

Nothing is easier than self-deceit.
For what each man wishes, than he also
believes to be true.

- Demosthenes

Däm'Um:
Song of the Vam Pÿr's
BLOOD JUNKY

Written by Stavros
Edited by Carol Russell



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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2010910115

ISBN: 978-0-9828121-1-2

Published by Crazy Duck Press, PO Box 946, Poolesville,
MD. 20837-0946

The Upanishads
Translation by Juan Mascaró; Penguin Press
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“Wishing”
Written by Buddy Holly & Bob Montgomery
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Written by Iggy Pop & The Stooges
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Written by Merle Kilgore & June Carter
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Illustrations and Graphic Design by Stavros
Typeset in Garamond, Bleeding Cowboys, Scythe, Blue Highway,
Preston Script, & Marvelouz DSG

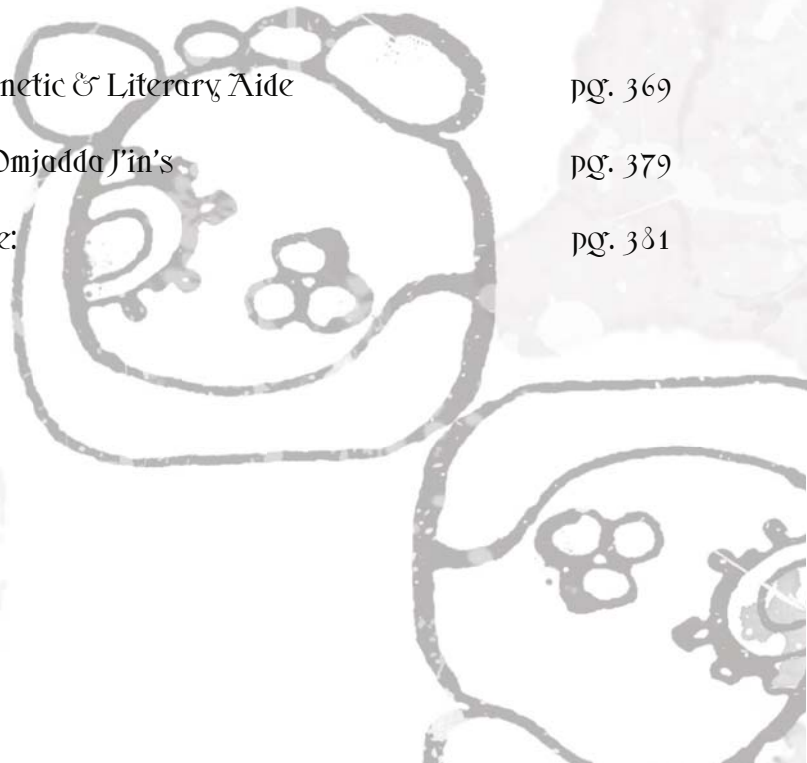
Printed in the United States of America

To the memory of my Father:

Rodney L. Cockerell
1946 - 2010

A Novel in Eight Parts

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PART ONE:

Social Contract



In dreams the mind beholds its own immensity.
What has been seen is seen again, and what has
been heard is heard again. What has been felt
in different places or faraway regions returns
to the mind again. Seen and unseen, heard and
unheard, felt and not felt, the mind sees all,
since the mind is all.

-The Upanishads



Lin looked out over the tawdry lights of the city of lost angels. A million pinpricks that filled the moonlit night with brilliant noise. *There's no real dark anymore. The earth is crowded; guttersnipes and trash.* Breathing smoke, a tattooed dragon on the slag stone balcony, she pulled hard from the cigarette. Its glowing red tip briefly added to the twinkling as Santa Ana winds grabbed the ashen embers and ferried them through the streets like little glowing devils seeking fuel to ignite the desperate pith of the city. The cancer-stick was stale, at least three years old. Stuffed in a drawer the last time her thoughts fell on Dominique.

Dull bitterness, in mind and body, a steady ache; the smoky flavor sent spasms through her parasite in angry shudders. It despised the smoke and pushed it out of Lin's nostrils, screaming for blood. Her thin, white robe floated on a breath of air.

From up here, where all the smog gathered around this west coast haven, in her castle in the sky, her deluxe apartment far from the throttle and choke of the world, she could hear the chaos clashing below. Crushed under the soles of her bare, waxen feet, sounds drifted up to her. Called to her. Pleading for scant recognition, each lonely voice clamored in the din, each a single cell in the red tapestry proclaiming its mortality. A cacophony: pointless conversations, bleating car radios, hookers on their knees in alleys, police thrusting a robber to the ground, a baby's cry, a drug addict haggling price from the meager metal protection of an idling car, and an old man's last breath – all circulated into the drumming mood of this sanguine night.

One hundred years ago it wasn't like this. The town still held some glimmer of magic. Hell, it wasn't like this fifty years ago. But who's counting? Who even notices that the magic is gone, leaving in its wake the lingering remains of an extinguished black wick on an old dusty candle held waiting in the breast of one who still mourns its passing? Lin sighed. *This used to be such a fun town. Now there's just too many people breeding like a damn disease, infecting every living cell, spreading out like a well-fed cancer. Viral.*

Dreaming of bygone nights lit by the pale glamour of the same moon blinking down time after time, Lin placed her alabaster hands on the stone railing of the balcony terrace as she jettisoned the soft cotton cargo of the cigarette into the Santa Ana air. She watched it tumble and turn, spiraling to the fetid street below. The blood parasite within writhed along her spine and ribs. It caused her jungle tattoo to quiver into inked life. Toucans took flight across her back, into that blank spot where Lin was thinking of putting a city scene. *Nature vs Man. The epitome of*

progress. Living on the Pacific Ring of Fire, nestled into the big shoulders of skyscrapers and movie stars, it only felt right to finish the elaborate design with a monument to the civilized state. *Not until Three Hundred, though. That'll be a seminal year. I will finish it then.*

Lin curled a finger around the hand-carved spirits glass, swishing the red liquid within. Her parasite, her Jadaraa Soo*, wound around her wrist, pushed into her fingertips with love, and cradled the cup. It was hungry. It wanted to go out into the illumined night and drive its tendril features into a warm body. It yearned, unceasingly, to be fulfilled. Lin opened her mouth and kissed the cup for a hefty dose. The parasite cringed at the blood's cold temperature. Withdrawing at first into its veiny legs, it receded back to its full girth, seeping throughout Lin's body like a wave on a beach. To the painted host, the chilled hemoglobin felt good against this warm, dry night. It cooled her stillborn flesh and fucked with the Jadaraa Soo. A 'lil kick for the bastard to make her smile. A not-so-brutal reminder to the beast within that she does what she likes despite what it wants. Lin didn't feel like going out tonight or calling The Service to have a Sanglant delivered. So, this cold plate would have to do for them both.

A few seconds after ingesting the blood, the veins of her captor began to purr like a giant, caged cat. Softly. Just softly, mimicking the jungle beast tattooed on her left calf. *After all, blood is blood.* That's all the thing wants: blood. An endless cycle of self-consumption from the day that Lin let it consume her vital fluids, let the vile thing be born in her body, let the blood become beast and beast become being; the Jadaraa Soo ended one life, and began another.

"Blood. Blood eats Blood. That is the rule. It is as simple as that."

That is what Dominique told her when Lin was on her knees before the woman. Before she uncorked the cylindrical crystal vial and ingested the black blood of Ornn Däm Mu. *His dark fluid. Bottled night.* Before she became what the world would call a vampire. Dominique said it was *"as simple as that"* in her soft voice with that perfect lilt. It sounded simple and easy, basic and one dimensional to Lin then. It was, after all, what she wanted – to be resurrected in the thrall of her lover's arms.

"Love?" she huffed and a scowl twisted her cheeks. *I deluded myself, believing in its utter simplicity with a child's naiveté, so that I could be with the gorgeous woman for all time. Live with her and her dark gift, endlessly affectionate and kind. Foolish!*

**See Lexicon on pg. 369 for assistance with definitions and pronunciations.*

Lin ground a flat tooth against the veiny canine staring through the noise of the bright night. A small quiver shook her jungle leaves, uncoiled around her shoulder blades, and moved serpent-like through the base of her neck and down her spine to where the ram horns connected around William's name. Her Jadaraa Soo trembled and cracked the last cold element of digestion, like a yawn, and stretched Lin's muscles and fleshy tissue. It held her like a lover. *Like Dominique used to.* But the parasite is no lover! Most of the time it's just there. Out of mind. On autopilot, gliding through its urges with its limited slideshow of transmitted images from its old life, directing Lin when to feed. She hardly paid attention to it anymore. Blood memory dripping down the pedestal of time through her creeping veins. It's all become so ordinary. Mundane. Hard to recall when the epochal creature became like so much white noise to her being. *But, tonight...* tonight, it's as agitated as she is.

Perhaps, it too, knows.

Her hand wandered to the silver locket around her neck. It felt heavy. *My albatross from the desert.* Anxious fingers fidgeted with the antique jewelry as she glared out across the flat landscape of lights. Her vampiric veins pulled back from the surface of her skin as fingertips touched the silver ornament. They retreated from the vile mineral, deeper into the cavity of her digits, and coiled around the bones in her hand. It was a warm night. A dry night. The kind of night that told Lin that hidden in this city somewhere, someone was going to be murdered. *Feelings boiled to the surface in violent tempests.* She tasted it in the wind, distinct as rain. And, when one has lived as long as she had, one tends to pick up on the little things like that. Besides the thin sheer robe, decorative tattoos, and arid Santa Ana breeze, the locket was the only thing she wore to guard herself from the murderous intent roaming through the streets of this city of lost angels.

It feels like only yesterday we made the trip. Lin chuckled softly, letting her dead breath roll off her lips, and pulled another dose from the crystal chalice to numb her frustrating maw. *Another decade has passed* – in the blink of an eye, disappearing like candy. Time ate her heels with longing; Lin shook her foot. Time pushed on her shoulder blades and flitted through her legs; she felt like launching herself into the air beyond the balcony, floating weightless to the ground. Lin felt the veiny fingers of her Jadaraa Soo coil around her esophagus. It felt like bile racing up the back of her throat and she mashed her teeth hard against the bitter memory of desert winds and death. She didn't want it. *Not now!* She didn't want to go. *What's the point? What's the use?* The constant drumming of the city below pounded through

Lin's head like a hollow tube as she reached for another stale cigarette.

"Fuck," Lin uttered.

Her clumsy fingers, devoid of the puppet strings, having only left the confines of the silver locket a second ago, were useless tools. The Jadaraa Soo hadn't filled the little round digits of flesh yet and she knocked the old cigarettes off the banister. She watched them tumble and turn, spiral down... down. *Some lucky bum will find 'em.* Lin sighed. She knew it was time, but she didn't want to go.

Dominique will be expecting me to stop by. Lin pursed her lips after another refreshing repast. The two old lovers were colder than this red dish. Lin huffed and shook her head as she thought on it, adding her discord to the muffled cacophony and spit. She watched it tumble down too, weightless and falling, a red speck against the painted drama of Los Angeles. *Down. Like she was, on her knees, before the Persian beauty with her mouth opened. Waiting. Wanting. Willing. Down.* Lin watched the red spit fall all of the way. Then... *Splat!*

Lin grinned and her mirth died. *Dominique?* Too much unsettled baggage with that one. Unpacked, wrinkled feelings left in their confines; stored in the dustbins of her soul. She recalled the flutter that filled her belly on that evening when she was first introduced to the Vam Pÿr. *Milan. 1772.* She was a guest of the Conte and Contessa De Luca, having vacationed with them throughout August. Linnet and the Conte's wife, Carmela, got on so well that she was encouraged to extend her stay throughout winter.

Conte Antonio De Luca was a business associate and friend of Linnet's father, and the two of them devised the arrangements to broaden the young lady's matrimonial opportunities that brought her to the noble home in the Austrian Duchy. A lovely girl, Linnet had long, coal black hair with eyes so bright they ignited a room. She had a slender European figure that had filled out nicely enough over the past few years, but for all of her charms her social prospects in England were less than advantageous. Reluctantly, Emerson Pevensey agreed to Carmela's wishes and his youngest daughter remained abroad with the hopes of landing a husband.

There were suitors in Italy for the highborn buxom broad and chiefly among them was a minister's son, Donatello Adessi. He was fair-haired and handsome, a seminary student who had left to join the Cavalry and achieved some small notoriety. Carmela took great joy in playing matchmaker with the lurid lass, thinking it her duty to find Linnet an apropos spouse since the young woman's own mother was several years dead. Carmela felt akin to the

English maid, having lost her only daughter to the cot death as an infant. She and Antonio had raised and wed boys, and having the young Pevensey girl with them had bridged that long-suffering gap in her soul.

The prodigy's return to Milan was the perfect excuse to show off the young lady and orchestrate a chance meeting with the fair-haired soldier. It was the twenty-sixth of December, and though the winter had been unexpectedly warm a spot of rain lingered in the heavens of the mostly starlit sky. Intermission was letting out and Carmela quickly pulled Linnet into the grand ballroom of the Teatro Regio Ducal as the Conte wandered over to the Faro table to test his luck with the cards.

"Only sixteen years old and he has already composed his third operetta." The Contessa explained, leading Linnet along. "One would think his father helped him with the mature nature of the theme, but I assure you, once you meet the young man his talent is most evident. He is quite capable, though I do prefer the soprano tone of the castrato to the natural pitch of Mrs. Amicis-Buonsolazzi. There is just something lacking in a woman's timbre.

Antonio and I were at the gala premiere of *Mitridate, re di Ponto*, two years ago to the day. The carnival was in town then – Oh you should have seen it Linnet! It was magnificent. You would have loved it. And, of course, we attended the festivities of Ferdinand's wedding last year when the Maestro performed his second opera." She leaned in and patted the young woman's hand. "Did you know, it was on the advice of the Conte that he obtained the commission?" Carmela shook her head and raised her eyebrows. "With the apparent age of the Archduke and the extraordinary gift of Herr Mozart it seemed an appropriate fit. Ah..." Her gaze swept the room. "This way my dear."

"Are we to meet him now?"

"Do not be silly. Only those of lesser breeding would introduce themselves during an interlude when everyone knows it is best after the encore; and besides, I told Antonio that we simply must entertain the young man this time around. It would be a travesty not to. He is going to speak with his father, Leopold, tonight and you can be introduced to him properly, tomorrow."

"Introduced to whom?" a young man asked as he clicked his heels and bowed at the two women turning to him.

"The Maestro," announced the Contessa. "You do recall my Goddaughter,

Linnet?”

“Yes, of course.” He took Linnet’s gloved hand in his. “How could I forget.” He kissed her fingertips lightly and smiled.

Linnet blushed.

Donatello’s eyes were untraditionally blue. Piercing. He stood out among the rank and file of olive tones and dark hair, dressed in his light gray uniform, a neatly pressed long-skirted overcoat, buttoned waistcoat, breeches, and thigh high leather gaiters. His sword decorated his side and he carried his hat. Politely, he inquired on Linnet’s thoughts of the play. As she began to tell him the Contessa excused herself, wandering over to an elderly couple that Linnet had seen the De Lucas’ favoring socially on previous engagements. In the crowded room, the young couple was left to their own devices.

“There were many lovely arias,” Linnet professed.

“It is within a comfortable range.” He offered her his arm.

“Though I must confess I fear that I have not the experience to judge the work. This is only the second opera that I have attended.”

“Then let us educate you on the form so that you may feel more at ease in the second half.”

The couple took to wandering slowly around the room discussing the libretto and plot-driven recitatives within the first half of the opera. The hem of Linnet’s blue silk taffeta gown silently drifted above the floor, pressing gently against the cotton fabric of her chemise as they walked. The soldier let her fill his ear as he kept his eyes on the shape of Linnet’s mouth. He dreamed of kissing her lips. Neither one realized that they were being watched. As they neared the southern sloping staircase the Contessa returned at their elbows.

“Linnet? There is someone I’d like you to meet.” Both turned around. “This is the Madame De’Paul. She is a spirited woman. Maintains her *own* fleet of ships. Can you believe that? A female Quartermaster. When I heard I simply knew that I had to introduce the two of you.”

Donatello clicked his heels and bowed his head slightly. “Madame.”

A corner of the pale stranger’s mouth slightly upturned toward the young man and Carmela continued her introduction, sounding the young man’s achievements, more for Linnet’s ear than for the fascination of her

unique guest. Linnet was immediately struck by the beauty of the lush burgundy gown worn by the woman. It was cut to the French letter with a brocade intricately crafted to match the veil that fell from the elaborate headdress and crossed the woman's eyes. Linnet felt the room tilt, absorbing into the splendid rose of the gown and the sublime nature of the woman's bare shoulders. The subtle curve of her neck, the cut of her jawbone, and her powdered tan skin was captivating. The man at Linnet's arm faded as the woman smiled, warmly, at her. Full and bright. The English lass became flush in the moment, and slowly the Contessa's high-pitched bray took hold of her ears once again.

"...That is just what we were discussing earlier. It is an age of youth that compels us. More and more the young are advancing in areas traditionally occupied by more seasoned gentry. Take for example our beloved composer, which I was just informing Linnet priory..."

"The splendor of youth," broke the soft, perfect voice of Madame De'Paul, "is not in one's age, but in the timbre of one's heart." She placed a hand to the maid's rosy cheek. "Wouldn't you agree?"

Linnet felt an intense draw upon her touch and leaned into the bowl of the woman's palm, sensing the majestic weight of her eyes through the thin concealment. Butterflies lifted in her stomach and she clanged the bottom of the antique chalice against the stone railing of her balcony and exhaled, bitterly.

The Vam Pÿr was an idea clothed in flesh that pulsed a burning desire, addled Lin's young mind in an endorphin rush that beat back her fear, canceled every cautionary warning and dived off the cliff to sprout wings like an angel and soar the heavens as a god. Lin knew it. Felt it with every beating pulse of her veiny parasite. *I am corrupted by the civilized state.* The manicured glitz of a million pinpricks of light danced within her hardened soul. She was spiraling down, a tattooed dragon curling into the void behind her breastplate.

Splat!

Lin yanked the locket's chain tight against the back of her neck. Her parasite whined as it fled from the silver. *That dark candle of the city in my memory was never lit. There is no afterglow from sex. Happily ever after never happens. The same putrid stench of the streets below still invade my nostrils like Nazis, just like they did fifty years ago. That little girl who dreamed is dead, consumed in the fire of her passions. Everything. Every moment. It's all a bitter,*

acid-tongued lie. Every act of life, living, screaming in this mess of noise, lost in the throttle and choke, to attain the slightest glimmer of some divine destiny for its self is but a foolbardy pursuit. There is no truth to the hopes one breeds within the mind. Everything is shit. Everything decays. It is the way of things. It's how the universe is spun. Everything recycles into its own quiet death. Yet...

I'm still here...and Dominique will expect me to stop by for a visit.

The veiny blood parasite wove through Lin's fine muscles, curled around porous bones, and slithered under her flesh as it caressed its host with a devoted embrace. Resilient, its tough interior hide was the pulley and the wheel of the symbiotic meat machine. Through its will the vampire drank again from the hand carved crystal, replenishing her death over and over. Lin's death, like the universe, was constantly expanding. She, a willing victim in the everlasting freak show that had become her flimsy excuse of a life, trapped like a hostage in her own corium castle.

Lin let the antique locket go. It plummeted against the hard valley of her chest, knocking against the painted lock of her sealed, winged heart. Dark crimson veins spread out like a ripple under her inked skin, travelling deeper behind her breastplate, away from the vile silver. *My own private albatross. An heirloom from a time of harsh, bitter winds and dirt so thick I could swim through the sky.* It was a time of savage loss, and death so replete in its appetite that it still haunted the vampire to this day. The locket was the scale in her soul, tipping with the weight of her passions. The memory of her dark mistress burned just as brightly as the garish lit horizon of Los Angeles. It was the commencement of the journey, the crack in the impenetrable wall behind her eyes, the augury to behold.

Lin peered down and saw a lucky vagabond pick up her fallen, stale cigarettes. *The universe is smiling down at him tonight.* The taste of murder filled Lin's mouth and she gagged on the dust-collected reflections, forcing them back down her gullet with another swallow of cold hemoglobin and days of yore.

Another decade has passed. It's time.



Z let Manuel drop the e-pill onto her outstretched tongue. It wasn't the first time that he saw her teeth, the protruding fang-like canines. He thought her obsession with vampires was a bit trendy. Blasé even. He never considered the possibility that they weren't retrofitted Halloween memorabilia. It never really crossed his mind to ask her about them either.

The two of 'em were always too busy dancing, or drinking; partying until dawn. *Everyone's a freak*, thought Manuel. *Who am I to judge? The only thing that mattered was...getting freaky.*

Manuel could handle freaks. He fit right in; snuggled like a tight-fitting condom. From his close-cropped, blond dyed hair with its tufts of color shooting out in long plumes like a peacock all the way down to his platform shoes and leather underwear, which he hoped some classic built sailor was going to be pulling off with his teeth tonight. Manuel always felt at home with the misfits. It was all the normal people that worried him. All the Regular Joes, the common shopper folk, out there turning the world into a shithole, building a better bomb; they were the ones that were going to kill him. They were the ones that just didn't get it.

The lights of the disco gyrated like a spinning top. A heavy bass pulse triturated. Z couldn't stop moving, even if she wanted too. And she didn't want to. She felt the tablet of ecstasy melt on her tongue and felt the angry twinge of pain from her blood parasite within. She figured the thing should have been used to her excessive alcohol and drug use by now. *Fuck it if it wasn't.* She fed it. And she fed it well. All the in-between moments were hers and hers to do with as she damned well pleased.

It pleased Z to dance. To dance among the crushing throng of the living, wrapped in their luxurious warmth, their collective heat. She moved among them soaking up the vivacious energy. She let them press upon her a vivid impression of living so that she could become like a Phoenix, an imitation of life, and rise to the top of the heap a perfected being of the curse, a reflecting pool of radiant, effervescent energy, bristling on the edge of possibility. So that she could dive into this humid sea of flesh without losing control. Z twirled. She let the music take her like a lover, place its hands on her hips, and drive her inhibitions wild. Her teeth twittered on edge. She was on the verge of some pure movement that her limbs had never concocted before.

That guy to my left, behind the chatty brunette, is still watching me. Z loved it when someone watched her. She was a divine spectacle of brilliance. A thunderclap of god light. *They should all fuckin' watch me!* Z's amazing. *They should bow down to my every whim. Submit to my devilish merriment. Bow. Bow. Bow.* Her thoughts echoed to the beat as she cut her sway into a sensual, syncopated rhythm. Her hands slowly traversed the landscape of her undulating body. She imagined that she knew what Eve felt like on the night that she seduced Adam. She felt her snake coiling along the curves of her spine, down past the small of her back, to those two luscious mounds of her perfectly formed ass. Z embraced the stranger's eyes as if they were kisses.

She reveled in the fact that if he was going to watch her...then she was damn sure gonna give him a show!



Ryan Silva watched the girl dance. She slithered up her spine and cast her eyes at him as if they were dice. This wasn't the first time that he'd seen her at the club. But it was the first time that she appeared to have noticed him. It usually didn't take that long for a girl to notice Ryan. Getting girls to notice him wasn't his problem. With his strong build, square jaw, Hollywood good looks, and confident swagger, it was usually getting rid of the girls that was the problem. And it was a problem that Ryan Silva didn't put much mind to. Once he was done with 'em, that was that.

Yet, this one...

This one had a vibe like a razor and a cut along her curves that made his chest ache. This one had been coming to his club, walkin' his turf for the past three weeks and hadn't paid him any due until now. He'd seen her dancing and talking with that Mexican faggot. Ryan even knew her drink. Whiskey. *A strong tongue for such a lithe female. Bet she'd taste like a freshly plucked peach, she would. The girl has done her best to stay off my radar. That is... until now.* Once Ryan Silva had a girl in his sight...well...that never was his problem.

Mindy wandered up to him and stroked her silver-ring-fingered hand through Ryan's chiseled blond hair and kissed him hello hard on the mouth. He bedded her tongue with his and stared into her heavy eyeliner eyes.

"Thought you'd show at Mickey's. Me and Theresa scored and been looking for you."

"Mickey's a fucker."

"True enough. Whatchya doin'?"

At Ryan's silence she followed his line of sight.

"Wanna jet?"

"Maybe later."

Mindy watched the skank twitch her skinny ass to the beat like a dog in heat. She knew Ryan's appetite and could tell this girl fit the bill, that her long legs filled his eyes. She could taste his want in their kiss. She also knew

that no woman truly satisfied his itch. Ryan's heart was a wanderer, never steady, never settled, searching. Mindy accepted that fact about him a long time ago. She didn't take offense to him eyeing the skinny twat. Ryan was a great lay – *definitely not the marrying type*. And he probably never would be.

“Mmmm,” Mindy whispered softly into his ear. “You want that?”

He looked at her for a moment. “You in a giving mood?”

“It could be arranged.”

Mindy's smile slid across her face, a worm spinning silk, as she slid her jacket off. Exposing her bare shoulders to the gyrating lights she handed her soft leather coat to Theresa, whom Ryan had not even noticed until now. Then, without another word, Mindy turned toward the crowded dance floor. She moved with a slow, smiling walk and entered the writhing horde as if she owned the joint. Her fine, svelte body cut a luscious path toward the intoxicating punk and Ryan leveled his gaze drawing them both in. He breathed slowly. Mindy slithered up to her and the mysterious, vibrant punk fell instantly into the girl's tempting, revolving curves. Ryan's lips parted. His tongue felt thick and wet as he watched them, dancing together.



Z sensed the stranger's eyes on her as she approached. She could feel her heat and smell the liquor of her sex as she smoothed up beside her. She was pretty. Petite. Had a licentious grin as she wiggled her hips. She wanted to play, like a kitty cat with a ball of yarn. Z immediately fell into her and the room disappeared.

The vampire placed her hands on the girl's rolling hips and their bodies leveled, in sync with each other, in sync with the down beat of the rhythm, and in sync with the live girl's steady, thumping heart. It was the drum that the surrendering bloodsucker danced to and the beat that finally made Z's blood parasite, her Jadaraa Soo, crave the lewd girl's flush, pink flesh and mellow out. Her sensual rhythm made Z's beast lull into the calm of hunting. Made it open and receptive like a sponge. It was exactly what Z needed.

Within a few seconds the full effects of the ecstasy hit the prancing addict harder than a wave. It hit her like a feather hammer to the temple, like she was touching the sun or falling in love for the very first time. The heat off every sweat-laden body twisting and turning on the dance floor dazzled her hypersensitivity. She was drunk on their flesh. Smashed to the

collective rhythm of their circulatory systems. Inebriated from the stink of their panting breaths. She was infused with their life force.

This moment...

This moment was better than blood. Better than sex. Better than anything else she could recall. *Happiness in a little, white pill.* From across the room Z could detect the palpitating flutter of her voyeur's heart racing as he swallowed hard his searing desire.



1774. London, England.

The painter told her not to move. Linnet had been sitting with a stiff back for the better part of the afternoon. Her corset dug deep into the soft, malleable flesh under her arms and pressed in to the bones of her ribs. He told her, warned her in fact, on a few occasions, to remain still. Yet, she required further prodding and had learned all too well the sharp consequences of both Master Reynolds's tongue and lash if she did not obey.

Her eyes frequently wandered to the timepiece on his worktable. Evening approached, and with it, her Dark Mistress. The light was already beginning to wane in the Englishman's studio. Yet he continued to work, mixing the pungent linseed oil and powdered pigments with the flat slap of a knife and swirl of a brush, distilling real life onto the flat canvas. This meant, of course, that Linnet had to remain sitting no matter how excruciating it became. A woman's life, after all, was one of sacrifice and patience, waiting on one man or another.

"This is the way of things," her Mother had told her on several occasions as they performed the duties of the house when she was growing up.

This general temperament was clearly expressed in Master Reynolds's sister, Frances, as she hurried about the studio, a quiet church mouse, lighting the candles and removing the uneaten plates of food, prepared so lovingly, from her brother's bench. Craftsman and Form had been talking vigorously throughout the day. Rousseau's treatise, *Du Contrat Social*, was the coat rack from which the day's conversation hung and the reason Joshua had neglected to eat the bread, fruit, and cheeses his sister had brought him earlier. In the week that Linnet had been posing for the painter, this subtle forsaking to nourish his body proved regular. He was quite a gregarious man and often held no quarter with his tongue. Having

found it intriguing that the young girl and her benefactress had only recently arrived from Paris to pose for him, the artist took it upon himself to impress upon the young maid his vast knowledge of all things French.

Being a child of Britannia herself, born in the little town of Abingdon, merely twenty leagues and a day's ride from where she posed, Linnet found Sir Joshua Reynolds's ideas on their southern neighbor quite stimulating, if not archaic. He was a learned man replete with all of the finery that his education and station in life afforded him, and often told Linnet so. Frances barely looked upon her at all, and Linnet wondered if he beat her too if she displeased him. It did not miss her fair judgement that like most men, from either the English Isle or the adopted home of her Mistress, that he preferred the company of a woman who lent her ear to modern ideas more so than her lip.

"There is no duality about it," the artist interrupted. "The nature of man is untainted, of singular purpose, when left to the devices God intended for him."

"Devotion is not an inherent trait but a learned..."

"It is when Man divines for himself this social contract of cities and marketplaces, building upon the grand schemes and ideas of his youth, that he loses all aspects of his intended purpose." The celebrated artist continued, unaware of the protestations escaping out of the young woman's mouth. "He at once gives into vice, corruption roots, the heart becomes callous, and is forced to compromise his spirit. Thereby transforming God's free man into the chained slave of his own social will."

"Surely," Linnet interjected, raising her feminine voice to match Reynolds's heightened vibrato, "the heart of Man still retains some semblance, some origin of its true nature, or all societies would fall to ruin instantly."

"That, my dear girl, is the precise reason why it succeeds. If you are to learn anything, outside of the humdrum of your age, then let it, at least, be that modern man thrives in corruption."

"But, what of the noble pursuits?"

"Mere gallivanting vanity," he said, dismissing the question with a wave of his pigment stained hand.

"Surely, Sir, that cannot be said of the arts and sciences? You of all people should easily see how man's nobility far exceeds his cruelty."

“Ha!” He alighted. “Even more so!”

Linnet switched her tact and suggested that her fair sex possessed purity and grace if man did not. The artist dismissed these notions away with the flutter of his occupational hand as he stood defiantly behind his easel, gruffly complaining. He would hear none of it. Reynolds rebuked her naiveté, claiming that females were without a doubt the more cunning and conniving members of the species. Their actions far surpassed any atrocities perpetrated by any man written about in the annals of history. He pointed to Eve’s perpetual damnation of their race and Helena’s destruction of Troy as proof of woman’s curse upon man’s erudite souls.

“Perhaps, if women were allowed to govern themselves,” Linnet shot back, “instead of being mere pageantry of a man’s estate, held as possessions, then such ideas of conquest would not permeate our culture.”

The artist scoffed.

Linnet was ablaze in defense of her sex and rallied to continue. “If women governed alongside men, as equals, a better judgement and temperance might be cast in the affairs of state and the true natural order of things could be preserved in civilized company.”

Though, before all of the words finished tumbling out of Linnet’s small, well-shaped mouth the painter’s laughter filled his studio. She drew quiet, slighted by Master Reynolds’s jeers. Pride felt hot within her bodice, but she held her tongue. It was, after all, a woman’s role to practice a triage of graces. The fair sex knew what men could not practice: *patient espionage sustained polite social circles where arrogance paraded proudly and with gall.*



Lin culled the frilly thoughts from her raven’s nest. She hadn’t considered the painting in such a long time and proposed that it, along with all her other relics, was still sequestered in the darken hovels of the attic off Rue Abel, collecting dust. She looked up to the bright orb flowing down blue lines of gray and could think of nothing else now, but her. *Dominique.* Her Jaci, her moon spirit shining down. *Thought I was liberated in your arms.*

“You don’t know shit about anything!” Yelled the vampire at the moon.
“You were never there.”

She buried her tired complaint into the bottom of her cup, draining

the vessel of its red bounty. Gloom filled her eyes as she looked to the street below. *Been here too long. Nothing's new. Nothing.* Her Jadaraa Soo slid under her breasts and squeezed her ribcage. It writhed over her stomach, wanting more. As she stepped away from the balcony's ledge to refill her cup she vaguely heard the bum below asking every passerby if they had a light. *Seems the universe is not without its dull retractions.* Lin snickered as she stepped into the kitchen, thinking of Queen Elizabeth I. All that power at her fingertips, a commander of vast armies who struggled and fought to actualize her royal destiny, and yet, she could take no lover into her bed without spoiling the runes of her country. Fate twisted. Fate connived. *What good is a fucking cigarette if you don't have a lighter?* Fate withheld.

You left me to build your Council.

Lin punched in the code on the refrigerator's electronic lock and opened the huge stainless steel door when she heard the little pop. The quiet of the house moved around her. Comfortable, standing in the hard glow of the cold machine's inner sanctum, she filled her cup with the ruby contents in the plastic container. The Jadaraa Soo planted itself deeper within Lin's body away from the utility light. Wind blew the hem of the curtains through the opened patio door softly grazing the glass. She tried to recall the face of the pockmarked artist, but it was lost to the channels of time. The staunch sound of his voice remained, however. Barking in the back of her mind for her to sit up, drilling her to *Turn this way, and that way, hold your breath like so...*

Lin chuckled quietly and a police siren erupted several blocks away when she had returned to her nightly perch. On the street below, the vagabond was gone and the pariah's gaze fell onto the taillights of cars, drawing red lines, like blood, through the veins of the city. Lin felt the road tug at her gut and she closed her eyes. Pulling on the silver ornament, gritting her teeth against the corrupt thoughts from the desert she turned her musings on her father. *You never listened either. You, a capitalist and I a reformer.* Lin smiled and lifted her cup to the moon to toast his bones.

For all his labors, Emerson Pevensey was never so near to the King of England than when his progeny sat all those long hours for the celebrated artist. Emerson toiled, the son of a lesser nobleman, trading textiles and goods for His Majesty in Oxford. Though the Pevensey house was a respected establishment of the realm, he was never invited to Court.

Seven Pevensey ladies were ushered out from under the broom and married by the time Linnet was born. She was the eighth daughter to a family that could sustain no male heir. Emerson's only son, Linnet's only

brother, William, died of consumption the year before her birth. Though she never knew the young Pevensey master, the weight of his death bore down upon her throughout her upbringing. William was the silent opponent she reckoned with daily. He was the ghost that haunted her Mother's tears and framed her Father's chin with firm anger. William usurped their kind love. William was the length of the yardstick to which Linnet could never live up to. She grew up feeling like a disappointment simply because she was the child that had survived, and was yet another female.

The affect of femininity permeated the Pevensey clan, and on more than one occasion Linnet overheard her Father claim that his ruin was due to a house of women. Ironically, it would be a woman that stole his only remaining child at the twilight of his years and took her to the regal courts of princes and kings; kept her embroiled in a rich circle of lords and ladies whereas he could not.

The mutated odors of the concrete sea drifted past her nose as she drank from the spirits glass in memory of a man long since dead. She could not recall his face either. The cerebral labyrinth in her head was as pockmarked and faded as the artist's features. It did not escape Lin's fine attention that she'd been spending more and more time of late thinking about days gone by, staying indoors, refusing to dress, sequestered away from the constant crush of life. It's always a precursor to the tune of spinning tires. Lost admiration for the now, counting years, wanting nothing more than sullen isolation, buried above the city's lights to take the time, *the god awful time*, reminding herself as to why.

Lin sighed, bowed her head, and let the desert memories take her. *They'd come sooner or later, anyways.* But she began to shake. A vile torment of flesh rocking her, Lin felt queasy. It wasn't a spasm from the enigmatic creature, so she boxed the desert back up choosing instead to fall on the ease and cold forgotten comfort of the painting.



1774. London, England.

Linnet's bruised ego settled into her quiet knowing. The timepiece on Joshua's table was accurate and sure. Dusk had descended. Her Dark Mistress knew freedom the likes of which Master Reynolds could scarcely comprehend. *Nay! Even artistically conceive of as possible!* His frail ramblings on the nature of good and evil in Man were ineffectual at best. He boasted to stand on the forefront of modern thinking, but was, in fact, a dullard to the true mechanics of the world. Linnet had been shown things that the

master artist would envy. He prattled on. He liked the sound of his own voice. Linnet listened, raised on the good graces of a silent tongue, until she tried an altogether different track. Her statement was simple and clear.

“Love is man’s salvation from himself.”

Unexpectedly, her well-timed retort bore strange fruit. It caused Master Reynolds to reflect. He fell silent as he worked, leaving only the rough grate of the coarse horsehair brush to speak in his defense. This silence, in and of itself, surprised the eighth lady of the House of Pevensey. It was not an unfamiliar truth in a Christian kingdom torn by Catholics and Protestants, but the painter was caught dumbstruck, and after a time, the instrument that he worked with earnest diligence paused on the rough fibers of the canvas. Master Reynolds returned from his internal communion and boasted loudly through the room as if cracking a whip.

“Love is merely a temporary delusional state by which the species can propagate.”

Typical. The inert model rolled her eyes. The thinking of men halted at the swollen, protruding belly of a woman producing kith. Obviously, the harder sex was stunted by nature.

“Love is just a socially accepted opiate,” pressed Master Reynolds with renewed verve, “that deludes the heart more than it could *ever* care for it. I have personally witnessed more unions of marriage destroyed by the ideals of love or from awakening from the Love State than the institution could scarcely claim success.” He stepped out from the protection of his easel, “which is a travesty when one considers that the house of marriage is an empty house, whose walls are the vessel of duty, where no seed of love could ever flourish or take root, because, the institution itself is in motion.”

Linnet’s mind pulled her dead brother from the grave and felt the stagnancy and foul silence that she had grown up with. It was the ballast of despair. “In motion, Sir? It no more resembles motion than a statue in the garden. A marriage grows docile and inevitably dull by its lack of movement.”

“It is a constant engagement,” the Artist explained. “It produces dependency, instead of freedom, and requires obedient reliability in the submissive pursuits of husbandry.”

“I beg to differ, Sir!” Linnet challenged with a snort, raising her voice as she spoke. “A woman is far more submissive in role and character

than a man in the institution of marriage. And she is without entitlement! Managing the affairs of a household usually fall upon her broad shoulders while the man busies himself with matters of State, drinking, and war.”

Master Reynolds cackled a braying, loud laugh. He loved the girl’s passion. She challenged him. Whereas so few patrons dared to even comment, she freely spoke her mind. Frances cut a well-worn path through her brother’s studio behind them.

“Joshua,” she said quietly invading. “The Lady De’Paul has arrived. Should I make room for her and Ms. Pangbourn at the table this evening?”

The pock-faced man shook his head as he spoke. “That will not be necessary. I am meeting with the Academy tonight.”

“Very well. I will send her up.”

He wiped his hands on a soiled rag and Linnet finally relaxed her posture. Her spine bore fruit baskets of pain. Her joints were cramped and weary from inactivity. It hurt to stand. Yet, it all seemed worthwhile once the young maid spied her Dark Mistress drifting into the darkened room.

Dominique De’Paul was elegant and graceful. The epitome of mystique and beauty. She seemed to glide on a cushion of air. The hems of her petticoat and gown did not whisper as she walked. A five-foot seven-inch Persian goddess from the Timurid Dynasty, she was shrouded in the allure of night. Her skin was the timbre of unspun silk and Linnet was sure that the woman’s water swayed the tide of the moon itself. In Linnet’s doe eyes Dominique was perfection personified. Beauty unbridled. Upon seeing her illustrious innamorata the model felt a fire ignite in her belly.

The benefactress was attired simply in a French, striped Poplin dress and quilted petticoat. The stomacher was gracefully refined and immediately caught the eye, which traveled upward toward the exposed neckline that cradled the olive bleached complexion of the woman’s once dark skin. The Lady De’Paul wore a fetching hat that matched the delicate Poplin and a thin veil fell about her face and neck, obscuring the Persian woman’s pallor. The soft tones of Dominique’s skin balanced the colors cascading through the dress.

However, it was the woman standing in the center of the room who held Dominique’s attention. Regally garbed in a shell pink calash and white silk de chine brocade dress of hand-splayed floral bouquets, Linnet watched as the master artist delicately took Dominique’s hand in his, pressing her gloved fingers to his lips. Dominique’s eyes lingered on the warm face

of her paramour as her Jadaraa Soo reached up to the plum of the man's mouth.

Master Reynolds was careful not to transfer any oils from his paints onto the Lady's glove. Such an accident would be indecent and rude. He so cherished the generosity of his patrons. As he greeted her graciously, he complimented on the charm and wit of his model for her Lady's pleasure.

"Yes," Dominique agreed. "My dear Linnet is quite outspoken. It is a trait, I wish, you could capture on canvas."

Reynolds humbly alleged his lack of talent at such a task and offered poetic endorsement that the vibrant energy of their conversations infused each stroke of his brush. The pale angel was not listening to him, though. She drew silently closer to the canvas on the painter's easel, captivated by the image that was emerging from the thick, earthen stench of paint.

"Sir Reynolds, you surprise me each day with your progress."

"Thank you. The subject makes it easy."

How does flattery fit into the uncivilized state? Linnet scoffed. It is no natural accommodation of the soul!

"You are without equal." Dominique's eyes followed every line and curve of the portrait of her darling Linnet.

"My lady flatters me," he boasted to Linnet with his usual social grace. "But, do tell me Lady De'Paul, when will you allow me to discern the complexities of your complexion on canvas? I am ever so intrigued. Your pallor pales even the glow of the moon."

"Monsieur," Dominique smiled. "It is I who am flattered. But I am afraid that only my fair Linnet will have the joy of your brush. We are set to travel immediately after you are done."

"Oh." His hope was crestfallen. "Where to?"

"The arrangements are still being finalized. My condition hampers me from securing the details of our affairs, and with Linnet sitting for you this past week, I fear I have allowed a good many things to lapse in her absence. I do so depend upon her abilities." She cast a warm smile on her consort and began to meander through the studio. "My holdings in Brazil need attention. I believe we will be travelling there by the rise of the next full moon." She stopped and turned to the man. "Do you think you will have completed the painting by then?"

“Of course,” he offered as he crossed the gulf between them. “More than enough time. Though, I feel it is a grave injustice to the world that I will not have the chance to immortalize such a raving beauty as yourself.”

Dominique slightly curtsyed, feigning an embarrassed blush.

“At least allow me to paint you from my memory,” urged the Artist.

“As long as it is of your memory and not some creature that walks the earth, then let it be so.”

Master Reynolds chuckled. “You are too fetching a woman to be so innocuous to your glamour. But, if my memory is all that there is to serve, then it will have to be enough.”

“I am sure that it will.”

A natural silence descended upon them. Reynolds took the opportunity to take his leave and wash up for the evening, saying he would find Frances to escort them out. The air of pretense in the room vanished with the master painter and the ladies fell casually into each other’s comfort.

“So you are set on São Paulo then?” Linnet moved slowly toward her mistress.

“Yes,” the enigmatic woman said, resolute. “I think it best considering all the mess Peter Plogojowitz had caused. It’s turned into quite the frenzy with Arnud, you know.” She raised her eyebrows, thoughtfully, and turned toward Joshua’s table. “Europe is steadily declining and I fear another war is on the horizon. There is nothing more tedious than another war.” She picked up an unused brush and placed it within a jar that held many other implements of the artist’s craft. “There also has been no reply from Isabela. I fear the worse.”

Dominique moved to the window as something caught her eye beyond the tempered glass. Linnet was confused by her mistress’s worry over the Habsburg incident. It had all happened decades before Linnet’s own birth, yet the former Vam Pÿr was still on edge about it. In the early days of their relationship Dominique went so far as to make Linnet read the 1732 Chief Medical Examiner’s Report, *Visum et Repertum*, and Dom Augustine Calmet’s 1746 *Treatise on Vampires and Revenants*. Her strained voice still stained her ears.

“It is important for you to know for yourself,” she told Linnet at her house off Rue Abel. “How the world is shaping us into being. We must be careful. You can not risk exposing what I am going to share with you to others. It is for you and you alone. There are elements at large that would destroy everything if our existence came to light.”

Dominique explained that it was the Dalam Kha’Shiya J’in that created the debacle in East Prussia and the Habsburg Monarchy when they tried to reinstate the slave trade. They failed, of course, which was why events had lit a candle to the nocturnal habits of creatures like Linnet’s Dark Mistress. The incident sparked fear in the common folk. It became lore. Recent German poetics from Ossenfelder and Burger capitalized off this burgeoning spark and reclaimed a foothold in people’s minds in the form of macabre literature.

The former blood slave often criticized the works of these writers. Yet, while managing the sale of some properties a few months ago Linnet found financial documents that allied the Vam Pÿr as a secret contributor to the publication of Gottfried’s Lenore. *If Dominique were truly so vexed by public opinion and afraid of its backlash, then why would she seek to have Gottfried’s work published? His quaint vampire tale had mass appeal. Why not just kill him and be done with it?*

Linnet watched the woman peering out of the window. There was obviously something that she was keeping from her. Though, the young maid could scarcely find a reason to ask. Her Lady’s habits and secrets were her own vessels to keep. Since she had joined her Dark Mistress’s entourage nothing had been what it had seemed and Linnet figured that nothing ever would. It was like looking at the world anew. “I was hoping we might venture to Asia this time.”

“No,” Dominique said, peering out of the thick ripples of glass. “Emperor Kangxi said he’d have my head if I ever stepped foot in China again.” She turned and smiled at her consort. “I have grown rather fond of my hat collection.”

“But, that was nearly a hundred years ago...”

“The memory of an imperial decree is very long, my dear...and besides,” she said pausing, indicating outside of the window with a nod of her head, “I believe we have more pressing company that must first be attended to.”

Linnet pulled alongside Dominique and gazed out of the spiral pane

of glass to the street below. Standing under the frail wax-and-oil-light of a street lamp stood a tall Moorish fellow. He was as black as the night itself and offset the conservative, light beige suit he wore. Thick grooved scars decorated his face. He was striking under the canopy of stars.

Dominique gazed down too. Not at the tall African gentleman who looked up at them in the window, but to the swinging curve of Linnet's tempting flesh and the protruding vein that bulged in the bend of her neck. The woman's visceral warmth caressed the cold flesh of the Vam Pÿr's face. It excited the parasite within. The thing shimmered throughout Dominique's limbs as the copper scent of Linnet's blood coursed like a racing river through her body.



Just then, the front door to the secure penthouse burst wide open and an explosion of noise, jocularly, and laughter intruded upon the quiet memories of the eighth daughter to the House of Pevensey. Lin turned around and saw Z leading a ragtag collection of oddly dressed freaks through the house. The obtruding vamp drank from an opened bottle of Vodka, held tightly in her left hand as she escorted the pack toward the accessible entrance to the terrace.

The ruckus ceased in snickering hurdles as Z stopped short, her gaze falling all over Lin's frame in the opened doorway. The men behind the punk fell into her lanky stance and the women, oblivious, stepped on the heels of the men. None of them, saved for the peacock-dressed Mexican, had Lin met before. They all gawked at the splendid absence of clothing with which the pale, statuesque woman greeted them. Lin fused her sudden anger to her Jadaraa Soo and bid the veiny creature to recede deeper under her flesh.

High above the throttle and choke of the city of lost angels, alit like a pale tower jutting from the smog on the balcony, Lin slowly collected the sheer, white robe about her waist with unabashed dignity. Z looked up Lin's tattoo-clad body with heavy eyes, drinking the voluptuous vamp in as she pulled a steady swig from the clear glass Vodka bottle. Lin felt exposed. Raw. Her thin robe did little to conceal that which had already been seen.

"Hi honey," the inebriated vampire said. "I'm home."



PART TWO:

Bloodlines & Serenades



Two paths lie in front of man.
Pondering on them, the wise man chooses
the path of joy; the fool takes the path of pleasure.

-The Upanishads



1774. London, England.

“The story my grandfather’s father told him was passed down from all those who had gone before. Many generations remembered so that we would never forget *why* we fight.

The sun was low in the sky as the three hunters, Aadii, Bala, and Suma returned home with a gazelle on their backs. As the sun dipped below the treetops, the hunters reached a part of the Savannah where the grasses grew tall. Aadii took the gazelle from Bala, who had been shouldering the kill. They laughed and spoke of the hunt, of their wives and children, of stories their elders spoke, as they waded through the towering grass toward the Marula trees on the far side. The three hunters thought to camp and build a fire under the protection of the trees and return to the village the following morning. But as they neared the outlying grove, wild beasts did set upon them.

A flash of white. The rustling of movement. A beast leapt from one of the Marula trees and landed on Bala who was behind the others. He was taken under. The grass came alive with his screams as Suma ran toward him. Even as his death cries filled the dawning night, the edge of the tall grass began to flap in the direction of Aadii. He cried out for Suma to come help him. He had given Bala his spear when he had taken the burden of the gazelle. Bala’s cries grew faint. There was little Suma could do. So he turned to help his friend. Aadii dropped the gazelle, thinking that whatever it was attacking them would go for the fresh meat instead of him. But it did not.

Suma ran toward Aadii, shrieking to scare the unseen animal as the bending sedge revealed its path. He threw one of his spears, hoping for a good clean hit. He missed and the beast kept coming. As Suma reached Aadii he brought up his last spear, but the beast was faster and ripped Aadii from the sea of green spraying the young man’s blood across Suma’s face. When the hunter opened his eyes...there was quiet. Both of his friends were gone and the grass swayed ever so gently in a light, cool breeze.

Suma knew the beasts were still there. He could not run, for if he did, he might run straight into them. He had to wait for them to make their move. The beasts were in no hurry to reveal themselves and time passed. They were like no other animal the hunters had faced before. There was a savage cunning in their attack. Each advance brought their prey closer to them, instead of driving it away. Suma was frightened. He had just lost two brothers of the tribe in the blink of an eye and had scarcely seen a thing. He began sweating despite the coolness of the night air. He gripped the

thin wooden shaft of his spear tighter as his eyes swept across the tops of the tranquil grass. Any second now they would make their move and he would know the face of death.

Again, it was sudden. One after the other bound from their cover toward him. In the light of the rising moon, as they glided through the air, he could now see his attackers as clear as day. Their bodies shone with a white luminescence. Their long arms reached out toward him, not like an animal, but like a man. Their thick legs were tucked up to their chests, ready to pounce. Their bodies were hairless and each had a mane of long black hair that flowed out from the tops of their heads. They roared...and it thundered as if the heavens itself had cracked. Suma had never seen men like these before, though he had heard tales of them. Far to the east where the forest still remained thick against the encroaching desert, a tribe of celestial beings was said to reside. They were known as Malaika. But Suma had never heard tales of how the Malaika hunted men.

When the beasts sprang from the brush, giving away their locations and the location they intended to be, Suma took off in the opposite direction away from them. He was the fastest runner of the three hunters and had gained a good distance from the beasts by the time they landed and began pursuit. But, alas, Suma was not as fast as the Malaika. They soon gained on him. He turned 'round just as one of them leapt at him. He brought his spear up and impaled the beast through the belly as it landed on top of him. Both he and the injured Malaika went rolling through the grass, tumbling over one another. Suma did not waste the advantage he had gained and quickly got to his feet and continued to run. He ran as fast as he could. He called on all the gods to carry him, to give him the legs of a cheetah and protect him from the white angels. When he reached the edge of the grasslands he looked back. The other Malaika had broken chase. Perhaps to take care of their injured brother or perhaps because they had enough food from their hunt, or perhaps because they had made the point that they wanted to make. Whatever the reason, Suma ran.

He ran all of the way back to the village and told everyone what he had seen and what had happened. Our elders took counsel with Suma and it was agreed. We would no longer hunt on the lands past the sea of grass. There were good grounds to the south and in the plains over the western mountain. We would hunt in those places more and perhaps the Malaika would leave us in peace as they had done until then. But it was not to be. Soon, the Malaika began raiding our villages and stealing our loved ones, taking them into the dark night never to be seen again."

Nsia Bah leaned against the high back of the chair pausing in his

tale to give his empty teacup to Laurel, the servant girl, and to take stock of his audience, the Vam Pÿr Dominique De'Paul and her consort, Linnet Pangbourn. Linnet asked him how he had come to be a warrior in his tribe, and so the tale unfurled under the candlelight and hospitality of the Lady De'Paul. He was sure that Dominique already knew this story. She had been silent during their time together, letting her consort navigate the conversation. Perhaps his great grandfather, Musa Bah, told it to her, or she had heard it from some other source. Nsia had no doubt that she knew a great deal about his people and the beasts of which his tale told. Her countenance spoke of a deeper wisdom. Her eyes were calculating and he did not like it when she looked at him. None the less, he was delighted to see that the young maid, Linnet, was quite taken by the tale and enjoyed his telling of it.

“For many generations,” Nsia concluded, “we were preyed upon by the Malaika at night and they became to be called the Kula Malaika, Shaytan Khalid. Which in your tongue translates as cannibal angel, devil immortal.” He turned to the silent and composed Vam Pÿr and nodded. “You know them as Omjadda, others to the North and East have called them Annunaki.”

“That is correct,” Dominique affirmed, finally breaking her lengthy quiet.

“They are our waking nightmare.” Nsia said, looking down. “So the responsibility fell to my family and the family of four others to stay behind and protect the village from the Kula Malaika so that our people could cross the mountain to live safely within the center of the great mother. For over nine hundred generations we have defended ourselves and protected all that we love from these beasts that have hunted us, stolen our women, and sought to disrupt the evolution of Man.”

“Suma was your ancestor,” Linnet said realizing the breadth of the man's lineage.

Nsia Bah nodded his head. “Yes.”

“Can I offer you another cup of tea?”

Linnet signaled Laurel to come remove her cup, uneaten biscuits, spoon, and saucer. The tall, slender African, sharply dressed in a beige suit cut in the style of the Colonies, declined a second cup of the lady's hospitality.

“Then do please tell me Mr. Bah,” inquired Linnet, speaking in a

cordial tone, sitting up on the haunches of her gown, “how again you came to be putting a knife to my throat?”

It had happened earlier that night...