.

“Does that mean he’s okay?” Rafi asked.

“Yes, he just left. I suggest you do the same. Master Nachtheim is holding the Hematolegion back, but it is only a matter of time until he will succumb.”

Saying so, Wisborg gestured to the door behind him, which led to the kitchen. *Right, the storeroom exit.* It appeared to still be in order.

Our legs had already begun moving before I’d even formulated a response. “All right, you hurry up too, Mr. Wisborg!” I’d already passed him before I finished my sentence. His next words, however, stopped me in my tracks.

“No, I will remain by the Master’s side.”

“W-what?” I looked back at the servant.

“It is only because it would go against his principles to allow his guests harm that he has yet to succumb. In truth, the Master wants nothing more than to embrace this ‘death.’ And as his servant, it is my duty to follow him,” he said, his back to us.

It was his choice to make. And it was a choice that other vampires far younger than him had made gladly. It was not something I had any right to question. And yet... something would change. Something would be

irreversibly lost. Even knowing how improper it was of me, even knowing how little the words of an ignorant nobody like me mattered, I felt that I had to speak up.

“You don’t... you don’t have to do that,” I said shakily. “You’re more than just his servant—your life is worth more than that.”

He was silent, for a time. And then, with his back still turned, he spoke in a clear tone. “...Lord Valakia, although it might be presumptuous of me to do so, allow me to quell a certain misunderstanding that I have sensed you bearing.”

“Huh?”

“You seem to believe that one day, with enough time, enough accomplishments, enough love and wisdom, you may fill that hole which has grown inside yourself and become complete. This could not be further from the truth.”

I unconsciously took a step back, and in doing so I felt movement at my feet. Looking down, I saw a rat passing by me, hurrying in the direction of Wisborg. And then another, and then another. Slowly but surely, every familiar that he had released in the manor was returning to its origin.

As he spoke, he straightened his crooked back, looking up at the ceiling, which was already being eaten away at by the Legion. “With enough time, I’ve come to realize that life is not a process of growth. Learning, maturing, never reaching perfection yet approaching it bit by bit—these are the myths of man deluding himself. Incompleteness is the eternal condition of all sentient beings. And the longer a life you lead the more those gaps inside you grow.

“What has ended can never be regained. Loves lost will always linger. A sliver of every failure, every disappointment, every faded bond will always eat away at you. Regrets mount ad nauseam. Every single thing you lose, you will yearn for, just a little bit. Eventually, that yearning will blot out the future. All you will have left is desire—a base, destructive animal lust.

“Some will remain that way, become monstrous wretches that haunt this world. Others will suppress it by adopting a principle—they will mold themselves into perfect machines which exist only for the sake of fulfilling their prescribed creed. They hope that by becoming a system, they may approach that fabled sense of completeness. But cracks inevitably show. All we are is men, and men is all we’ll ever be.”

The volume of rats had slowly but surely increased. What had begun as dozens was now in the hundreds, their gray fur covering the luxurious carpet below. With a single-minded zeal, they hurried to the foot of their master, where they crawled up into his mantle and disappeared.

“Whatever semblance of completeness man can achieve in life, it will pale in comparison to that of a stone by the side of the road. Death is the only bringer of completeness in this world: chaos returns to order, and all gaps are gently filled. I have long since craved it, long before I lowered myself to the status of a slave. Now that it’s before me, I cannot contain myself. Even this questionable, second-rate death will do.”

He looked at me over his shoulder. His gaze emanated a fierceness and madness which he had locked deep inside him all this time. At that moment I knew that all the modesty and servility he’d shown until now was just a flimsy mask—Nosferius Wisborg was a true king of the night.

“Do not mourn me, Vio Valakia, for after millennia of wandering I am at last on the cusp of perfection. And here’s my advice: enjoy the fall, my friend. It’s a long way to get here, but time is all we have.”

With that said, he turned his head forward again. There would be no more words between us. I had wished to offer him a fitting goodbye, but I could not say a single word.

Soon enough, Rafi tugged at me. “We have to go.”

She was right. I didn’t protest—unlike him, my end would not be here. The rats still hemorrhaged around us, but we stepped over them as we hurried to the exit.



After passing through the kitchen and the storeroom attached to it, we finally emerged at the back of the manor. The first thing we saw was Sin, standing stock-still a few feet away and looking up at the building, a dazed look on his face.

We immediately ran towards him. Finally noticing us, his eyes widened.

“You guys are okay!? I saw you get swallowed up by that thing!”

I nodded. “It’s all thanks to her,” I said, pointing at Rafi.

“Is that right?” As if having a weight lifted off his shoulders, he expelled the air in his lungs and slouched. Taking his hat off, he wiped his sweaty forehead and ran his hand through his hair. “You’re real dependable in a pinch, huh?”

“You too,” Rafi said, sneaking a glance back behind her.

“Oh, you mean with Mr. Wisborg? That was nothing, really...” He sighed. “And it ended up being wasted effort anyway.”

I hung my head. “...Was it really okay to just leave him there?”

“What else could you do? It’s his choice,” Sin said, looking away. “I respected the guy for keeping his wits about him, even after living for so long. It’s rare to see a vampire with the humility to bow their head after thousands of years of life. If he thought that was best for him, we’ve got no choice but to accept it.”

“Right...” Even though he was younger than me, the certainty in his words made me feel like a lost child in comparison. With no more to say, an awkward silence fell over us after that.

No, there’s certainly more to say. I just couldn’t say it. I had brazenly accused his brother earlier, but now that it had all been confirmed and Gin had happily confessed to his betrayal, I felt like I didn’t have the right to say anything to Sin. He probably didn’t want to be casually asked how he felt right about now either.

“...What do we do now?” Rafi asked, cutting through the tense silence.

“Get out of here. There’s nothing more we can do,” he remarked. Of course, we all wanted to leave this place more than anything, but it also felt irresponsible to simply run away after everything that had happened. Or perhaps I was haunted by that Devil’s house—it felt like a part of me was left behind in there.

But his words were on point—it was too late to do anything now. Most of the brickwork of the manor’s tall walls had turned pitch black by now, absorbed forever by the monster. There was no telling that it wouldn’t turn on us again after it had finished with *Nachtheim*.

With heavy steps, we circled the manor, giving the left tower a wide berth as we walked around to the front. We intended to head straight toward the path that led out of the manor grounds, but the presence of a figure standing calmly before the dissolving building stopped us all in place.

It was Gin. In a mirror image of his younger brother earlier, he too stood at a safe distance away, taking in the spectacle. However, though it was hard to see him from where we were, I could tell his expression was the polar opposite. He appeared no less at ease than a festivalgoer enjoying the fireworks.

Rafi and I were standing behind Sin, so I couldn’t know what face he was wearing at that moment, but I saw his shoulders tremble. There was nothing I could do to quell the emotions welling up in him. Resuming his walk with a much more forceful gait, he walked towards his brother. With no other choice, we followed him.

When we got close enough, Gin casually turned his head our way, seeming like he’d just noticed us. “Oh, so you’re all alive. Not optimal, but

you weren't the main course anyway." And with that brief, remorseless remark, his eyes went back to what remained of the house. "I suppose that explains why he was resisting so much—to protect his remaining guests. To think that even in that form, he would be so particular about his principles. His sense of self must already be weak. It's hard to maintain sentience in an immovable state while perceiving unchanging scenery. I would assume that he has spent the last few millennia in a mostly dormant state. Unlike you, there's no will to oppose the merge left in him. Look how quickly he's disappearing."

As Gin said, the manor was now entirely covered by darkness, and had begun to slowly but surely lose its shape. What felt even more alien than that horrific phenomenon, though, was his nonchalant attitude.

Sin fists trembled. He took another step toward his brother and yelled: "Gin! Why the hell would you do all this? Have you gone crazy!?"

"Even if I explained it, I'm quite sure you wouldn't accept it, so I don't feel like wasting my breath. It would be quite convenient for you, though, if it was the case that I've suddenly gone mad, but I'm afraid I ought to dispel that notion. Whether I'm crazy or not is up to you to decide, but none of my morals or reasoning have undergone any kind of sudden shift in recent memory. I'm the same as I've ever been."

"Bullshit! The Gin I know would never do something like this!"

"Wow, I suppose the Gin you know must be quite the upstanding individual. Good for him," said Gin, chuckling derisively, though the mirth never reached his eyes.

"...This is getting nowhere." Saying so, Sin straightened his back—and raised his fist. "Guess I'm gonna have to beat some sense out of you!"

He didn't need a running start or a wind-up—as before, his entire forearm detached itself from his arm and shot towards Gin's face. However, the attack never connected. Mere inches from his face, the forearm suddenly lost all momentum and fell limply to the ground. Sin, too, simultaneously lurched over and fell on his knees.

At first, I didn't understand what had occurred. Gin still stood calmly with his hands in his pockets, but he had lifted his right leg forward a bit, as if stopping in the middle of taking a step. And at the bottom of that leg, the entire front half of his foot was missing as if cut in two, the cross-section black. He had used his technique on his foot, kicking his brother in the stomach with the velocity of a bullet.

"You should consider learning to be a little less obvious," Gin said as the detached tip of his foot floated back and rejoined the rest of him. Sin, unable even to stand, dragged himself forward with his one complete hand.

After a few agonizing moments, he reached the feet of his brother. He was able to join his right arm back together, but the strike must have been particularly powerful, because he was still unable to resist in any way.

“*Guh... Gin!*” All he could do was look up at his brother and pathetically scream his name. Gin, for his part, looked down coldly.

“...Hey, by any chance, remember how old I am?” Gin left a moment of silence, but no answer to his non-sequitor came. He continued. “One hundred and twenty-three years old. I’ve long since passed the humble threshold of the centenarian. If we do some simple math and subtract your age from mine, you get how old I was when you were born into this world. The answer is seventy-seven.”

“Wha—” Before he could let out a single thought, Gin put his foot on top of Sin’s head, and pushed his face down into the ground.

“Seventy-seven years. Have you ever thought about it? Ever considered the implications? That’s more than most humans get to live naturally. A full human lifespan, the whole of the time that man gets to complete his life’s purpose before returning to dust. Only after all of that did you appear in my life. And yet...” Gin grit his teeth. “For whatever reason, you act like you’ve got me all figured out. Like you know my heart inside and out, like you’re the final arbiter on what is and is not characteristic of me. You haven’t even been alive for seventy-seven years, but somehow you believe that your fragile little mind can comprehend the whole of my being, and when whatever delusions you have fail to match up to reality, you lay the blame on me of all people. I bet you’ve never once considered the possibility of being wrong. That mindless, brainless confidence... It disgusts me!” The gentle, deliberate nature of his voice was gone, replaced by nothing but seething malice. He raised the foot planted on his brother’s head, before—“Go to hell, you piece of trash!”—rapidly bringing his foot down, crushing Sin’s head like a watermelon.

I yelped involuntarily. When he brought his foot up, blood and brain matter sprouted out from the wound. And then, his twisted expression fading away, he stepped a few feet away from the body as if he was none of his business and began dragging his foot on the grass to get rid of the blood stuck to the sole.

I ran over to Sin’s side. Of course, not even he could stay conscious with a wound like that. Except for the occasional involuntary twitch, he displayed no movements. And when I next looked up, I too froze.

Rafi’s eyes had turned vermilion. The ends of her hair began to float slightly. And, from the ground around her, which had turned black, a shade of darkness altogether different from that of the Legion’s, bats began to pour

out. She had summoned every bit of animosity within her and pointed all of it towards Gin.

Gin raised his hands in surrender. “Woah, come now, miss. You know he’ll be back to normal in a matter of hours. Besides, they say you shouldn’t butt into family affairs.”

“I know. But you make me *very* angry.”

That simple statement, not even a threat but a mere proclamation of her honest mood, coupled with the quiet fury packed inside her gaze, could drive a grown man to pass out from fear, but the vampire before her only made a troubled smile.

“I sure don’t want to have to fight you. A few parlor tricks aren’t enough to overcome that kind of raw power. But are you sure you can afford to spend this time taking your anger out on me?” Gin asked, pointing towards what used to be the Homesick Manor.

Indeed, any such appellation would now be misleading, as the structure had long since ceased to resemble any sort of building. Reduced to an unshapely blob less than half of its original size, furniture, doors, books, utensils and various other miscellaneous items poured out from gaps, like a squeezed sponge releasing all the muck stuck to it alongside the dirty water.

“It’s not interested in non-sentient matter. It ignores all of it, like trash—Oh!” Gin’s explanation was interrupted by an unexpected figure being ejected from the muddy darkness—the body of Craven Nevermore.

“Hahaha, right, right! A body without a core inside it is no different than trash. Incidentally, it seems to treat familiars the same way.” Saying that, Gin reached back into his pocket and took out the eye inside it—Nevermore’s very heart. And then, without hesitation, he reached forward, and sent his arm flying towards him, unceremoniously dropping the item on top of the corpse.

In a few seconds, the same amount of time it took for Gin’s hand to return to him, Nevermore snapped into consciousness like someone abruptly waking up from a nightmare. With jerky movements, he looked every which way around him, assessing the situation. Before long, his gaze settled on his killer. His one eye opened wide, his mouth following suit. But before any sound could come out—in less than the blink of an eye, he was absorbed by the darkness directly behind him and disappeared.

“Serves him right. He came here knowing this would happen, thinking that he could overcome it through his own willpower, but I doubt it. Guys like that are always more bark than bite.” And then, shrugging casually, he turned to Rafi. “So, back to the main subject: in mere minutes that thing is going to finish devouring *Nachtheim*, and then I imagine it’ll turn its attention back

to you guys. And even if you escaped once, while it was busy dealing with him, are you sure you can do it a second time? Should you really risk it?"

Rafi frowned as she glared at Gin. She could tell he wasn't bluffing. "Let's go," she said brusquely to me as she took both my own hand and Sin's limp one, dragging us all into the air. Numerous bat familiars clipped their claws into our clothes, helping lift us up.

Gin waved us off. "I may as well act out some fraternal piety as we say our goodbyes: take care of my foolish brother, will you?"

Rafi said nothing in return to him, and I didn't either. In moments, we were far above the forest, the top of each tree like a small dot in the distance.

"...Will you be all right, flying all the way out of here?" I asked.

"I can manage," she said, and then added, "...I wanna get out of here as soon as possible."

"Yeah," I smiled bitterly. "All the way with you there."

For one final time, I looked back towards where we'd flown off from, the now tiny speck of a clearing in the distance. Soon enough the only thing left there would be a pile of scattered furniture. Whatever memories and lingering attachments that place was filled with, they would all be washed away. And after those monsters leave, with no master to send out any invitations, no one would ever arrive at that place again, not until this entire forest is burned to the ground or buried by time.

Just like that, a being that had existed in this world for eighty millennia came to an end. A time longer than human comprehension, longer than societies, longer than history, and it would end with a whimper in a forgotten corner of this world. Perhaps that was the natural order of things. It wasn't something I wanted to think about, and I wouldn't get anywhere even if I did.

I thought back to that Devil, whose musings I'd been given access to. I couldn't claim to understand him or empathize with him—no one in this world could, most likely, except for the monster that had just ended his life. But still, whatever else may be true about him, he did protect my insignificant, trifling life. It may have been an autonomous act bereft of sympathy or affection, but he tried to save us all, for no other reason than that he had long ago determined that lives were worth protecting. That was something worthy of my gratitude. And so, since there was no one else to do so, I would say it:

Goodbye, Fafner Belial Nachtheim. Goodbye, Homesick Manor.

Epilogue: Return

It was about twelve hours later that Sin's eyes snapped open.

We had decided to camp out near the edge of the forest. Although calling it a camp was generous, as all we had was a small fire and a curtain fashioned out of Rafi's familiars that we propped up against a boulder as a substitute for a tent. It wasn't much to gawk at, but I'd call it a good effort for two totally empty handed people carrying around an unconscious third. *Most of the effort was Rafi's, though.*

After processing the sight with wide-open eyes, he slowly raised his upper body and heaved a sigh while rubbing the back of his head.

"No chance you'll tell me that was all a dream, right?"

"...Sorry."

"Figures." He grabbed his hat from beside him and put it on. "So, what'd I miss? I can't have been out for more than a day. Where are we?"

"I tried to fly in a straight line to the South, but I might have messed up," Rafi said.

"It's impossible to see the path from above, since the trees cover it up, so we couldn't follow it," I added.

"Damn. Well, we should find some villages or small towns nearby, but I can't do much during the day. If the sunlight catches me I'll be more burnt than fowl forgotten in the oven. So my bad, but I'll be continuing to trouble you for a while."

"That's no problem at all, but..." I looked at him with concern. "How are you doing?"

"...I've been better." He rested his back against the boulder and put his arms behind his neck. "Yeah, that was a real gut punch. Figuratively and

literally. The moment I find myself without something else to focus on, my mind goes right back to thinking about it. About just how frustrating it is, you know.” He shrugged. “That’s why I’m glad I at least have friends like you to share the grief with.”

Rafi and I both looked at him in silence, then at one another, then back to him. Sin raised an eyebrow.

“What, what’d I say? Don’t tell me you don’t think of me as a friend at this point. You’ll make me cry.”

“No, no, it’s not that,” I said, giving him an awkward smile. “It’s just that... I was expecting you to be a bit more broken up about it. If I was in your place, I might never trust someone again after something like that...”

“Ahh.” He crossed his arms, mulling over the thought. “Well, it sure isn’t gonna help. I don’t think I’m getting a better night’s sleep than this one for some time. But, you know, four decades is enough to experience your fair share of betrayal. This might just be the worst one yet, but the same principle applies here too: I can’t lose all trust in everyone, even if I end up getting burned a couple of times. If I can’t even believe in my own ability to judge people, then I’m really screwed, you know. And if I wind up being wrong, then so be it, but I think you two are trustworthy.”

“I’ll... do my best to live up to that estimation.” I smiled bitterly. He really was in a different league.

“Besides,” he said, his gaze growing sharper, “more than anything, I’m pissed off. Call it being naive, but I just can’t buy that everything he’s ever shown me this whole time has been a lie. Even if he’s been hiding that repulsive side of himself, I don’t believe it’s possible to spend decades alongside someone without any of your true self showing through.

“That’s why I can’t just let it go. I’ve gotta find him again and sort this out for good. And—” He took his hat off and bowed to Rafi. “—I probably can’t do it without you. You’re the strongest vampire that I can ask. Would you help me with this?”

Rafi seemed surprised by the request. And then, she crossed her arms and closed her eyes, like she was weighing the request. “Hmm, what to do...”

“Come on now...” I began to say, but she interrupted me.

“I know. I’ll do it—if you beat me at cards.”

Rafi shot a competitive glare at Sin. He looked back in shock, and then—burst into laughter. “Hahaha, then it’s practically already done! Thanks for giving me such easy conditions, Raff!”

He was too busy laughing to notice, but I could see one of Rafi’s eyebrows twitching, and though it may have been a trick of the light, I thought I even saw her eyes slowly turning red.

Before Sin ended up with his head cracked a second time, I decided to intervene. “Umm, before that, I believe there may be an easier way to get us to owe you one, Sin.”

“Hmm?”

“Well... I left all of the money we had on us in there. Even if we get to a town, I’m not quite sure what to do... So if you have any ideas, we’d be grateful.”

In retrospect, we really should have prepared to leave the moment we figured out the truth. It was too late for hindsight, though. Of course, I didn’t think Sin was any different, but given his experience and personality, he was at least better suited to negotiating than us.

He grinned wryly, then rested his head back on the boulder. “I’ll see what I can do. I have a feeling we’re in for some long days ahead.”

He wound up being exactly right. It’s not like I had no complaints, of course, but after the week we spent at Homesick Manor, even those long days felt like something I ought to be thankful for. That’s the way days should be—not short and empty, each one blending into the next, but packed to the brim with memories. If not for that, even an eternity may pass one by in the blink of an eye.



In the clearing that once hosted the noble grounds of Fafner Belial Nachtheim, all that remained was a giant pile of miscellaneous household items, now robbed of their purpose and rendered into trash.

Its meal complete, the shadows of the monster—Hematolegion, the Nightless Night—receded from the former site of the Homesick Manor. They moved near the edge of the forest, where a shape grew from the dark.

A few steps away, a man stood at the ready to greet it with applause. “Bravo. To witness the devouring of such an ancient vampire is not a privilege afforded by many. I’m truly grateful to have seen it. Incidentally, I was right, wasn’t I? That pillar in the basement was his heart after all, right?”

Origin Glib looked down with an earnest smile at the diminutive form of the creature—now clad in the corpse of one who was once called Dolly

Penumbra. It stared back at him in silence, no sign that it even heard his words, let alone that it intended to reply.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Anyhow, you were skeptical, right? This should have been a mighty fine demonstration of the merits of heeding my word. There may have been a few unexpected complications, but on the whole, the plan went wonderfully—it’s a far cry from the savage, inelegant movements you’ve been prone to until now. You may have the minds of millions inside of you, but the individual wills of each and every single one clash against one another and cancel each other out, until all that you are left with is a vague impulse, instinctive movement. As expected, there’s no wisdom to be found within the herd.

“You’ll never get anywhere like that. The humans will find a way to seal you, and that will be that. So just leave the thinking to me, and you’ll have everyone in your belly in no time. You know it just as well as I do, don’t you, that I have what it takes? Otherwise, you’d never have agreed to my proposal to begin with.”

The monster watched quietly as Origin’s soliloquy dragged on. It didn’t seem like it would ever respond, but suddenly, as if by some sort of whim, it opened its mouth.

“We must ask: why? You’ve already rejected us, so why offer your help?”

“Oh?” Origin’s eyes narrowed. “You’d ask me that directly, even though you must have seen a reasonable portion of my memories when you swallowed me? Is that not like admitting defeat for you?”

The monster’s neutral expression did not twitch in the slightest. Origin closed his eyelids and raised his hands. “My apologies. I shouldn’t be bullying my new ally like this. Very well, I’ll answer your question, though I will unfortunately have to do so in a rather roundabout manner.”

And then, he straightened his posture, clasped his hands behind his back, and began speaking with a professorial diction.

“Human communication is a tool developed for the sake of survival. Cooperation has granted evolutionary benefits that have allowed humanity to dominate over all other animals. What one man alone could never achieve can be brought about by collective effort, and the benefits of a collectivist society are what allow the individual man the resources to grow and reach his potential. It’s a reasonably decent compromise, all things considered. For humans, that is.

“The purpose of mortal life is to propagate itself through reproduction. As far as the species of mankind is concerned, no one single life outweighs the importance of the entire species. Under this structure, society may very well be the ultimate form of life, but you and me, my friend, *we’re not humans*,



are we? Our lives are unlimited. There is no need to forsake our own existences for the sake of rearing successors, and we don't require generations upon generations to evolve and change. We alone are complete. The entire framework of species fails to account for us: we are life itself, each one a species unto ourselves.

"And yet, I have to ask, why is it that we must be limited by the constraints of human beings? Even now, though you've surely exceeded humanity by leaps and bounds, you still take the form of a human, and so do I. Our bodies begin as those of man, and only through the evolution of our perception may reach a higher state. Similarly, our minds are made to resemble humanity—to a fault.

"I don't know how it is that vampires appeared in this world, but it must be the case that we exist because of humans. There's no other way that these similarities can be explained, especially since the human mind is so poorly fit for an eternal being. The only way to cope with thousands of years of life is for the mind itself to evolve in order to suit this objective. To go insane, by normal definitions. Our potential is limited by our adherence to this origin point of ours. The drive for communication is the greatest manifestation of this.

"No man can live alone, but for an eternal being, communication is useless. We do not require anyone else to live. We are complete. But there is no impulse more deeply rooted than the desire for connection. The pesky sense of hunger can be overcome with enough practice, and it's not that hard to develop a tolerance for pain, but the social element is much harder to be rid of. The yearning for connection will still remain, even after thousands or tens of thousands of years. There's no better example of it than you.

"At this rate, we will never evolve beyond it. Our ultimate forms will be no more than pathetic, broken wretches yearning for some vague notion of love. An abhorrent end for beings as wonderful as us. I can't allow that to happen."

Origin closed his eyes and spread his arms wide. "I want to reach the next stage of evolution. What exists beyond life as a collective—the ultimate individual lifeform. What heights may be reached by such a being? I must see it with my own eyes. But this lukewarm world is no place for that, as it stands. There must be a trigger for such an evolution to occur, and I can only think of one way to get there."

He gripped his hands into fists. His eyes shot open, his gaze directed somewhere far above the sky.

"Allow no more room for connection. There must only be one individual in the entire world—only then will that individual be forced to adapt

to his new environment, and shed the bonds which kept him captive. I will be rid of every other lifeform on this planet.”

For just a second, the monster thought it saw a glint of something different inside Origin’s eyes—a flaming madness that could never be quelled. A moment later, though, he regained his composure and smiled shrewdly.

“I’m not particularly powerful, as I am right now. And humans are like bugs—in the time I kill one of them, ten more will have been born. Vampires are even worse: there may not be many of them, but it would probably take me over a decade to eat a single one. That’s why I require your abilities. You, my friend, are the key to everything.

“—First, I will have you swallow everyone on this planet whole. Then, I’ll simply eat you, and be done with it all in one fell swoop.”

Origin declared his mad intention with all the nonchalance of a man reading out his appointments for the day. There was probably no one in the world who could listen to that utterance with a straight face—no one except for the Legion. It merely stared back in silence.

“I say that, but I’m aware it won’t be quite so easy. Man is terribly proficient at forming one-sided relationships. I’m sure I would end up bound by some imaginary bond with some beast. It would be unacceptable to falter at that final stage, and as you have no interest in animal life, I would have to then spend some more time killing every animal in the world—but I figure that the form I would gain from eating you would be more than suitable for such a task.

“So, you asked why I would help you; that’s the answer. Ours will be a temporary alliance, but for the time being it should only be beneficial to you. I hope that’s satisfactory.”

“Nonsense,” the monster said monotonously. “There is no way for you to devour us. You will simply be absorbed by us in the end.”

“You’re welcome to keep believing that. It serves me just as well,” he said with a wink.

“No one can exist without connection to others. You are no exception.”

“Oh, I’m plenty aware of that already. I struggle to imagine how I could live without it. I get shivers at the thought of a world with no one else in it. But...” Origin’s eyes grew cold as the smile faded from his lips. “That’s exactly why I must reach it. I will rid myself of this hideous dependence. Never again will I have to deface myself for the benefit of others, twist myself to match their expectations. I’ll be rid of all the damnable noise.”

He heaved a sigh and closed his eyelids. When he next opened them, he had regained his grin.

“You yourself are not a terrible prototype, anyhow. Surely you don’t think all those memories swirling inside of you are actually equivalent to communication, do you? There’s no definition by which any of the people you’ve devoured could be called ‘alive’. It’s nothing more than a ventriloquist act meant to delude yourself.”

He taunted his supposed ally without restraint. The monster showed no sign of offense, however. It instead asked him one more question:

“...And what makes you think that you alone can absorb all others in this world and remain yourself?”

“An odd question.” Origin’s smile widened. “If I didn’t have at least that much of an ego, then I surely wouldn’t be able to do it, would I?”

“...You are a mad fool.” For perhaps that brief moment alone, the unknowable monster that was the Legion was the more commonsensical of the pair.

“Aren’t we all?” Origin removed his hat with his left hand and held it behind his back, before extending his right towards the doll of Hematolegion. “So, will you accept the help of this mad fool? How about a handshake, to commemorate this fruitful partnership?”

For a time, through a girl’s eyes, the creature stared blankly at the proffered hand. Whatever process of thought was taking place inside it, none manifested outwardly. But then, eventually, with stilted movements like those of a marionette, Dolly Penumbra’s hand reached forward and touched Origin’s.

One year since the time a vampire hunter and a bloodsucker shook hands in a dilapidated storehouse, with the ruins of a Devil’s legacy as its backdrop, another heretical handshake took place—one which would spell unfathomable disaster for the world.

After parting hands, Origin stretched his arms out in a refreshing motion. “Now that that’s settled, how about we dig into Nachtheim’s treasure? There must be some one-of-a-kind artifacts inside that pile of trash, you know?”

“...” The Legion stared pointedly at Origin. He raised his hands in surrender.

“All right, all right. We’ve got unlimited time, but I see that you’re raring to go. I suppose that’s good in its own way. Finding my way back here will be a challenge for me to savor after a job well done.”

With that, he spun around and took two steps towards the road leading out of the forest, before abruptly stopping. He looked behind his shoulder. “Right, one more thing. This is nothing more than my own personal curiosity,

but what's the deal with that Dolly Penumbra anyway? Was her personality always like that?"

A few moments of silence later, it answered. "...Of every vampire that has ever joined us, she may have been the most enthusiastic. Upon learning of our existence, she sought us out in order to become one with us. Her true self has sunk deeply within us, deep enough that we can no longer replicate what she was like before she died."

"Hah! Is that so?"

Seemingly satisfied with that answer, Origin looked ahead and disappeared into the forest without hesitation. Had he looked back once more, he would have seen the pale imitation of Dolly Penumbra melt once more into the shadow and vanish, but he never did.

In that callous, merciless manner one monster slithered away and another strode away. And with its final guests having finally left the premises, the Homesick Manor died once more, swallowed up by a hazy miasma, never to be remembered again except as a dim, obscure nightmare.

Postface to the Chronicle

Thus ends this night's chronicle.
Though it may be a regrettable tale of failure, I hope
you've enjoyed yourselves nonetheless.

If you yet yearn for eternal life, I hope by now you
know that you won't find it with the humble
vampire.

Even my friend, Vio Valakia, knows it—though he
yet lives strong, he knows that one day he shall find
himself at the end.

Perhaps you still cannot let go? Then let me offer an
alternative.

If you seek endless life, you need but set your story
in writing. Compose a chronicle of your own. Then,
though it may be left behind and forgotten, you
may rest assured in knowing that, some day, by
some compatriot you will never know, it shall be
remembered again.

Now then, it is time I laid down my pen for tonight.
As always, I have been your chronicler—G. M.
Ziggurat.

Afterword: Splatterfest [The Great Wave off River Styx]

In case you are wondering, this author's answer to the question that opens this book is a resounding 'Yes!' I very much wish I could live forever. I don't know how my opinion might change in thirty or three hundred years, but right now I find the world far too interesting and full of things to do to be bored of it in one measly century. And whatever fear I may have for the imagined plight of being abandoned by death, it pales in comparison to the very mundane fear of meeting said death. It's to the point that whenever I hear someone faced with this hypothetical give a self-assured no, as if it's barely a question in their minds, I can't help but feel like they're simply coping with the unfortunate reality of not having a choice in the matter. I mean, however terrible you imagine immortality to be, it's still no more than a fiction, a flight of fancy. You can't really know how it would feel to be immortal, but death is always close by. Better the devil you don't know than the one you know, I think. (Not that I really know either of 'em.)

When I first decided to write a mystery about vampires, it was the vague outline of this story that came to mind, before I eventually settled on writing *The 1st Night* first. If that was a mystery novel with vampires, then this firmly falls into the camp of a *vampire mystery novel*. And with that dichotomy put into place, the Sunset Vallachia series has reached its middle point. If you've enjoyed either of these books thus far, I hope you stick by for the complete tetralogy.

Incidentally, after writing the first volume, I decided I should get myself more cultured as far as vampires so, so I've started watching a bunch of vampire movies. If I wasn't as bad at watching movies as I am, I could

probably have experienced a lot more, but as it stands I've seen about twenty-two, a far cry from my previous record of three. I've enjoyed most of what I've seen, even the schlocky ones (which as it so happens is a lot of them), but if there's anything I'm glad to have seen among them, it would be the Nosferatu movies. It shouldn't take a detective to realize I've taken some inspiration from them as far as this novel goes, particularly *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), though I think the best portrayal of Nosferatu is still Klaus Kinski's (I don't like the newest one from Robert Eggers' film that much, though. Nosferatu should never have a moustache). I also have to mention *Interview with a Vampire* (1994), *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and *Vampire's Kiss* (1988), all entirely different takes on what a vampire story can be, and each with plenty of impact in their own interesting ways. Someone must have already done a mystery with the general idea of *Vampire's Kiss* by now...

Anyway, with that out of the way, time for the acknowledgements. A big thank you to Volt McVolt, Toxter and Life for proofreading as well as being there to bounce ideas off of. Thank you to the members of the *Zaregoto* and *Honkaku* communities for the consistent support. And many thanks to you, dear reader, for getting this far. See you on some other night.

Genma496, March 2026
BGM "R&R with Dracula's Minions" by Yasushi Ishii
From *Hellsing*