

dawn harshaw

Vampire
KITTEN



Vampire Kitten

DAWN HARSHAW

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Vampire
Kitten

Empathy is the ability to feel as one. The outpouring Love broadens your identity and expands who you are, restoring the subject of your Love to its rightful place in your heart.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"Oh no," Elise put her hands on the cage. "What has he done to you?"

The kitten inside meowed pleadingly. Decay marred deep into its flesh, and fur has fallen off around the patches of diseased skin.

Elise wanted to cradle and console the kitten, but a sense of caution overruled the protective impulse. Vampires had great natural resistance to disease, yet it was drilled into her to stay away from decaying flesh - especially if it still moved.

She examined the large table upon which the small cage stood: rusty knives and dirty spoons, bottles, vials, and several disemboweled rat corpses.

So, Bron, this is what you do in your spare time... She poked one of the rat cadavers with a stick. Thankfully, it remained motionless.

They all autopsied rats in class - after all, knowledge of anatomy was important for young vampires - but all the splattered blood suggested the rats were still alive during the dissection. Elise entertained the thought that Bron was actually a budding genius dedicated to learning and scientific exploration, but the crude, jagged nature of the cuts suggested torture as a motive. *You're not just a fat bully, but also a deranged psycho.*

A cockroach ran across the table. The kitten didn't stop meowing.

A grey, metallic canister stood apart from the other bottles and containers; Elise looked for a not-too-dirty piece of cloth and grabbed the canister with it. *BIOHAZARD. Experimental agent 2711, Midflower. Handle with EXTREME CAUTION!* She put it back down as soon as she read the markings.

"Did you steal it from your father? You sure as hell didn't stumble upon it by exploring the outer city," she mumbled aloud.

The vampire enclave they all belonged to was established within an abandoned, but not completely ruined district of a pre-apocalyptic megalopolis. The clans of Starfire City took care of their young, but those born human held lesser status, so they often adventured unsupervised beyond enclave territory.

The kitten's desperate meowing demanded attention.

"What should I do with you, hmm?" Elise said affectionately.

The obvious option, and probably the most merciful, would have been to end the kitten's suffering outright - as fast and clean as possible. The thought made her stomach turn, and she couldn't bring herself to do it. *Besides, what if he finds out it was me?*

Elise examined several knives and grabbed one that wasn't rusted or damaged. *This'll do.* She spotted a lighter, picked it up, and tested if it works. *Long flame, excellent!* She steadily moved the knife back and forth over the flame. *I hope it's just regular nasty stuff he poked around with and none of that biohazard stuff.*

She held out her open palm over the cage... She took a deep breath, grit her teeth, and slid the knife's edge across it. Blood bubbled from the wide gash and dripped down into the cage.

That's it... Elise clenched her wounded fist to make it pour. *Drink up.*

The kitten eagerly licked the blood as it ran down its nose and whiskers, and started lapping up from the puddle that formed on the bottom of the cage.

Of course he's hungry; Bron didn't even think to feed him.

Despite Elise clenching her fist, the gush of blood soon slowed to a trickle. *It's healing already.* She tore off a piece of cloth and wrapped it around her hand.

The kitten licked the bottom of the cage clean and waited contently.

Elise inspected the animal: the patches of decaying flesh had a coarse, orangish film formed on top. The eye-whites began turning red, but the kitten's demeanor remained calm. *You poor thing. I hope my blood gives you strength to battle whatever disease he inflicted upon you.*

Elise deliberated whether to set the kitten free: *If Bron figures out it was me who found his hideout and ruined his experiment-slash-torture... Ah, so what. I don't care.*

She was about to open the cage when she heard noise from outside the window.

No! He can't be back already!

Elise quickly scanned the room for potential hiding places: plenty of trash, but nothing big enough to reliably hide behind. One big broken window, two doorways - one of which was completely blocked.

Climbing up those ancient vehicles piled up on the street was easy for Elise, but not so easy for Bron due to his weight.

With only seconds to spare, Elise ducked through the unused, half-barricaded doorway. *A few years ago, crawling through even the most cramped of places would have been effortless.* Rats scurried out, and she tried not to breathe too much of the dust in.

When Bron finally scaled the ledge, huffing, the kitten began to hiss.

"What? You missed me? I brought some new toys for you."

Elise watched silently while Bron retrieved another grey canister from his backpack and placed it on the table.

"Maybe you'll like this more- Hey, what's that?" He leaned closer to the cage and the kitten bristled up. "Red eyes! That's a neat side-effect!"

Bron opened the cage and reached inside. The kitten hissed and clawed, but he managed to grab it while incurring only a few scratches. "Feisty, aren't ya? Don't worry, this won't hurt. Well, not as much to kill you outright..."

He struggled to open the canister with one hand while holding the kitten in the other. His juggling act failed when, just for a moment, he inadvertently lifted the kitten too close to his face.

The kitten attacked with the strength of a vampire and the ferocity of a tiger. By the time the pain registered in Bron's brain and instructed his hand to drop the savage beast, half his face has been turned into finely minced meat. *Too bad it'll heal.*

The canister fell from his hand, and after a few attempts at letting go, the kitten ended up flying against the wall.

Bron scampered for the exit screaming "Mother! Mo-ooooom!"

A wicked grin snuck up on Elise's face almost by itself, and it only broadened when she saw the kitten shrug off the blow and charge after its tormentor. A thick, grey mass started leaking from the container - a

pungent odor. Elise heard vengeful hissing mixed with inarticulate yells and the sound of boots bouncing off metallic boxes.

Without his crew to back him up, he isn't tough at all... I almost feel silly for putting up with all his bullying. Elise crawled back through the half-barricaded door and dusted off her clothes.

If I tell, the others will laugh and the elders will surely punish him. But, they'll reprimand me for sneaking out and vampirifying the kitten - I guess that's not their preferred solution to the rat problem.

Elise carefully stepped over the spilt liquid. She climbed out the window and started making her way down.

Maybe I should keep my mouth shut and blackmail Bron instead, so he stops bullying everyone... but I guess that's just wishful thinking.

On the other hand - she grinned again and looked up to the starry sky - it'd be fun to watch him explain to his father how those canisters went missing... Enclave security and all.

There are obvious things we're addicted to: food, air, water. More insidious are addictions to feelings, people, or states of mind.

Perhaps most common is the addiction to being oneself, which results in resistance to change and clinging to the ego. On the other end of the spectrum we find those who refuse to Love themselves enough, and seek other addictions to fill the void.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"Next on today's agenda is..." Lady Cellie shuffled the pages around until she found the right one: "The social implications of demon blood consumption." She put the page back down. "What shall we do with the junkies, gentlemen?"

The three vampire clan leaders at the table - two lords and a lady - pondered the problem in silence. Their aides stood behind them, not speaking unless spoken to.

Snow was falling outside.

The youthful-looking Lord Aram of the Bloodthorn clan cleared his throat. "Err... nothing?"

"What do you mean, 'nothing'?" Cellie asked, slightly annoyed.

Lord Theodore of Stoneheart raised a hand. "Aram is right. Doing nothing is least costly, and we should consider this option, even if only as a baseline to judge other potential solutions by." His beard accentuated the projected air of wisdom.

Cellie nodded. "I see..."

"Yeah, that's what I meant. Thanks, Theo."

"It's 'Lord Theodore' for you."

The silence enveloping them lasted several minutes.

Carved into a mountainside high above everything else, castle Aluin endured frequent blizzards and several apocalypses. Over the centuries it became known as the place where vampire officials journeyed to settle disputes of the highest order - or turn them into bloodbaths.

"All right," Cellie said. "Here's how I see it. If we don't do anything, the cycle of rising supply leading to increased demand will continue. We can expect market saturation at best, or supply wars at worst... Except, is that really the worst? What about unforeseen side-effects? Will frequent demon blood consumption lead to decreased resistance to possession? Or what if a demonic entity catches on, and starts inducing specific mutations in possessed thralls for the express purpose of harming vampires consuming their blood?"

"Chilling thoughts," Aram remarked. "It seems there's a biowarfare angle to everything we discuss nowadays."

"Well, it's just common sense," Cellie said.

Theodore snorted. "Hah! Not so common, I'm afraid. If such concerns were common, we wouldn't have a junkie problem in the first place."

"Why don't I find that comforting..."

"You take on too much responsibility," Theodore said. "You're the leader of the Helldare clan - not their Mother."

Aram waved dismissively. "Enough with the flirting or whatever the two of you are doing, and let's consider solutions, shall we? What about a coordinated ban across our clans?"

"I like bans," Theodore replied. "They're simple, direct, and project a sense of purpose and moral unambiguity. They make me look like the good leader which I am. But, I also like low-cost efficiency, and a ban may or may not belong to this category of counter-measures."

"No doubt an efficient ban would solve our problems," Aram said.

Cellie eyed Aram, uncertain how to interpret his words. "I'm not sure if you're being sarcastic or just naive. An effective ban is rarely efficient in terms of cost. If we suppress the supply, demand might go up, and that can even be counter-effective in the longer term."

Aram smiled. "It's been a while since anyone called me naive. I'll attribute it to my youthful charm and take it as a compliment."

Cellie rolled her eyes.

"Look at the other cons," Theodore said. "A ban sends a strong message, but the idiots guzzling demon blood are not likely to listen to reason, now are they? We would polarize our clansmen on the issue and weaken our own leadership position - we have enough enemies as it is."

"You're advocating something other than an 'iron fist' approach? I never thought I'd live to see the day!" Aram exclaimed.

"Don't insult my intelligence. While we're at it cut the flippancy too, will you? At this rate we'll never finish. Why don't you suggest a viable solution for a change?"

It took a few seconds for Aram's face to change to serious. "Very well. How about this? At the core of the problem is our lack of information: we don't know what effects the blood of various demons have, either in the short or the long term. If we had more information, we would know if a ban is necessary and within what limits. If it is, with popular opinion on our side, we'd have better success enforcing the ban. Even the polarizing effect wouldn't be entirely unwelcome, since it would serve to cull the weakest from our ranks."

Aram looked to Cellie, and then he looked to Theodore. "My suggestion is that we focus on research and resource gathering, and schedule another meeting, say, six months from now. We can discuss a more extensive solution then."

Cellie waited for Theodore to reply first.

He stroked his beard and took his time. "What you said makes sense for a change... We do need more information before committing to a long-term solution."

"I guess it's a question of 'how', then," Cellie said. "Who knows, we might even find ways to improve blood quality or preservation methods. Do any of you have the means for such extensive research?"

Aram shook his head.

"No," Theodore said.

"Perhaps we can get creative," Cellie said. "One of my specialists, Merryn, is helping the zombies at the Oakheart facility with their exorcism troubles. They have the resources we need, and my specialist has a tentatively amicable relationship with them. I propose we approach with an offer of formal alliance."

"Not a bad idea," Theodore shrugged. "They're probably researching the effects of demon blood already. At what cost, though? What are we prepared to offer in return?"

"The brains of our fallen enemies? They always want brains for that Serum of theirs. Grunts for protection, perhaps?" Cellie asked.

Aram's lips soured. "I'm not comfortable with that. We can always trade the brains at market value, and I don't have muscle to spare."

"Test subjects?" Theodore suggested. "We ship the heavy junkies for experimentation?"

Cellie's initially horrified expression faded as her mind rationalized the necessities. "Hmm... if we want proper research, we will need vampire test subjects, both healthy and beyond saving. We'll have to offer compensation to volunteers."

Aram put his palms on the table and raised himself slightly. "I propose a tax!"

Cellie heaved a sigh. "Don't we have enough taxes?"

"No, you misunderstand. Instead of banning demon blood, we should tax import by a percentage of the goods! Say, forty percent? Part of it could go to research, part of it as payment to Oakheart, and part of it as compensation to volunteers."

"Quite a fountain of insight, aren't you?" Theodore remarked dryly. "I disagree with the last part: we can't offer demon blood as compensation for volunteering. It would taint the testing pool and send a mixed message. We'll have to use regular blood for that."

Cellie looked to Aram, then to Theodore. "Are we in agreement on the subject of demon blood? We tax demon blood import and propose an alliance to Oakheart?"

"Aye."

"Aye."

The whistling wind changed to a higher pitch, and whipped the snow falling outside into a minor snowstorm.

"Excellent. Issue resolved, for now." Cellie scribbled something on a paper, stacked the pages in front of her, and handed them off to her aide behind her. "Next on the agenda is..."

Cherish your friends, for they are part of you and you are part of them.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Elise welcomed the rising sun. She liked the mild pain of sunlight on her skin - a prickling sensation. The deterioration of damaged tissue wasn't rapid enough to overcome her regenerative ability.

It's a nice view.

Tall buildings overgrown with vegetation sprawled as far as the eye could see. The rays of the sun penetrated the life below, altering the way it breathed: hidden dangers and possibilities of the night became an overtness which nurtured steady growth.

Looking down, the height was just right for a hideout. Twelve floors put enough distance against the animals and monsters below - *and demon blood junkies, lately* - but the location was innocuous enough not to attract vampires seeking a good vantage point.

When the prickling excitement faded down to annoyance, Elise stepped away from the opening in the wall and walked to the table stacked with books, tools and technological gadgets.

Most vampires disliked the annoying uselessness of day; they spent a third of it sleeping and the remainder in restlessness and irritation. Elise didn't mind, since she kept herself busy by reading tech manuals and reexamining previously scouted locations. Her innate infravision was good enough for orientation and avoiding danger, but not good enough for inspecting the minutiae of ancient devices.

Maybe I'll actually find something of value soon.

Tools made of sturdy metals able to withstand vampire strength were in-demand - especially those repurposable as weapons - and could be bartered for human blood or other items. Chemicals and medical supplies were also worth scavenging for. Yet, it was the techno-gadgets which held Elise's attention and moved her imagination.

Vampire caravans occasionally visited known zombie facilities for trade. They circulated a bounty list, detailing which facility was willing to

pay how much for what thing in which condition. Many items on the list were bulky machines requiring well-coordinated groups for recovery and transport. Some of these mythic items were worth enough to guarantee a lifetime supply of blood - or an equivalent value in Serum. To cater to demonic entities, contractually binding amounts of worship - alternatively, the number of humans turned over - were offered as bounties for relics high up on the list.

Ancient comm devices were Elise's favorite things to scavenge for: they were small, with shiny surfaces, and came in many colors and shapes. *None of the old texts say how to make them work. Can you imagine life with tech-enabling magic always on by default? Crazy.* She liked the way they fit in her hand, and hoped to have just as many friends one day as shiny devices in her collection. *Yeah, right.*

The shush of stealthy steps - an awareness more than a sound - interrupted her reverie. It came from the direction of the stairway. *Connor! It's gotta be him!*

The shush slowly drew nearer, occasionally fading from her senses, until it finally stopped at the doorway.

"Could this be? Did I finally get the drop on the elusive Elise?"

Elise turned around. "Ah, you startled me!"

Before her stood a young man with thin crimson rings in otherwise dark green eyes. "Liar," he laughed.

Elise smiled warmly. "You are getting better, though."

"Thanks," he grinned. "Your sneakiness is rubbing off on me."

Slightly older than Elise, his muscles and stature were that of a healthy adult male, unstarved of blood or food. His posture, however, was that of a boy, and his movements were restrained by a hint of clumsiness - typical for one who has grown too fast. His expressions held a straightforward sincerity.

"Connor, what happened to you?" She stepped closer and raised a hand to his face.

Connor stepped back. "Nothing." He ran two fingers over his left cheek, apparently becoming aware of a narrow gash adorning it.

"You got beaten up again?"

Connor remained silent, his mouth twisting a little.

"Was it Bron?"

"No."

"But it was one of his cohorts?"

"...yes," he answered reluctantly.

"You're too kindhearted to stand up for yourself, and too proud to run away. Stuck halfway, you let yourself become a punching bag."

"Maybe." He cast his eyes down.

"You should stand up for yourself."

Elise realized she might have gone too far as soon as the words slipped out. Her heart agreed with the sentiment, but she knew too well that vampire resilience enabled pranks to be that much crueler and beatings that much more excruciating. Although frowned upon, certain forms of torture were also common.

It might have also been hypocritical of her to say, since she dealt with conflict using sharp wit, stealth, or speed, but rarely combat. Vampire egoism and machismo were especially tough on boys, creating bullying hierarchies that persisted and solidified into power structures in adulthood. One of the things she liked about Connor was that he wasn't like that.

"Yeah..." Connor uttered, breathing faintly.

Should I say sorry? Apologize for piling on his shame? Ugh, that sounds bad... Elise, keep your mouth shut instead of dispensing dubious advice!

"Come here," Elise said before the silence turned awkward. "Let me see that wound."

"It'll heal."

"No, it would healed have by now then. I'm guessing you got whacked by a wooden board or somesuch?" Wood and similar living materials were known to inhibit vampire regeneration.

Connor shrugged.

Elise grabbed a needle-shaped metallic object from the table, and aptly proceeded to pick out splinters from Connor's abraded face. He endured the ordeal stoically.

"There." She gave him a playful slap on the other cheek. "It's already starting to heal."

"Thanks."

"Anyway," Elise said cheerfully, "would it dispel your gloom if you knew Bron looked much worse a few days ago?"

"Oh?" Connor looked up. "How come?"

"Scar pretty much destroyed him and Bron ran away crying for his late mother."

Elise observed Connor's reaction; it seemed to her like he reached for his power within, but pulled back.

After a few seconds of silence, Connor finally grinned with a vengeful glint in his eyes. "He deserved it! Who is this Scar? Do I know him?"

"I don't think so. Scar is a kitten."

"Oh." Connor's grin faded. "So it was just a scratch, then? Big deal. I have to say I'm a bit disappointed... By the way, how do you know this?"

"I kinda followed him to his hideout. But Scar's no ord-"

"You did what?!" Connor interrupted. "You're crazy."

"Yeah, yeah." Elise hopped up to sit on the table. "Do you want to hear the story or what?"

Connor sighed. "Of course." He sat beside her.

"I found a bunch of vivisected rat corpses and a kitten locked in a cage. Apparently, Bron was torturing them using some kind of nasty chemical from the zombies."

"That's bad," Connor pondered. "I'm guessing he stole it from his father? Rumor has it the Reach Initiative has a stockpile of such stuff. Did you report it to the elders?"

That's what I thought!

Elise shook her head. "...and this poor kitten was marred by the stuff, his skin missing in patches, so I fed him my blood and he got better."

Connor opened his mouth to reply, but went for a facepalm instead. "Now I know why you didn't report him. They really don't like to hear about vampirified pests either."

"Scar is not a pest, okay? When Bron came back, I hid, and Scar mauled his face off. It was not just a scratch!"

Connor sighed in relief. "I believe you, but I don't think it took him long to regen." He ruffled her hair. "I'm just glad you're okay."

Ever since childhood, Connor has been her only true friend. *Others are petty and selfish and shallow.* Connor was born a vampire, but his parents died soon after, leaving him orphaned too. He didn't think it was below his station to be friends with a turned girl.

"Now that you mention it, I think I saw some cats on the way here. If I didn't know any better, I'd say one of them might have been following me. I suspect it could be a demonic spy."

"Hah," Elise snarled, "those are just stories to scare children with, don't tell me you believe them!"

"Why not? We have all seen demonic animals."

"Yeah, but they grow monstrous and then they die. The ones that live longer do so because of stuff the ancients did, and they're not really demonic."

"But you can tell the difference, right?" Connor asked. "The possessed ones have stares which pierce your soul."

"Well, maybe..."

"Several times I have seen small animals with the same stare. They move through the ruins like a vampire would, and they notice things they shouldn't be able to. Logic dictates there must be demonic entities out there who learned better control."

"Have you been sipping demon blood lately?" Elise smirked. "You're just imagining things."

Connor frowned. "Maybe. Maybe not."

Elise shrugged. "Anyway, Scar's no demonic spy. He was such a feisty bundle of decay and claws. Had a big gash right across the eye, see?" Elise marked it on her own face. "I hope he survived."

"Hence you named it 'Scar'."

Elise nodded, grinning.

The sun continued its ascent towards the zenith, elevating the rhythm for the life it enabled.

"By the way, I heard you got assigned to raid detail," Connor said. "Congratulations! That is what you wanted, right?"

"Yes. I'm hoping for scavenging raids rather than military ones."

"I heard the Reach Initiative is pushing for a major assault... I guess the affluence of EnrRrei's oasis isn't just a rumor."

"I doubt their ambitions are sensible. I could be sent on a scouting mission, though."

"If I were you, I wouldn't wanna get stuck treading endless dunes under the desert sun. They say prolonged exposure peels your skin off in layers until the exposed flesh starts oozing blood, but then it takes a while until you die of exsanguination."

"Eh, you can't scare me off. What about you? Did you get assigned to administration?"

"Not yet, but Mother Vheila says she has put in a good word for me."

"I don't trust that woman. She just wants you to stay with the Mothers, since you're a hard worker and do as you're told. I heard that Lady Cellie is always on the lookout for good assistants. Few have the necessary patience and attention to detail, and you're also loyal to a fault; I can't think of anyone better suited for the job. If she offers you probation, I'm sure you will prove yourself."

"Thanks. I'll ask around."

"Don't worry," she bumped his shoulder, encouraging. "It will pan out."

They quietly pondered their promising future. Although the seemingly cruel world sought to knock them down at every step, they were now officially adults of the Helldare clan. They strongly believed in skipping over the pitfalls of fate to create their own destinies.

The sun was shining brighter than before. The familiar lethargy slowly kicked in, signaling the need for rest.

"Hey," Connor broke the silence, "look."

"What?"

"There's the creature which has been following me."

Elise looked up, and saw a small animal with the aura of a tiger standing in the doorway. It strolled into the room like it owned the place.

"Scar!" Elise hopped down from the table. "You survived!"

Connor raised an arm to hold her back. "Careful, it looks diseased. Could be hostile."

The kitten looked directly at Connor, hissed menacingly, and began licking its paw a second later.

"Hostile? Does he also look like a demonic spy?" She mocked.

"Fine," Connor lowered his arm, "just don't let it bite you."

Elise briskly ran to the kitten and lifted it up into her arms.

The kitten began purring in response. Its fur, though discolored in places, felt as smooth as it was shiny. The change in physiology and the healthy fur made the kitten seem thrice as big as it was before, nevertheless, to Elise it remained a fragile being to be protected.

"Are you sure 'Scar' is a fitting name for a girl cat?"

"What?" Elise grabbed the kitten under its forelegs and raised it higher. "Oh."

Connor snickered.

The kitten settled in her arms once again. Elise looked into its red eyes, and saw her own mirrored. Beaming, she smiled with satisfaction.

"Her name," she said with emphasis, "is Scarlet."

Due to a sense of finality and the inability of most to see beyond it, death is the object of much fear. However, losing sight of yourself is worse than death, and there are oh-so-many ways to do it. Don't put off being who you want to be!

- Dreamer's Handbook

With a powerful strike, Jor tore through the fence and smashed the head off the unfortunate zombie who happened to be standing on the other side.

The fence barely hindered Jor's strike. Obviously, its purpose was not to keep intruders out, but to keep the undead from wandering away. The zombie's head wasn't just severed; the force caused the fleshy bone fragments below the neck to explode and the detached skull to splatter flat on the ground.

Jor stepped over the ruined barrier with zombie miasma dripping from his hand. More of the idle undead noticed his presence.

'Orummagh is the sun of my existence. I surrender to Him completely.'

Jor wasn't quite himself - but he hasn't been himself for a long time, and he knew it. Rage tainted his mind and infused his body.

His legs carried him forward. He couldn't feel them at all - only an icy sensation which rose to meet the burning rage descending into his stomach. The unnatural energies swirled, twisting his guts and making him want to hurl.

'For He is truth. For He is power. For He is salvation!'

Two of the undead staggered into Jor's path: Jor rent into the mid-section of the first zombie, breaking the spine and snapping the body in half. His other hand swiped the head away from the second one.

Bone splinters embedded deep into his hands, but Jor didn't even notice. A mixture of blood and decaying flesh stuck to his arms and chest - the horrible smell made him want to gag even more, but this cleansing reaction was denied to him.

'His strength flows through me and my devotion never falters.'

Jor's sinewy legs carried his overly large torso swiftly and effortlessly, without any input or feedback from his conscious mind. He approached large groups of idle zombies, only to dance away when they noticed him. When the faster ones caught up, he mowed them down using the rage flowing through his huge arms.

He didn't always get the timing right: sometimes his hands moved too fast, taking only a limb or two. Sometimes his hands moved too slow, letting twitchier zombies through. They sunk their teeth into Jor's flesh, hugging it close while clawing at it with all their limbs and protruding bones.

Jor felt no pain from such assault; he grabbed and forcefully tore attackers from his body, who took away bite-sized chunks of his own flesh - a minor annoyance, at most.

'Purge impurities! Cast away heresy! Pave the way with blood!'

Jor's thoughts were fragmented; the only full sentences he was capable of thinking were part of demonic prayers and litanies. His conscious psyche was shackled by years of religious indoctrination, and the demonic entity directly controlled most of his subconscious.

Jor's circle-strafting maneuvers herded the slower zombies together into a horde of mindless, stinking, groaning decay. He was red from his own blood.

'My faith in Orummagh brings His glory to the world!'

Finally, the swirling in his stomach disappeared as all cells in his body succumbed to the corrupting demonic influence. The chaotic, forced growth of his legs accelerated to match the size of his morphing body - gaining stability, but losing the ability to move at all.

The influx of demonic energies was too great for his malignant tumor of a body to handle. The energies seeped outside his physique, reducing visibility and mirroring the red haze Jor felt within his mind.

Zombies piled up around him, the closest of which pressed against and inadvertently shielded Jor. Others tried to get closer by climbing atop of other zombies.

Jor felt nothing but complete and utter rage as the red haze leaked from every pore of his body.

For a moment, as the zombies clawed away at his figure and the channeled rage overpowered, the shackles slowly fell from Jor's mind and one happy thought filled him:

Orummagh sees me! I'm worthy! He sees me!

* * *

"...disposing of it would be a waste; blood of this quality could be worth a small fortune in the right market. The techs will find use for the rest of the body, too."

"Understood, sir. Should we quarantine the area?"

"No need. Notice the irregular blast pattern and the slight charring of the corpses? This was definitely demonic, not biological. A wave of internal pressures blasted the mindless ones from within, followed by a large, fiery explosion originating from the possessed channeler. The energy is still thick; by its texture I'd guess it belongs to one of the elder demons. You - send for a demonology expert!"

"Sir, look! It might still be alive!"

With great effort, Jor opened an eye - only to see another set of eyes staring back at him. They belonged to a man, whose large frame didn't hide the heavy grafts and localized mutations too well.

"I'm security chief of the Midflower. Speak, demon spawn! Who sent you, and what hell did you unleash here?"

Jor tried to move his body, but succeeded only in turning his neck. Yet, his mind was clear and observed his present state with calm detachment.

"Chief, he could be one of the mad ones that wander in from the desert and-"

"Quiet!"

Jor's throat was sore and dry - not to mention half of it ripped out - but he tried to speak nonetheless. The words came out as whispers:

"Orummagh... he's smart... Run, run!.. Others are coming..." He coughed up blood, but even the strength to cough quickly diminished.

"Who's coming? Speak!"

He warned them to spite Orummagh, but whether they'd heed his warning didn't concern him - he wasn't going to spend his last breath trying to explain.

Jor closed his eyes, and with this act, outer sensations stopped reaching him.

His mind retreated, touching up on memories of the many years he and his beloved Connie spent under the demon's shadow. They lived in nomadic camps, all their waking hours spent in work and devotion to the demon. They endured ash storms, starvation, and the burning sun.

At least we had each other - but the thought didn't fill Jor with romantic notions, only with regret. We succumbed to misguided purpose and false hope. If only we had the strength to end our lives... We should have died together with dignity.

As Jor's body has shut down, so did his mind. *I'm going first, love...*

Elementary particles (and all 'matter') are artifacts of the staticness of the observing framework.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Rob eyed the big red button, resisting the temptation to push it. "Hey Pete, look what I found!"

The salvage operation was one of the most promising their crew has been on. So promising, in fact, that Lady Cellie brought in two additional raid squads and oversaw the operation herself.

The demons slaughtered everyone in the underground facility and retreated without taking any of the spoils. They did leave, however, corpses in blue and white labcoats with blood smeared all over.

"What!" Came the muffled reply from the far side of the corridor.

Many of the reinforced doors were already bashed in or broken in half. Naturally, the crew raided the blood depository first - no self-respecting vampires would let all that tasty blood get ruined. *We arrived just in time.* If the clan leaders knew why only facilities such as these had electricity and working technology - they surely did not bother telling Rob.

"Just come over here!" Rob yelled back.

The big red button wasn't the only tempting thing: the control panel occupied the entire length of a wall and the better part of the room. Covering it were switches, dials, small buttons and various indicators, with the words 'BIOPRINTER 3000x' featured prominently above. The panel seemed to have suffered no damage; the room and its massive steel walls remained untarnished, and the only thing indicative of an attack were the torn pages scattered all over the floor.

Rob picked up a few pages which looked like part of an instruction manual and started reading:

'...The insta-clone setting couples the ancient bioprinter with advanced bioscanning technology that we developed in-house, right here at Midflower. Identity and the mythical 'soul' evade us - mid and higher brain functions are not present, and insta-cloning any animal or humanoid

results in a severely afflicted biomass. But, so far such failures proved helpful for deeper research into the Virus; they also provide a refined learning tool for technomages beyond the mere smoothing of perturbations in the fabric of reality. Since electromagnetic and other fields...'

A muscular vampire entered through the doorway. He was toying with a knife in his hand, and like Rob, wore body armor - loot of an earlier salvage expedition. "So? What is it?"

Rob didn't answer, just pointed along the control panel in a sweeping gesture.

Pete raised an eyebrow. "Just tech? No chemicals or usable bio-stuff?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. Grab a few pages and help me out, would you?"

Pete grunted. He started picking up the pages and handing them to Rob, who stacked and sorted them.

Rob's eyes glazed over much of the text as he skimmed it.

'...It is infuriating how much at odds the predominantly subjective nature of technomagic is with hard facts and cause-and-effect chains of scientific methods. We all know that Serum users' brains establish additional pathways below the threshold of reality - that's why there's no coming back from Serum addiction. Despite their hyper-intelligence, the technomages haven't yet condensed that higher understanding into a shared context with objective symbol-sets - they profess a tendency to convey information through the collapsing fields of the very fabric of reality, and there might be the beginnings of a language there. Such fleeting advancements...'

"Hey, did you hear? One of the other squads found survivors!"

Rob looked up. "Really? Friendly or hostile?"

Pete shrugged. "Not hostile. Some of the brainiac zombies locked themselves into a panic room. 'Technomages', they call themselves, and they're promising a lot for a safe transport to another facility. Boss Lady is negotiating with them right now."

"A proper escort job for a change? That's great!"

Pete nodded. "They said something about 'Serum-rationing' and 'tech-enabling trance'... Boss Lady looked concerned. The new girl was there too. Pretty, she shakes her ass like-"

"Pete... Focus. What else?"

Pete was one of the few vamps whose natural libido resembled more that of humans. From among the new recruits, Rob found the fat kid more intriguing. *How come he has such a black crater on his face?*

"Ah yeah, Boss Lady says we don't have much time before the power fails."

"I see. We'd better hurry, then." Rob resumed reading.

'A rumor-theory circulates that technomages are getting dangerously close to the domain of demonic entities, or more precisely, to the mechanism of possessing humanoids from higher realms of awareness. Although this could explain the increase in seemingly random attacks from demonic forces, so far no facts support the shaky assumption.'

Pete attempted to make sense of a few pages, but soon threw them away in frustration. "Gibberish... all of it..." He muttered.

With the corner of his eye, Rob saw Pete fidget - and lift his fist to smash down on the big red button. "NO!"

For several seconds, strong vibrations and a pervasive hum emanated from the walls. Rob's body tensed and his mind emptied itself in anticipation of the unexpected.

When the humming ceased, one of the steel walls slid apart to reveal a small chamber - from which a limping zombie staggered out.

Rob immediately sized up the danger and swung into action: with a powerful right hook, he separated the zombie's jaw from the rest of its body, and followed it up with a shin kick. A twisting of arms - a response to a meager counter-punch - brought the zombie down.

Rob was honest with himself enough to admit: he enjoyed stomping on the jawless skull and watching the partly liquefied brain drip from his boot. *It's the adrenaline high.*

Without much sound, the steel walls closed. Rob took a few steps back, recovering.

"That's it? All it does is open a secret door?" Pete casually smashed the big red button again. "Pff... I hope there's supplies we can use in that chamber."

Rob briefly considered berating his brother-in-arms, but he didn't think it would do much good.

After another round of humming and strong vibrations, the metal wall opened to reveal a second zombie - exactly the same in all features as the first one. With a limp, the zombie stepped out of the chamber.

"Ha, another one!" Pete exclaimed with almost childish delight. "Where did he hide? Move, this one is mine!"

Rob didn't try to stop him; he just rolled his eyes. *This idiot will get me killed sooner or later!*

Pete stepped closer, daring the zombie to attack. "Ha!" The zombie obediently lunged, and Pete backed away. "Take this!" He readied a strong blow that would leave a hole in the decaying torso.

Suddenly, while Pete's swing gathered momentum, the lights blacked out completely.

Damn! Rob strained his eyes.

The lights came back half a second later, however, the interruption was enough to disorient Pete and make him miss his aim. The lights continued to flicker.

The strike severed the zombie's arm, but the other arm drew the brutish vampire in a hostile embrace and made him lose footing. They tumbled onto the control panel, rolling over switches and dials.

Rob couldn't do much, except stand idly by while - after much bone-crunching and flesh-rending - Pete finished the zombie off. When the humming started anew, Rob realized that the two managed to hit the big red button one more time.

Pete stood up, shaking. Claw and bite marks adorned exposed parts of his skin.

The humming, the vibrations, and the rapidly blinking lights set both vampires off-balance and made it seem like they were guinea pigs in some horrible psychological experiment.

The steel walls moved apart once again.

The piercing, but shaky flashes outlined another copy of the same zombie - *no, two!* Rob had difficulty ascertaining the correct number of limbs, but he saw at least two identical heads, five arms, and a number of legs which flailed in the air without supporting the mound of flesh they were attached to.

The monstrous zombie tried to step into the room, but succeeded squeezing through only on the second try. A wailing sound wheezed from one of the mouths.

Rob's subconscious fight-or-flight instinct said 'flight', and his conscious mind agreed. He turned around and fled out the door, yelling to Pete: "Run! Run!" The monster was scary, but despite limited night vision, losing electricity in an underground facility that depended on it was scarier.

The two vampire grunts ran hastily for safer grounds. Rob could hear Pete's heavy breathing from behind.

What neither of them could see was that after making two more steps with its weight-bearing legs, the ghastly creature tripped over the body of one of its predecessors and fell. That was all the unformed brains - even by zombie standards - could handle.

As a tree that falls in the forest, it exhaled the last breath of a life that never was.

Empathy without Love is a mirror with no light to reflect. When the torturous closeness can no longer be counterbalanced by the ego's faint self-love, the ego unhinges.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Bron grinned menacingly. "You got separated from your squad? How unfortunate."

Elise felt she was on one of those ancient rollercoaster rides she read about. After discovering her raid mission was a scavenging one, seeing Bron in the other squad dulled her initial joy. Finding the technomages brought a sense of achievement, but the recent flickering of lights peppered it with danger and adrenaline. To top it all off, it seemed the ride would end with a drop... and she wondered what weightlessness felt like.

"What are you still doing here?" Elise asked, trying not to reveal her disdain. "The lights are failing, move out!" *Does he know? He can't possibly.*

Bron took a step forward while an eerie sound echoed through the hallway. "I came to thank you." Two of his cronies blocked the doorway behind him.

"What? For what?"

Bron kept pushing ahead until he backed Elise against the wall.

"For this," he pointed at his face. A mesh of scars adorned it, some wide, some tiny, all with the same black outline emanating from within the flesh. His phony smile faded.

"I had nothing to do with it," Elise lied. "What happened to you, anyway?"

"Your damned cat happened, that's what! Don't even try to deny it, I saw it following you around!"

Despite the situation, Elise felt a bit of relief. *So he doesn't know I was there. Good.* "So what? Animals like me. I didn't do anything to you."

Bron exuded malice, culminating in a simple shrug. "Maybe you did, maybe you didn't. It doesn't matter. Someone has to pay... and that someone is you."

Resisting the urge to gulp, Elise feigned a frown of annoyance. "Cut the crap and let's get out of here. The scarring makes you handsomer," she added, failing to suppress the sarcasm in her voice.

Bron laughed, and while laughing - Elise noticed a fraction of a second too late - punched her in the stomach.

Her eyes bulged. *That was the wrong thing to say.* The punch pinned her against the wall and pushed all air out of her lungs. Her inner organs shifted around.

"I explicitly asked to be on this raid, y'know? Accidents happen."

When he withdrew his fist, Elise bent over and fell. She kept gasping until, seconds later, she finally managed to draw breath.

One of his squaddies started fidgeting. "That's enough; let's leave."

Bron turned around at once. "Who's the boss here?"

"Uh... You're the boss, boss."

"I'll say when it's enough! Understood?"

"Yes."

"...as long as we understand each other. Give me the canister."

Bron was obediently handed over a container.

"I'd love to stay and play, but as you said, time is running out," he addressed Elise. "I'm going to leave you a present; the finest, most potent demon blood this facility has to offer. It would fetch a nice price on the market, so I hope you appreciate my generosity. What you do with it is up to you." Bron placed the canister on the floor before Elise.

Between breaths, Elise heard the door close and lock, followed by banging sounds. *They're barricading me in.* The clanking ceased shortly and darkness enveloped her; not even the flicker of lights remained.

Great. I should have at least punched him back.

Time passed rashly while Elise considered her options. A corpse in a blue labcoat kept her company and offered silent insight.

She tried to push, punch, pry the door open - nothing helped. *Not even a dent.* The walls proved similarly resilient, and the ventilation shafts were big enough only for an arm to fit through.

I'm locked in. She started sweating as the weight of the situation set in. *Bron will tell them I'm dead. When electricity finally fails, doors will lock shut and my strength won't be enough to open them. Other doors holding back unknown horrors might open. No... No one is coming for me. I have to escape right now or I'll never get out.*

She grabbed the canister and tapped it. *It's not gonna change me. I'm not gonna get addicted.* The word 'bioreplicated' was crossed out in red, and 'source' written above with big letters.

I need the strength. If I don't drink, I'm dead. She had a slight, subconscious curiosity about the taste. *I don't really have a choice.*

Elise opened the canister and took a sip.

The initial taste of blood was familiar, if a bit irony. The peculiar aftertaste gripped her stomach before releasing it again, but the nourishing feeling left her wanting for more.

Elise tested her strength by punching the door once again. *Not a scratch.* Still, she did feel her power rise.

I don't have time to waste, Elise shrugged to herself. *Whatever will come, will come.*

She lifted the canister, took a big breath, and started drinking. It took a few seconds to gulp it all down.

At first, she felt the surging power as if seeping in from outside. Soon, the physical toll of the metamorphosis set in: crackling bones, stretching skin, inner organs growing with differing speeds. Her regenerative powers worked with the surge, not against it.

She continued banging on the door since it started producing results.

The thirst for blood turned into something deeper, something sinister... It cried out for something that wasn't there, and became enraged for not having found it. The thirst flailed and expanded, a headless beast, granting power from lack.

Torn between the hostile reaching forces, Elise's identity dwarfed. Still, a part of her was glad, because she felt it would be beyond soul-rending if a reply came answering the cry.

When the door finally broke, Elise's attention wandered back to the physical world to acknowledge it. It didn't linger long.

The blood tasted like regret. She sensed a remnant presence amongst the forces - filled with pain, sacrifice, and a sense of being lost and absolved. The presence carried an identifier: *Jor*. The raging forces carried away these remnants too... far away.

The thirst remained and Elise cried out, the painful sound reverberating within the halls of her mind as well as the ruined Midflower. The physical cry ended after she ran out of breath, but the one in her mind went on, setting a new baseline for her state of being.

This is madness, an irrelevant thought stated. I'm insane.

Elise no longer had any control of her physical body. She floated in a constricted space, and the input from her senses faded.

Existence was the color of angry, thirsty red.

Bron, you really didn't think this through.

Time-management is part of self-organization, which is part of self-discipline, which is part of self-realization. Your time is precious.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"I told you the monster's coming!" Pete said incredulously. "Why don't you believe me?"

Cellie focused on the recurring sound: a muffled roar piercing the air from the direction of the entrance.

"A big monster with many arms! It hid in a small room and then it attacked us."

He's a grunt, Cellie reminded herself, a brawny soldier. "I believe you." His may be a simple, imaginative world, but that sound surely is trouble.

Pete rolled his eyes, "Finally!"

Rob slapped Pete on the back of his neck. "Watch your tongue with Lady Cellie!"

Zombies scientists experimented all the time, and the idea of a monster with many arms wasn't as far-fetched as it seemed at the first glance. *It could be a remnant of Orummagh's demon army, but if the Midflower engaged in dark experiments, the surviving technomages will have some explaining to do.*

"Sorry, Boss Lady," Pete said apologetically.

Why did Orummagh's forces retreat? Perhaps a threat from EnrRrei elsewhere... or a trap to lure us out? Nah, wiping out a raiding party isn't worth the effort.

Cellie turned to Rob, who was tending his wounds. "What do you think? Have you perhaps seen the monster as well?"

"Aye," Rob said while tightening a bandage with his teeth. "I saw it, although I'm not sure what I've seen. The flickering disoriented me."

Well, that doesn't really help... Whatever it is, I guess we'll just have to kill it when it comes out.

"...but, it came out of some kind of multiplying chamber called the 'Bioprinter'."

"Bioprinter?" Cellie perked up. "Did it have a number?"

"Three thousand-something if I remember well."

"Hmm, it may be on the bounty list..." Cellie muttered, but forced her thoughts to focus on the threat. "You did well to run away. Rest up; we may need to fight and I expect you to be ready."

"Yes, Lady Cellie."

"Yes, Boss Lady."

Cellie hastened her steps in the direction of the entrance. The rumble of threatening sounds became louder and more terrifying, and she pondered whether she had made the right choice.

Mapping out the facility and subsequently closing it up made more sense than caving it in. Since the Midflower held strategic value, establishing a permanent outpost was an alluring opportunity - better than destroying it to prevent vultures and temptations. *Excavating some of the bigger machines may be possible in the future.*

Cellie paused to carefully step over a corpse smeared upon the charred ground. "Oh, for blood's sake!" Some of the goo stuck on her boot.

Naturally, that wasn't the only zombie corpse. Charred bodies littered the entire perimeter of the facility, even beyond the fence. *The air reeks of Orummagh.* Most seemed to have died together in a huge explosion, but there were signs of later struggles as well.

Cellie had great hopes for this raid, and although the spoils were worthwhile - blood, tools, Serum to barter, bio- and chem-stuff whose value remained to be seen - there was political gain in it for her as well. Leading a raid herself showed strength and bravery, while having the information at a proper time proved cunning and resourcefulness. *Results matter.* Gathering new information helped project strength at various meetings and prevented her from getting blindsided. However, the icing on the cake was finding the technomages hiding in the panic room.

She saw people in white and blue lab coats being escorted out. *Finally! I hope letting them gather their things was worth it.* The blood-splatters covering the coats presented quite a contrast.

They are still shaken up... Panic decimates any semblance of intelligence quite effectively.

Despite promising safe passage, Cellie still hasn't conclusively decided what to do with them: *Guests? Hostages? Slaves providing electrical power to Starfire City? Hah, she scoffed, not that last one, we're not the damned Crimson River.*

She yelled out as she approached: "Do any of you brains know what that thing is?"

Frightened looks and frail shrugs answered her, blinking.

Cellie sighed. "Get them out of here! Have the medics examine them!"

A wail more than a roar. The sound was intense enough to discern its undertones. *It's not simply mindless; there's pain in it... Not more than a few floors deep.*

A lone vampire climbed out the hatch and ran, huffing, soon joined by others.

Cellie grabbed one of them by the arm. "Report."

"We've barricaded everything on the way out and salvaged more canisters with blood," Bron replied. He looked nervous, with a misplaced half-grin.

Cellie attributed the expression to being a rookie. "Good job. Have you seen the monster?"

"No."

She let go of his arm. "Set the canisters down somewhere safe and get ready for battle."

The roaring electrified the air and signaled imminent danger. The banging was felt through the ground as vibrations.

Cellie looked around. *Is everybody out now? Seems about right.* "Hurry up people! Close the hatch! Prep for battle!"

Her orders were executed promptly, and for a moment, stillness enveloped the former and future battlefield. The raiders tensed and held back their breaths. Only the buzzing of flies on and around the corpses intruded upon the unnatural tranquility.

The fighters brandished daggers, large rocks, and heavy metallic bars serving as spears. Rob procured a rope and started swinging it as a lasso with his bandaged arm.

With a loud bang, the large hatch in the ground swung open and the dreaded monster launched into the air.

Stones and the heavy spears hit it almost immediately; a few became lodged inside the torso while others got brushed aside without effect. A few brave vampires assaulted it directly, Pete among them - slaying a monster with witnesses present was bound to increase one's renown.

Cellie used the time to inspect the monster. Huge and enraged, partially red in color, yet it possessed the regular number of limbs: two arms, two legs, and one head connected to a single torso.

"Keep your distance! Wear it down!"

Cellie has seen her share of such creatures: while under the influence, vampires hooked on demon blood boasted a similar appearance. *Admittedly, never so large or powerful.* Such extremes were usually reserved for the unfortunate subjects of demonic possession whose bodies were mutated beyond their limits.

If it's a thrall, it must be a sleeper left behind to trap us. The explosion will be as big as the one which blew up the entire perimeter. Cellie looked for signs in its eyes for a higher, raging yet coldly calculating intelligence - but saw none. *If it's a vampire, it must have drunk pure, undiluted demon blood of highest potency.*

Doubt crept in. *Crewmembers might be missing.* She quickly spun around to check the head count, and yelled out: "It might be one of ours!"

Whether thrall or junkie, the approach was the same: keep distance, taunt, and run in an alternating manner - *and pray it's not a thrall.* The controlling aspects of the fight resembled ancient bullfighting, but wounds didn't matter in the least and the heavy spears were used merely as a way of saying: 'Hey! Look here!'

The tactics worked; the monster moved as a wounded animal would and no higher entity seemed to be guiding it. *Junkies collapse fast.* Cellie had only to wait for the overdose to die down and the withdrawal coma to kick in. *Good, we might not incur any casualties and taking care of the injured shouldn't be insurmountable either.*

A raider ventured too close; the monster grabbed him and launched him up in a high arc. After a breath's time, he hit the ground like a ragdoll. Some of his bones pointed in funny directions, but he stood up several seconds later.

Suddenly, the roaring ceased. The demon grabbed its throat, gurgled unnaturally, and collapsed without fanfare as its legs gave out.

Most raiders burst out cheering, but a few moved in immediately for the kill.

"Stop!" Cellie rushed toward the fallen demon. "Don't kill it! Get back!"

Red fumes rose from the body as it started shrinking, and a wave of extreme heat made Cellie pause for a second. *Good, not the exploding kind.*

The body spasmed violently as muscles lost mass and strength at differing rates. The blood supply waxed and waned, while the still beating heart tried to adjust to a disjointed rhythm and loss of volume. Bones crackled and ground against each other.

The fallen demon's form shed its remaining rags and revealed the naked body of a female vampire.

When the spasming slowed and facial muscles realigned, Cellie began recognizing the contours of a familiar face.

"Oh, by blood!" She gasped. "It's Elise."

Language is often seen as a necessary evil; despite enabling symbol-based abstract thought, the overlay it places on cognitive processes is also a limitation.

However, language is not exclusively a human or even social construct. Lone animals too develop an internal language based on perceptions and actions and experiences, mirroring external and internal worlds. Due to greater integration with the subconscious, action and thought - or indeed planes of consciousness - are not as distinct as with humans.

For this reason, animals and animal spirits often serve as gatekeepers or guides for the dream realm.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Scarlet sensed predatory eyes following her.

Her first instinct was to cower while frantically scanning the environment for the perceived source of danger. But, that instinct came from the old, frightful kitten and went away unacted upon. The new Scarlet survived a fate worse than death - first with Bron's torture, and then with the grey liquid permeating her body in wretched agony.

Death was to be danced with and laughed at.

The threat was a pressure in her mind. It had a direction, as well as intent and emotions - almost as if it tried to warp her mind inside-out. The perceived hunger and the thrill of the hunt resembled her own. Despite that, she was ready to assert her place in the food chain, should the would-be predator not recognize that hunter and prey not always held to their presumed roles.

She continued her leisurely stroll through Starfire City.

Scarlet felt pressure not only from the one observing predator, but also potential others. Like atmospheric pressure or blood pumping on the inside, she considered such tension necessary for well-being.

(Ever since meeting Elise, her thoughts flowed in patterns uncommon to animals.)

Bears didn't venture this close to the inner City, and wolves usually hunted in packs. Danger from the air was less pronounced than in the desert regions - the tall buildings gave ground-based predators a significant advantage. Vultures kept out of sight, and hawks stuck to hunting rodents.

Coyotes adapted best to the urban environment and ate anything: mice, squirrels, insects - even stray cats. Scarlet surmised her stalker was a coyote, likely of wolven blood to dare venturing so close to the vampire enclave.

The apex predators, however, were almost always local mutants or otherwise monstrous aberrations - in this case, Scarlet.

The hungry eyes came closer.

She could almost see what they saw... scouring, single-mindedly intent and salivating. Amazing how the lack of fear and being well-fed freed up the mind for other perceptions.

Not all animals seemed to have that ability. This coyote, for instance. It had no sense of danger, only that of assured supremacy. His blindness already caused his life-force to flow in Scarlet's direction, and she readily absorbed it.

C'est la vie, Elise would have said.

Scarlet left the overgrown streets and approached a large church square. Open spaces were never safe, but instead of tracing the edges of the square, she decided to cut straight across.

The tall and sturdy church walls ahead overshadowed the rundown parish surrounding it.

The coyote abandoned the cover of stealth and sprung into action, leaving its would-be prey no means of escape.

Finally.

A sense of complete presence enveloped Scarlet; a calm that only came from the ardor of hunt and the readiness of functioning at top capacity - a moment away from engaging.

Scarlet turned around and stood her ground, welcoming the charging coyote. Indeed, it was a healthy half-breed.

The split second of mutual recognition when their eyes met decided the battle:

Scarlet's pupils briefly narrowed, while the coyote's expanded far beyond usual as terror set in. The coyote reeled back at the realization - he was the prey, not the predator - but it came too late. Unable to stop the charge, he tumbled ahead without much coordination.

Claws extended, Scarlet greeted the coyote with a slash across the face, which further disoriented and exposed the throat.

That instant was all Scarlet needed. She moved in to execute a throat clamp, fully intent on subduing the larger animal by crushing its windpipe.

Instead, her sharp teeth and strong jaws tore out the throat with a single bite. Blood splashed on her nose and whiskers, and she blinked. Her sense of smell became overwhelmed, but she resisted the blood rage and spat out the chunk of fur and flesh.

The coyote made gurgling noises.

Scarlet simply stared into his eyes, her way of saying: 'It is what it is.' With each breath, she acknowledged his involuntary sacrifice as she continued absorbing his soul into her own - for she was living also for all the prey she consumed.

It didn't last long until the coyote's final attempt at breathing failed too. Its eyes slowly turned glassy, breaking the spell:

The coyote was dead.

Not a second wasted, Scarlet gave into her thirst and started lapping up blood from the resulting puddle. Though partly euphoric, the experience was mostly soothing and quenching.

Naturally, sucking out the nourishing substance from a body that still had a beating heart would have been more fulfilling, but unlike human vampires, Scarlet rarely had a choice: her prey was either bigger, therefore still dangerous, or smaller, where only eating - rather than drinking - was possible.

She dutifully lapped it all up, then nudged the corpse to let gravity squeeze out a few more drops.

Since the coyote didn't have much fat on his meat, she chose to eat the brain next. The brain was always a bit tricky to get to, but getting the jaw out of the way helped. She went for the nutritious organs after: heart, liver, kidneys.

Scarlet was full before finishing the lungs and stomach lining, and leaving a trail of blood and grated innards, she dragged the half-eaten corpse to the front of the church.

The massive hardwood-and-steel gate stood atop the round stairway, closed shut. Even among taller buildings, the church spoke of grandeur of an age long past; it was partially restored by vampires and served as an infirmary in rare need.

Scarlet paused briefly, then continued around to the side entrance.

The smaller door was likewise reinforced and locked, and the whole doorway area had the distasteful chemical smell of a cleaning agent.

There was no sign of the animals she brought previously. Though she hoped they found their way to Elise, it was more likely that scavengers devoured them.

Although she hasn't seen her in two weeks, Scarlet was quite sure of Elise's location. Her scent was strongest here, but the smell was also wrong, like that of mad vampires in the outer City - only significantly more so.

Boredom didn't agree with Scarlet. She intermittently scratched at the door, building upon the progress she made last time. Still, only a thin layer has been scraped away, and beside claw-sharpening, the action wasn't much more than an exercise in futility.

A few vampires walked across the square now and then.

When she got tired of scratching the door, Scarlet kept busy by hunting nearby rats and mice. Last time she brought a chicken from the domesticated pens, which she refused to drain of blood since Elise needed it more. She also liked playing with snakes, but their blood tasted wrong.

Soon enough, she brought a rat back to the side entrance. It was still alive, and she lifted her paw, seemingly encouraging the rat to escape, only to pin it down again at the last moment. Such a hunting game held her attention for a while.

For some reason, her thoughts wandered back to the torture she endured under Bron, which evoked the same feeling of utter fear and rage. She lifted her paw again, but her intuition told her Elise wouldn't approve. It was a new feeling - the closest she ever felt to shame or regret.

The paw came down with claws extended this time, impaling the rat. It didn't suffer long.

After sucking out what little blood it had, she placed the carcass near the bigger one. Familiar boredom quickly replaced the fleeting regret, and she dozed off for a while.

Scarlet became fully alert again when a vampire woman approached from the direction of the nearby parish house. The woman seemed tired and uninterested - until she noticed the half-eaten carcass and the trail of blood leading around the building.

Unsure whether this person was a friend or captor of Elise, Scarlet backed into the corner of the doorway, hoping to sneak in.

"So you're the one causing this mess... and Vheila should keep cleaning after you, eh?" She stomped her foot. "Get away! Shoo!"

Scarlet didn't intimidate easily; she sunk into the corner even more and watched the woman intently.

The woman sighed. "This filth is really below my station... I'm a Mother for blood's sake." She turned around and walked grumbling in direction she came from, disappearing briefly behind the gate of the parochial house.

She returned with a broom. "...like I don't have enough to worry about! Let's get this corpse out of the way before it attracts other animals, and I'll have the youngsters scrub everything clean later..."

Vheila prodded Scarlet with the purposed end of the broom in an attempt to swipe her away.

Scarlet growled. The vampire's eyes didn't show much willpower, but Scarlet seemed to detect a degree of hostility, maybe even malice.

Vheila kept prodding her. When that didn't work, she reversed her hold on broom and switched to poking with the blunt end.

The pokes hurt. Despite her ambiguous demeanor and seeming lack of willpower, the woman had strong physique.

Scarlet hissed.

"Get out of here!" Vheila yelled, visibly irritated. "I'd squash you, but then I'd have to clean that up too."

Backed into the corner, and with the jabs growing increasingly painful, Scarlet had no choice but to defend herself: she tried to divert the attacks, and while doing so, her claw got stuck on the broomstick. Leaning in, Vheila shook the broom with both hands.

Scarlet used the opportunity to bite the foul vampire woman on her hand, just above the bracelet she wore.

"You pest!" Vheila shrieked and backhanded Scarlet with full force.

Scarlet flew quite a distance before tumbling. The punch itself was worse than the landing, and it took several precious seconds until air started filling her lungs again. Involuntary tremors coursed through her body, which tried to get bones and inner organs back into all the right places.

Scarlet couldn't figure out what Vheila's problem was. It's not like she wanted to torture her... or did she? Maybe she was defending her territory, or she just wanted the corpses for herself.

Scarlet stood up and stretched. Considering these vampires were Elise's people, she thought it best not to cause more trouble.

She took one more look at the woman who kept shaking her weapon and yelling. Scarlet hissed - both as a goodbye and a threat - and turned to walk away.

Despite the danger, Scarlet fully intended to try again tomorrow: Elise needed her.

As revenge, perhaps she would snatch a chicken from the pens again.

Superstition is a crutch that develops over time and often cooperatively. It builds upon all those moments when faced with the existential fears from the unknowns of life - you chose not to think about them instead.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"I don't wanna!"

"Maximilian, you will sit down and eat your veggies if I say so."

"But I don't wanna! I wanna eat blood!"

"Honey, you're too old to drink blood all the time. You have to eat vegetables too to grow big and healthy, and only then can blood make you strong. If you-"

Max interrupted with high-pitched squealing. "I wanna blood I wanna blood!"

Vheila slapped her son with such force that his legs gave out from under him. *He's spoiled and it's all my fault.*

Due to vampires' greater physical strength and resilience, their threshold for pain was higher as well. The only thing that made the slap different from everyday play was his mother's stern gaze and insufficiently commanding demeanor.

With a pouty face, Max got back up and defiantly stomped his foot.

"Sit!" Vheila pointed to the table and at the bowl of lovingly made vegetable stew. "And I don't want to hear another word!"

Max dragged his feet, but knew better than to throw a tantrum when his mother was in a foul mood. He raised himself onto the chair and started pushing the utensils around.

As a habit of nervousness, Vheila twisted the bracelet on her left arm. She exhaled sharply: "Eat!"

Max put the spoon into the bowl and took his time stirring it. He occasionally lifted out a spoonful of the chunky deliciousness and let it pour and splash back into the bowl.

Vheila sighed. *You'll be the end of me. If only you'd have inherited less of my headstrongness...* "If you don't eat, zombies will come to take you away."

Max frowned, but he had heard such stories before and the threat didn't faze him.

"You don't believe me? They'll go after you and not other kids because they know you won't have the strength to run as fast."

Max's mucking with the food turned less resolute, but he didn't stop.

"Even if you're not the only one they grab, they'll eat you first because your flesh is nice and fatty, just as they like it... without all the chewy muscles that would have made you strong. Look at me!"

Taken aback, Max obeyed.

"If they are too hungry, maybe they won't kill you before they start eating you. Even if by some miracle you're rescued after only a few bites, your body won't be strong enough to fight the infection and you'll turn into a zombie. Then it will be too late to eat your veggies."

Max managed to avert his eyes from Vheila's soul-piercing gaze. There was silence for a while.

"On the bright side, because you're so weak, demons won't try to lure you to their darkness. If you run and hide like a cockroach, they won't even look to squash you. They will look away in disgust at your weakness. You won't have to worry about demons, oh no, you'll only have to worry about zombies!"

Max ate his stew silently while tears kept flowing down his cheeks.

I overdid it... my poor baby. Vheila could barely hold back from hugging her son and telling him she didn't mean it: that he's strong and that she will protect him from all dangers and that he can have all the blood or whatever he wants...

As a Mother, a rarity in vampire society, she served as a symbol for cohesion and the promise of a better future. The Mothers were esteemed for their perceived wisdom, but also inundated with gifts from males seeking their favor - mostly to further their own political standing.

Vheila fidgeted with her bracelet without realizing.

Rituals and traditions - the unquestioned, but often conflicting way of doing things - were the main guidelines for raising a vampire child. All Vheila had for support were the prodding rumors and overbearing advice

of Elder Mothers, by the succession of which the rituals and traditions came to be in the first place.

I'm pretty sure the kitten which bit me the other day was a zombie. Though stray zombies posed a real danger for unsupervised children, they were no more than a nuisance for adults.

All the gifts and attention spoiled me, and I've spoiled Max in turn. The whining attitude will get him hurt, maybe not by the zombies and demons of the world, no... The real danger is here: the bloodthirsty, merciless vampires who sense weakness better than they smell blood.

After Max finished eating the stew, still fighting to hold back the tears, he turned to his mother and asked: "Will I be strong now, mommy?"

Vheila's troubled features softened. "Come here," she said gently and opened her arms.

Max sprung into her embrace.

"You will be strong," she whispered into his ear while stroking his hair. "I will do everything to help you become strong. You'll be the strongest."

Slowly, Max's sobbing stopped. He wiped off his tears, and like sunshine through the clouds, smiled.

"Go play," Vheila said. "It's sleep time soon."

"The zombies won't eat me now?"

"No..." Vheila thought for a while, "but tell you what." She removed her bracelet. "This charm has protected me for a long time. Its magic will scare the zombies away until you're strong enough to fight them on your own."

The bracelet was too big for Max's hand, so she put it around his neck instead.

"See those sharp things? Teeth of a zombie mage, boiled in the blood of a raging demon. And these gems? They're from ancient places of power where sand has turned into glass. Never take it off, not even to show it off to someone."

Max spent the rest of the evening playing with the necklace, examining the shape of each tooth and quirky bead of glass. Vheila had to warn him a few times not to put it into his mouth.

When bedtime came, Max fell asleep quickly and without the usual peevish whimpering.

But, doubts and second-guessing didn't give Vheila peace; she twisted and turned in her bed. At one point, a realization jolted her with cold sweat into a kind of nightmarish clarity: *All the things I said to Max were more about my weaknesses rather than his!*

Fear bubbled up - a restless, itchy feeling - and she kept scratching her skin red around the area where the kitten had bit her.

Sleep continued to evade her as her thoughts descended into a jumbled state. *Do I have a fever?*

There was something strange about that kitten. Subconsciously, she reached for her bracelet - it wasn't on her arm, and that unsettled her even more. The red rings of the kitten's eyes haunted her deeper into delirium.

Small animals rarely posed any danger to a vampire's robust physique, but fears, when coupled with imagination, could quickly blow a small risk out of proportion and turn it into a crippling nightmare. *That kitten... it was definitely a zombie, but fast like a vampire can be. Strong too, since the bite went deep...*

Her heartbeat grew more rapid as the festering anxiety overpowered rational thought. Her eyes popped open and she suddenly sat up: *If I turn into a zombie, who will take care of my son?!*

Getting up and going to the kitchen for a cup of water helped clear her head. Afterall, she had other things to worry about.

Ideals are worthless without the willingness to realize them. Don't expect your ideals to be enforced by an external higher power. Don't buy into victim mentality, either.

This goes double for personal ideals requiring only self-discipline to achieve.

- Dreamer's Handbook

The sensation of a hand clutching her own guided Elise's consciousness back to waking. Slowly, her eyes opened.

"Are you awake?"

After a brief moment of adjusting to the light, she saw the soothing hand belonged to Connor. He had a stupid worried grin on his face.

"Yeah... Where am I?"

"You're safe," Connor said. "We're in the old church."

With some discomfort, Elise leaned forward to inspect her surroundings.

"Take it easy... It's alright."

The church hall encompassed a wide, open space. Its sturdy pillars and walls held smudges of ancient frescoes.

Rows of beds with clean sheets filled the hall. All were empty except her own, but still kept orderly in case of an unforeseeable biological emergency. *They used to bring junkies here too, but not anymore.* Until such a time, it served as a recuperation ward for the heavily wounded.

The stained glass windows let colorful, vibrant light through. *No one else but Connor cared enough to restore them.*

The church was familiar to Elise since she used to clean here - one of the many tasks assigned to young vampires under supervision of the Mothers. Humans, who did most menial work, were not trusted with access to critical infrastructure.

Connor cleared his throat. "So... How are you feeling?"

Elise considered the question, but it seemed so distant and meaningless. "I'm fine," she answered almost out of habit.

Seeing Connor's concerned look of disbelief, she focused her attention inward. Her body did seem fine: senses reported, muscles obeyed. Her coordination and range of motion felt a bit off.

Mentally, she felt sharp, but she floated on angry clouds. *The stained-glass light is too tainted with the color red...* Memories of recent events seeped in and she pushed them away.

Elise diverted her line of thought. "How is Scarlet doing?" Worrying about others was easier.

"She misses you. I tried to take care of her, but she doesn't really need caring after," Connor laughed. "She came to visit you a few times; she even brought fresh kill for you."

Elise was glad to hear about Scarlet. *She's strong, unlike me.*

Slowly, the main entrance gate creaked open, and she heard footsteps approaching.

"How is our patient doing?" The sound echoed loudly.

Elise recognized the voice before the speaker came into view. *Lady Cellie!* Two burly aides scurried behind her.

"She just awoke a few minutes ago!" Connor yelled back.

Elise met Cellie's eyes and produced a fragile smile. Unlike other high-ranking power players, Lady Cellie struck her as a sensible and genuinely kind person, which made her proud to belong to the Helldare clan.

"That's very good, we were concerned you might never awaken. How are you, child?"

Not knowing what to answer, Elise shrugged.

"I see. I'd advise to give it time... Unfortunately, this is not just a social visit, and time is not something we have excess of."

"I'm sorry about what happened," Elise said. "I..." She choked as she held back the rush of memories.

"Me too, child. Me too," Cellie hushed. "Do you need to catch your breath? We can delay our conversation a little bit."

Elise shook her head. "I'm ready as I'll ever be."

Cellie glanced at Connor. "Would you prefer to discuss the matter in private?"

This time, Elise was the one to squeeze Connor's hand. "No, I'd like him to stay."

"Understood. Do you remember what happened?"

"Partially." The memories fought to claw their way in, and Elise braced herself.

"What do you remember?"

They could not be held back any longer. "I... I got separated and the lights were failing... Bron locked me up; he and two others. The door was too strong, I couldn't get out. The bastard left a canister of demon blood and dared me to drink it. It was dark and I was scared. I thought nobody would come get me because he would say I died."

Cellie nodded slightly, encouraging her to continue.

"So I drank it. I drank all of it. First it felt good, it made me strong, and I banged on the door to get out. But then it made me angry, very angry, and I banged on the door, and my body started changing, and I felt lost but also so angry, I wanted to get out and kill him, yeah, kill all of them - and then the door broke! So I was running, but I was too big? Things were in my way, and the hallways were getting smaller, and there were other locked doors, but it didn't matter because I was so angry I was about to burst-"

The anger threatened to consume her once more, and Elise noticed a muscle in her leg cramping the same way when she began turning into that demon-elise abomination. She stopped talking and started taking deep breaths. She couldn't stop the memories, but she stepped aside, breathing, waiting for them to pass.

Her whole body was completely tense, but it did pass, and she breathed out. She felt impossibly light, bordering on non-existence.

"I think I did burst." Her voice was faint. "I think I reached the surface... I'm not sure, it's all so blurry." She slumped back into the bed. "That's all I remember."

The floaty feeling persisted. She worked on gathering enough strength, and asked the question which bothered her most. "Did I kill anyone?"

Cellie paused before answering.

Elise looked around at all the empty beds. *They either recovered or died.* She raised an eyebrow while examining Cellie's expression for tells.

"No injuries were fatal or otherwise permanent," Cellie said. "You were out for three weeks. Even the worst healed fully after two."

Three weeks...

Elise couldn't discern if she was telling the truth about the fatalities, but she had no reason to doubt her. *I'll find out soon enough anyway...*

"However," Cellie sighed, "brace yourself for the bad news."

Elise propped herself up with the pillow. "Let's just get it out into the open and be done with it."

Cellie nodded. "I had my suspicions about Bron, especially because he was the most outspoken against you. You weren't there to tell your side of the story, and unbeknownst to me, he used all his connections and influence to stir the sentiment against you. He also accused you of vampirifying, training and siccing your cat on him-"

Elise interrupted. "Her name is Scarlet and he was torturing her."

"...resulting in a grave wound which left him scarred for life. What do you mean, 'torturing her'?"

"He has - or had - a hideout just for torturing animals, complete with tools and such. That's where I found Scarlet, in a cage with some restricted chemical marring her flesh. I rescued her when Bron wasn't there, but he came back and that's when Scarlet attacked her."

"Oh. Well, it doesn't surprise me... but I wish I would have known it much sooner. The damage is done."

I should have turned him in... I don't know.

"Apparently," Cellie continued, "Mother Vheila was attacked by Scarlet. Although the Mothers were initially on your side, she convinced them you and your cat pose a danger to the young ones. Such a fearful soul with a flair for drama..."

Yeah, she never liked me.

"And it's not just the Mothers; with this general anti-junkie sentiment blowing up, you've become the poster child for demonic influence. 'The demon queen and her demon cat', they call you. No one had such a strong reaction to demon blood before; the community is afraid. You're an unknown, and the unknown is always scary."

"Hah!" Elise snorted. *That's crazy. And stupid.* Her focus diminished, and the awareness of that floaty feeling enveloped her once again. *It doesn't make any sense.*

"I'm sorry to tell you, but you're about to be excommunicated."

Elise didn't have enough energy to consider implications. The rays of light were so very red, and they seemed to be bending around rather than going straight. *They're mocking me.* On the verge of passing out, she laughed.

Connor's hand was trembling. "Excommunication? This is a bad joke, right?! That piece of shit Bron is the one who should be excommunicated, or better yet, have a stake driven through his rotten heart!"

"Calm down," Cellie said. "Elise needs you to be rational right now."

"Rational?! What part of what you just said makes sense? You're our clan leader for blood's sake! You know this is wrong, why don't you do something about it?!"

"The world is not a just place... it seems you haven't learned that yet. I'm not a dictator and my power is more limited than you would think. If I openly endorse Elise, with nothing more than sympathy, I would end up ostracized as well. Influence, and the consequences of-"

"Empty words befitting a politician! You-"

Cellie raised her hand, "Alright, I heard enough." She waved to her aides. "Escort the young idealist outside; he needs some fresh air."

The two muscular helpers moved promptly, grabbed Connor under his shoulders, and briskly walked with him toward the exit.

"What? No, you can't do this! Let me go! Elise, we- We'll figure this out! Let me-"

The large gate easily slammed shut behind them.

"Don't worry about Connor," Cellie said, "he just needs to cool off."

Elise nodded, resigned. *Perhaps it is my fault... I almost killed everyone.*

"Look, it's not your fault." Cellie sat down next to her. "I know the situation is bad, but it's not the end of the world."

Elise forced herself to look up. Her breathing was shallow.

"If you happen to leave voluntarily, there'll be no reason to officially exile you. I will send you to Oakheart - we have connections there because

of an ongoing research agreement. Think of it as a priority assignment, yes? You'll be performing a valuable service until all this blows over."

Elise tried to shrug, but lost the motivation to complete the gesture.

"They pride themselves on their meritocracy; you'll have a chance to build up your reputation. It's not paradise and it's another culture, but it will do you good to see the world. And don't worry about blood, I'll have it sent along with the regular shipments."

Elise just stared ahead. "I think I'm gonna sleep now..."

"You do that." Cellie tapped her arm, and stood up to leave. "You're a smart and spirited young woman; your life is just beginning. I have high hopes for you and I'm confident you will do well."

Cellie's footsteps echoed her confidence as she left, punctuated by the creaking of the gate and its subsequent resolute slamming.

Elise continued staring blankly into the distance - it was all too much and too fast. The light played tricks on her, revealing and dissolving predominantly crimson shapes.

She closed her eyes, but the shapes and movements persisted. Sinking into sleep in her dissociative state proved difficult, especially with the demons' laughter reverberating all around the church hall.

I'm glad Scarlet is okay...

* * *

Cellie felt a tightness in her chest, and scrambled for a place where she could be alone.

She recalled a time many years ago, when she stumbled upon an infant in the outer City; hungry, frightened and all alone. The choice she made at that time was one of the hardest she has ever made. However, she wasn't sure if it was the right choice, and the decision burdened her ever since.

The infant Cellie found was human; her parents were likely killed off by the myriad forces of the wilderness.

As a human, the child would have led a safe and comfortable life with the clans of the City. At the time, Cellie felt that dooming her to a confined life with no real choices would be cruelty beyond imagining.

Cellie had cut her arm and fed the child her blood.

Such a thing was heavily frowned upon, but then again, no one had to know. *And then she grows up and does the same thing to that kitten*, Cellie remarked with a sad half-smile.

Cellie realized she wasn't just feeling sorry for Elise, but also for herself: she was a failure as a leader and a failure as an ersatz mother - the closest she ever came to motherhood. She has chased status and responsibility all her life, trying to make a better place... *but I can't do anything when it counts.*

The tightness in her chest became constricting. She felt she should be crying, but the tears didn't come and her frustration grew. *It's been so long since I cried...*

While Cellie's heart was wallowing in pity, her brain kept re-examining and second-guessing the decisions she has made. Despite how she felt, the decisions she made were the best she could make under the circumstances - both then and now.

This is the right thing to do.

Cellie acknowledged and accepted the emotions, but she didn't think they would hit her so hard. *Swim with the flow, not against it.*

As the feelings slowly found their place and aligned with reason, she recognized within herself a new old thing rekindling - not the superficial anger, but something beyond: ambition.

So far, her reasons for seeking and using power were mostly ego-related. Those reasons didn't diminish, but they somehow expanded beyond herself.

One has to become the right person to be able to do the right thing.

She breathed in deeply, triggering a yawning reflex. She felt reinfected with a noble cause, and saw the inklings of a vision such a path would bring.

Elise will have to be strong, and so will I.

When you change, make the world adapt to you. When the world changes, adapt by changing yourself.

If the feedback between the two processes is distorted, growing in power will be accompanied by growing in delusions - which hide your weaknesses from yourself, but highlight them to others.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Gareth slit the councilman's throat. *One down, two more to go.* He waited until the croaking and gurgling subsided, and pushed the bound body backwards onto the cold castle floor.

"Please, don't do this!" The second councilman rocked back and forth on his knees, wailing. "I'll pay you double- no, thrice as much!"

In his younger days, Gareth would have spent a few moments considering such an offer, but the panicky, begging types never proved reliable. Even if he were inclined to accept, his contract with EnrRrei bound beyond mere words.

Gareth removed a wooden stake from his belt and looked for something to hammer it in with. *These vampires sure are resilient. Like wasps, they refuse to die.*

"I demand you set us free!"

He knew of two sure ways to kill a vampire that were within the realm of practicality for an assassin: decapitation and a stake through the heart. Decapitation was messy, and the scent of all that blood travelled far to alert other vampires. Using a stake was cleaner - the sharpened piece of wood inhibited the natural regenerative powers - but it was extra weight to carry.

Without a stake through the heart, even the guards whose necks Gareth snapped while infiltrating the castle would make a successful recovery - *they might need transfusion to enhance the regeneration, though.*

"Please! Do you know who I am?! I'm First Councilman of the Reach Initiative! I'll be avenged!"

Gareth drove the stake through the unbeating heart of the first vampire's bled-out body. *It's funny how they oscillate between demands and pleading*

for mercy, like broken toys. Their personalities unravel without any additional effort on my part.

"Don't do this! I'll make you rich!"

Gareth stood up and pressed the bloody dagger against the blabbering councilman's throat. "Reach Initiative, you say? Perhaps your death will teach your clansmen not to reach toward things which belong to EnrRrei."

"EnrRrei? The demoness?" A muscle on the vampire's face began twitching uncontrollably. "You're a thrall! That's why you could overpower us with your bare hands... I'll give her anything she wants, just don't kill me!"

Gareth's relationship with EnrRrei was mutually beneficial: she provided him with demonic strength and a supernatural sense for the life-force around him, and he performed assassinations exclusively for her, for which he was compensated on a 'per case' basis. *It's good she's not a micro-manager like the other demons.*

Gareth saw only empty clinging in the vampire's eyes. "You don't have anything to offer her," he said, and slit the First Councilman's throat. He waited for the gurgling to stop and pushed the body onto its back.

One more to go. Gareth was almost sad his mission neared its end - he would miss Aluin's serene atmosphere. He didn't care much for the pretentious decorum the vampires tried to defile the place with; this castle in the mountainside survived millennia and showed no intent of buckling before the ravages of time. *I wish the usual hellholes I get sent to had the same spirit.*

Gareth expertly drove the stake home.

He was occasionally tempted by a longing for a greater challenge, a foe who would truly test his skills of combat. As a place of politics and diplomacy, castle Aluin didn't offer much in this regard; only absent-minded elders and hotshot guards making rudimentary mistakes of overconfidence. The rational part of Gareth's mind took pride that it was superior planning and tactics which made combat flawlessly unchallenging - the hallmark of a master assassin.

Gareth looked at the third councilman kneeling on the floor, hands and feet bound tightly. "You don't say much, do you?"

The vampire shrugged.

The quiet, rational types are often the most dangerous, but this one seemed to look inward, preparing for the journey death would bring.

"Any last words you want to say?"

The councilman took a deep breath, and exhaled in a sigh. "No. Make it quick."

Gareth nodded, wondering if he'll have this much composure when his time comes. *Maybe I'll die from some horrible sickness, with no one to fight except Death itself.*

"Very well. Ready?"

"Yes."

Gareth raised his dagger to end the vampire's life as painlessly as possible. Just a fraction of a second later, Gareth's other arm swung involuntarily and blocked the dagger from connecting - the force knocked it out of hand. *What the-*

Before he could figure out what was happening, Gareth's mind instinctively withdrew to a safe place from the engulfing rage. He observed from afar as words erupted from his own mouth and roared at the councilman:

"Abn brego mrreih, inmahr avvegrh vol ENRRREI!"

Experience taught him that the secret to surviving a demonic intrusion was to let go immediately - lest the rage consume all if he resisted - and wait until control was relinquished back to him.

A couple of seconds later the crimson haze withdrew; he blinked a few times and clenched his fists to make sure he was himself again. The vampire's eyes looked back at him with terrified surprise.

Gareth's short-term memory held new information: "EnrRrei sends her regards. She tells me you voted against a raid on one of our camps, is that correct?"

The vampire nodded. "The plan was lacking and it wouldn't have worked."

"Your forethought earned you your life today, First Councilman. Congratulations. EnrRrei wishes you to know that despite... recent events, she's open to future cooperation. Orummagh should pay for such a shameful attack on the council, don't you agree?"

The vampire grunted a barely articulate 'thank you'.

Gareth collected the dagger which fell out of his hand and sheathed it. *Enough excitement for one day; these unexpected visits take a toll on my nerves.*

"As much as I'd love to stay and strengthen diplomatic ties... it would be detrimental to my health. Please hold off on yelling for help; I hope to enjoy the scenery on my way out."

If you know what you want, congratulations, you've made significant headway toward achieving it.

The rest of the way will have time-frames, costs, risks, and obstacles associated with it. If you change your mind along the way, that's alright, just be honest with yourself.

Vision illuminates the many roads ahead; it may shorten the way, perhaps even to a distance that can be crossed with trivial effort.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Connor's fleeting lips on Elise's own felt soft and determined.

The kiss surprised Elise; it implied passion she hasn't noticed before. *Was it there all along? Lust was always just a human thing... an animal thing.*

No... He cared for her, of course, as she did for him. The closeness they shared was undeniable. *...it is as foreign to him as it is to me.* Yet, the true willingness to feel that way about her even though he couldn't - it made the gesture all the more powerful and deeply cherished.

"Oh, and one more thing..."

Connor reached into his pocket and removed a thin, metallic necklace. He put it over her head with care.

Elise adjusted the necklace on her neck and inspected it. It was created out of a rare white metal in a bygone age, while the pendant - a circle superimposed over a square - was forged by Connor himself.

Scarlet kept rubbing against her leg, purring.

"Don't forget me," Connor said.

Elise suppressed her tears to avoid looking weak in front of the caravan. "Don't be stupid." She mock-slapped him, changing the motion into a caress.

Connor grinned, despite being on the verge of tears himself.

"I'm serious, okay?" Elise said. "Try not to get into too much trouble. The people are rattled, and Orummagh murdering the councilmen left a

power vacuum that will need to be filled. Don't get caught in the middle of all that, understood?"

"Don't worry about me," Connor embraced her, "just get to Oakheart safely. They'll see you're smart, and if you manage to get me invited as well, I'll come right away. Prove to them you're a big deal!"

The sky above turned slightly red as the sun began the last stages of its decline, signaling the time to move. The caravan members picked up their packs and left the shade to assemble in the middle of the eroded street.

Elise enjoyed the hug silently, trying to stretch it across time before its inevitable end.

"You two take care of each other," Connor said.

Elise nodded and squeezed Connor's hand one last time.

Scarlet meowed.

Elise picked up her backpack and started running after the departed Caravan. She stopped halfway, turned back and saw Connor waving. After waving back, she continued to run until she caught up with the others.

Later she glanced back a few more times, and Connor stood there motionlessly. Eventually, he disappeared behind the horizon.

"It's only you and me now," Elise murmured and bent down to pet Scarlet.

Except for Connor, nothing really bound her to her clan or the enclave. *Well, maybe the consistent blood supply that wasn't a burden on my conscience.* Looking at it that way, this was the adventure she was reaching for; the chance to explore and see more of the world.

The ground-down outskirts of the outer City rapidly gave way to desert dunes. Elise rushed ahead, breathing in the abrasive spices of the desert air and drinking in the monotonous, open vista which promised death and freedom.

The footsteps behind her closed in, and she noticed the fighters leading the caravan giving her strange glances. *Do they know?* She recognized a few of her former raider colleagues. *Yeah, they know.*

They didn't seem outright hostile, so she just slowly drifted back.

The seasoned fighters were followed by inexperienced ones serving as pack mules, and Elise's own pack felt light by comparison. *Amazing how few things one truly needs.*

The desert and that feeling of freedom made her anxious and a bit agoraphobic. *A new life...*

"Hey Rob, look, it's the demon girl who almost killed us all! You know, the pretty one! Hi!"

Pete's loud voice was unmistakable, and so was his physique: he carried the biggest pack, twice the size of what the designated mules carried. He was waving to her.

Elise chuckled, and waved back briefly.

"Don't talk to her," his companion Rob hushed. "She could still kill us all."

"Sorry, don't kill us!" Pete yelled apologetically.

Elise nodded and briskly moved ahead. She could hear the slap on Pete's neck and Rob berating him. *I never expected the big guy to be the most accepting of them all.*

The technomages - the caravan's most precious cargo - walked behind the pack-carriers. Instead of their usual labcoats they wore plain human clothes, which were warmer than the vampires' own and better suited as protection against the desert cold.

Elise observed them, their strange silence and strange walk, trying to get her mind off her situation. Under different circumstances she would have had a myriad questions.

One of the mages moved closer. "That huge fellow is not going to go on a rampage and kill us, is he?"

"Who, Pete?" Elise shook her head, "No." She smiled sadly and continued murmuring under her breath, "...that's apparently my job."

"What? Speak up, would you? These old ears can't hear as they used to."

The technomage didn't seem old, but his mannerisms and the way he treaded the sand did resemble that of an old human. His eyes darted inquisitively with lightning behind them.

"Nothing," Elise said. "You've got nothing to worry about with Pete, just don't provoke him in any way."

Their worries were understandable, since Pete could snap any of them like a twig. The way the technomages occasionally glanced at Pete was similar to how the raiders looked at her: fear, with a bit of awe mixed in.

They continued walking in silence.

Elise was alive and of sound mind, which was more than she expected after downing that canister of demon blood. Feeling sorry for herself wasn't the solution.

Expectations are a funny thing. She tentatively hoped that her new life at Oakheart would be better, or at least that it would start making sense.

The fear was there, of course. The unknown always demanded attention, and fear is what warned of the danger. However, the dangers were too many, and she wasn't going to let fear paralyze her. *If I die, I die.* She decided to focus on survival first and foremost, and to reevaluate her priorities after she achieved a degree of stability.

Hope gradually replaced pity, and led her thoughts in a different direction. Soon her eyes awoke with an idea.

"Would you teach me technomagic?" Elise asked. *Who knows when, if ever, I'll get such a chance again.*

The old man laughed, and several others chuckled. Their tension eased as they regained a bit of their accustomed superiority and confidence.

"What? Is it a foolish request, or what?"

"Not at all," the man said, "just unexpected. I'm afraid it's also impossible."

"Oh... Why impossible?"

"Well, first of all, we would have to pack you full with Serum. You know what Serum is, don't you?"

Elise nodded, "Yes."

"That probably wouldn't work, on account of you being a vampire, so we would have to do it repeatedly, tweaking dosage and other factors. It probably wouldn't work even then, but I think Oakheart appreciates willing volunteers. Are you up for a little experimentation?"

Elise couldn't tell if he was serious or joking or both. "If it works, will I be able to cast tech-enabling magic?"

"Not likely, but maybe you could sense the electromagnetic field as all afflicted do." The mage scratched his head. "For smoothing it enough to make the increased Serum consumption worthwhile, you need training as well as the necessary personality type. Unruly types prone to emotional outbursts don't do well. Even if hybridization or full conversion is possible, most vampires have narcissistic streaks and anger issues which would interfere with that desire to create order."

Elise mulled it over. "So you're saying... that it is possible?"

"Theoretically, yes." The old man shrugged, followed by a disconcerting grin. "We won't know until we try."

Chuckling and nodding, the others around him seemed to share his opinion.

"Why would you want to become a technomage anyway?" He asked.

"I haven't really thought about it, it was just an idea. I used to gather any manuals and cute gadgets I could find, and study them."

"Oh, a vampire scholar!" He laughed. "Such a rarity! Well, I guess there's no harm in showing you the basics when we arrive."

"I couldn't always decipher the texts and the tech never worked either... So, thank you. It would be nice to see and understand how things work for a change."

"Well, we can always use educated help. The truth is, Serum doesn't make people more studious, methodical or disciplined. Natural curiosity and genuine interest go a long way. We can assess your aptitude, and if all goes well, we should find an apprentice position for you to fill."

"Really? That sounds great!"

The mage nodded. "Sure."

Maybe life won't be so bad. She could learn interesting things, maybe even go exploring with Scarlet since she had the strength advantage and the technomages seemed to be shut-ins. *Where is Scarlet? She was here a minute ago.*

"Sorry, my feline companion wandered off... I have to go search for her. Is it okay if we continue the conversation when I come back?"

"Of course, it's a nice distraction," he spread his arms, "and it's not like I have anything else to do!"

Elise scanned the horizon. "Thank you. I'll be right back."

She walked past the rear guard and took off in the direction they just came from. *I hope she hasn't strayed much. She must have found something to hunt... maybe a desert mouse.*

Demonic religions make it easier to control the possessed on a mass scale. Such exertion, in turn, gives rise to more religions hoping to counterbalance the foul influence. Unfortunately, both distract the possessed from building strength within.

When encountering a religion or a similar construct, ask yourself: what is its purpose?

- Dreamer's Handbook

"Who's next? Come in, don't be afraid," Merryn said.

A young woman peeked through the half-open door.

Merryn put on his least threatening smile, hiding his canines. "Please, come. Close the door and have a seat." *Establishing trust is always critical at this juncture.*

The young woman looked around the bare room, and took a seat at the table across from Merryn. She was wearing a simple hospital gown.

He spent a few moments sizing her up. *No visible sickness, demonic malformation, or disturbance of mental and motorical functions. Fearful, but that's understandable.*

The girl endured the ordeal silently and with her eyes cast down.

Merryn reached for a pen, tapped it a few times against the table, and shuffled through a stack of files only to select a single one. When he felt he had her attention, he looked into her eyes and flashed the best heartfelt smile he could muster.

Trapped, the girl couldn't break away from Merryn's gaze.

"What is your name?" He already knew the answer, but it was a simple way to start a dialogue.

"Devon Lints, sir." She finally looked away.

"Of?"

"...of Shkazzrt, sir." A wave of anguish and pain washed over her as she articulated the guttural name.

Being called a mere 'sir' was a minor insult to Merryn's ego. "The proper term of address is 'advisor' or 'Lord Vaugr' - but please, call me Merryn. Given the difficult and intimate journey we're about to undertake together, I think a degree of familiarity is in order."

"Yes, Merryn," Devon said without emotion. "Thank you."

"Well then, let me be straight with you: although I'm the best at what I do, exorcism is an inherently risky thing. Are you sure you want to go through with it?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"You're ready to cease being Devon of Shkazzrt and start being Devon of Oakheart?" Merryn's pronunciation of the demon's name was more nuanced.

She smiled faintly and sighed. "Yes, of course."

Merryn was interested in her manner of answering, and not so much in the answers themselves. Getting her to keep saying 'yes' had a two-fold purpose: it strengthened her resolve - *crucial to the process* - and subconsciously accustomed her to receptiveness towards his suggestions.

Merryn laughed, a bit more forcefully than he should have, but the laugh did make Devon relax a little.

"Well, the good news is I see no obstacle standing in the way of the exorcism. You're a bright young woman with a future ahead of you, and Shkazzrt's claws didn't seem to have sunk deep. Shkazzrt is what we call a 'young demon'; he doesn't leave many hooks or traps in the mind. We'll build up your mental resilience and his influence will vanish." Merryn raised a hand to his heart, "I swear on my blood."

He repeated the demon's name intentionally, to see if his patient's mind focused more on the anguish of the past or the promise of a better future. Although she winced slightly at each mention - *she doesn't notice doing it* - Devon's eyes regained a bit of a glow. *That's a good sign.*

"Thank you, thank you so much!"

Merryn briefly mirrored the smile before his expression turned serious. "Don't thank me yet. You do realize there are strings attached?"

She nodded.

"The fine people here at the Oakheart Institute value performance above all else. If you do your tasks well, you'll be assigned greater responsibilities - they come with perks and access to more resources. We

have a mutually beneficial arrangement even though I'm an outsider, and I trust they take care of their own even better." *I single-handedly opened up a new pool of potential employees for them! Damned sure it's lucrative.*

"Is it true they're all zombies? They didn't look like zombies to me."

Curiosity? Good. She's starting to open up.

Merryn nodded. "Most of them, yes. They keep it in check with proper Serum dosages. You'd do well to avoid the term 'zombie' though, it's kind of a taboo here. Unless you're referring to the mindless horde guarding the outer perimeter of the facility, the preferred term is 'afflicted' - but it's best not to bring it up at all."

The girl was processing the information in silence.

"Don't worry, you'll fit in. Before we proceed, let me tell you what will happen during the procedure." He paused to make sure he had her attention. "First, the techs will pump you full of drugs. This will happen in several stages."

The hopeful glint in her eye vanished, but she remained alert.

He dismissed her concern with a wave of hand. "The drugs are not overly dangerous as long as you keep your body free of them afterwards. My job comes next: I'll wipe the demonic influence away with brainwashing techniques, and with a process similar to assisted hypnosis, I'll strengthen your ego to resist further incursion. Do you understand? I'll help mold your mind to resist the influence."

Her nod was very curt.

"There will be no surgically invasive procedures; nothing so barbaric. I'm telling you all this because your conscious mind and I have to be on the same side. You have to trust me." He reached out to clutch her hand over the table. "You know we vampires are ego-maniacs, right?"

She smirked.

"Well, our strong egos make us naturally resistant to demonic possession. The demons might seduce or corrupt us, but they can't easily possess us. I will help your ego become strong as ours are - part by part and layer by layer. I'm really good at what I do."

Devon stared at Merryn with wide eyes, and he gently squeezed her hand before letting go. "Tell me about your symptoms. What does Shkazzrt's grip on your mind feel like?"

She gulped. "There... there's always a throbbing pain in my head, like thorns stuck in a wound. Strange, but I don't feel it that much now."

"The lab is shielded from known irritants and reactants." He encouraged her to continue.

"...and sometimes I feel it looking at me, and I see horrible images - I try to look away but can't, not from all of it, and I'm scared... Sometimes I get angry for no reason, and do things I don't even remember. I just want it to stop!.. so I never have to feel this way again."

"Believe it or not, this is good news. The process will be straightforward, since your mind knows what belongs there and what doesn't. There's just one more important decision you have to make..."

Merryn paused to make sure he had Devon's full attention.

"I expect the exorcism to be successful, however, there's always a chance of relapse. We haven't quite pinpointed what causes it, but it seems like a nasty variant of capture-bonding: a subconscious need develops which invites the same or another demon back in, bypassing the defenses."

"How much of a chance?"

"About thirty percent, give or take, depending if you count the milder cases."

Merryn continued before the look of terror and hopelessness could solidify on Devon's face. "Still, there's a drug we could use called 'Serum'; you might remember me mentioning it before. Are you familiar with it?"

"I've heard of it. Expensive."

"The Serum causes a temporary increase in intelligence, and even hyper-intelligence in large enough doses. During the procedure you would be given such a large dose, effectively immunizing you against any kind of possession."

Devon bit her lip. "...But?"

"But, you will have to remain in the employ of the Oakheart Institute until your debt is paid off - we're talking years, at least. Also, you will remain addicted to Serum or its unrefined counterpart, leaving you... well... permanently 'afflicted'. A small, daily dose will keep you functional and mostly symptomless. It's a tough decision, I know. Would you like some time to think about it? Of course, you don't have to go through with the exorcism at all, but those touched by Shkazzrt don't have a long life expectancy."

Devon remained silent for several minutes, and Merryn waited patiently.

Finally, she looked up. "No, I don't need time," she said with resolve. "Let's do it, give me the Serum! I want this jackass forever out of my mind."

Merryn smiled contently and nodded. He extended his hand as he stood up, "Please, follow me this way."

The pitfall of intelligence is that it does not equate to wisdom.

- Dreamer's Handbook

A thundering explosion shook the air.

Elise looked up and stared in the direction of the sound. *I didn't know we were carrying explosives.* A blue haze lingered in the distance.

"Let's go," she said, and resumed walking.

Scarlet trotted alongside her, carrying a desert mouse in her jaws.

What the hell are they thinking? That stuff is notoriously unstable!

Elise had enough of the sand which filled her shoes and crackled under her teeth. She had spent the better part of an hour searching for Scarlet, and then a few more trying to get back to the caravan.

The cold, intermittent wind and the lack of sunlight made finding their way back difficult. The few shrubs here and there weren't distinctive enough to be used for orientation, and walking in circles didn't help either.

Another explosion reverberated through the air, with a renewed blue haze illuminating the way. A third one followed quickly thereafter.

No... Elise started running. *Those are no pranks.*

The sand shushed and shifted under her feet. She kept rhythmically drawing in sharp breaths to be able to keep up the pace for a prolonged time.

The night air and the open desert no longer represented freedom, only isolation - which manifested as a cold layer of sweat on her skin. Instead of trying to figure out what was happening, she tried to prepare for a fight by emptying her mind as best she could.

The blue haze dissipated as she drew nearer, and left behind an unpleasant crimson afterimage. A wave of heat hit her face, bringing with it the gag-inducing stench of burnt flesh.

"No!"

Elise stopped at edge of a crater-like demarcation where the upper layer of sand was blasted away. She dropped her pack.

"No no no no!"

It wasn't only an afterimage; everything was painted red. A thin film of blood covered the sand and fused with it, still glowing from the heat in a few spots.

Elise stumbled ahead, in shock, looking for survivors and sources of danger. She expected to find neither.

I've seen this before... Although she attached no significance to it at the time, the sight was similar to the entry area of the ruined Midflower.

The source of the explosions was definitely demonic; it had that smell. The tiny particles permeating her nasal membrane and settling on her exposed skin had the same effect on her as that canister of demon blood, although with only a token amount of power.

She saw no survivors - or body parts bigger than a leg, for that matter.

They're dead. They are all dead.

Elise's legs began to wobble and her steps grew less coordinated. She laughed out, and then fell to her knees.

Scarlet licked her blood-dewed hand and pressed her head into her palm.

So many dead. The vampires didn't like her, but they didn't deserve to die. And the technomages; they survived that unholy assault, only to be finished off like this. *They weren't bad people.*

The carefully salvaged treasures were destroyed. *All gone, and my future with it.*

Why do bad things keep happening to me?! Despite emotions of self-pity, a quick follow-up thought pointed out that she was alive and unharmed - while the others were finely spread across the sand.

Scarlet kept meowing and she petted her. Her fur was moist with blood vapor.

Elise lamented the dead, but it surprised her that Pete's death hit her the hardest. He was a brute, sure, but he wasn't conceited like other vampires and he genuinely liked her in his own way.

His existence must have been lonely too. Elise knew for a fact that would-be Mothers frequently approached him, since Pete's sexual drive

made him stand apart from other males. They looked up to his brawn, but sneered at his intellect and personality.

"We still have each other, right?" She hugged Scarlet who snuggled against her.

The passing of time built up pressure, urging the survival instinct to kick in.

Now is not the time to mourn. Elise stood up, determined to find out what happened before deciding on a course of action. She walked a distance away from the perimeter, then circled around, looking for tracks.

No outgoing footprints... No one escaped.

She found three incoming footprints, coming from approximately the same direction. As expected, the impressions in the sand were huge. What surprised her was the significant distance between each step; their stride was really a series of long jumps. Despite their weight, the assailants approached with such force as to almost slice the air they floated through.

Monstrous demonic fireballs... I doubt they had any mental presence beyond exploding at the location the demon impelled them to. The effect of that canister on me must have been only a shadow of the real thing.

Elise walked back to the center of the crater, trying to ascertain if they had a specific target.

The fleshy remains were visibly different, depending on whether they belonged to zombies, demons or vampires. The various blood scents also provided a clue, along with the location of the scattered remains.

The attack focused on the technomages. One chunk of zombie flesh still wriggled, and Elise squashed it. *I guess they were the primary targets behind the attack on Midflower and slaughtering the caravan was just finishing the job. All these lives... collateral damage.*

As far as Elise could tell, thralls used to be little more than well-coordinated fanatics. *Mutations affected strength, sure, but not to such extent - and none were the exploding kind, for blood's sake!*

Elise sighed. *Maybe that's just Orummagh's way.* It was understood that the demons' prime concern was ensuring devotion, but Orummagh seemed to have bred them for alterability and one-time use. *More potent blood for the junkies.*

"What do you think, Scarlet? Is this all part of the demon's strategic masterplan?"

Scarlet too found a flailing chunk of zombie flesh and struggled to subdue it. She took a bite.

"No, don't-"

The taste must have been revolutive, because she spit it out almost immediately and sneezed. She minced the burnt flesh with her claws in revenge.

"I guess you're right... Maybe the mages just pissed him off."

Elise walked around once more, this time checking for salvageable materials. Blood, Serum, water - all spilt into the sand. Food rations have burned to ashes or fused together with the packaging. The heaviest packs did indeed contain gadgets and machinery - now doubly useless.

A few metallic items flew out farther and she checked a wider area, hoping for an intact canister. The only useful thing she found was a sturdy, metal quarterstaff, which she decided to keep as a walking stick.

"Scar, what do you say? Do we go back, or do we press on?"

Scarlet didn't answer.

"Yeah, I don't know either..." Elise sighed.

Returning to the enclave was the safer choice in the short term, but she would still be facing exile at best. *They'd accuse me of intentionally destroying the cargo and wiping out the whole caravan.* She could spend her life hiding in the outer City, hunting animals for blood and sustenance...

The other option was to continue the journey through the perilous Redgale Desert to Oakheart. *How many more hours is it? Six? If we pick up the pace, we can make it before dawn.*

"Not much of a choice, is it?" Elise walked to her pack and picked it up. "Let's go, Scarlet. We are going to Oakheart."

In the animal biosphere, predators and the harshness of nature serve to cull those weak of body. For humans, religion and society serve a similar purpose: they organize into predominantly hierarchical structures so that the collective weakness of mind is minimized.

The tragedy of humanity is that we have no predators for the weakness of spirit - unfortunately, self-responsibility never truly caught on the way sociopathy did.

- Dreamer's Handbook

The woman suspiciously eyed the offered bag. "What's that?"

"Two days' worth of food rations and a bottle of clean water," Leona said. "Here, take it!"

The woman ruffled her unkempt hair while mulling over. "And what do I have to do in return?"

"Nothing at all! It's a gift."

She grabbed the bag from Leona and held it firmly against her chest. After long seconds of no one trying to take it away, she muttered a 'thank you'.

"Don't thank me," Leona smiled warmly, "thank the demoness EnrRrei! She made it possible for both of us to eat a good meal tonight."

The woman frowned, but nodded.

Leona withheld a sigh till after she left the woman's nest-like abode. Sand covered her clothes and crackled under her teeth. *The weakest know that gifts come with strings attached... even if they bind only with the strength of gossamer.*

It wasn't just the sand which bathed the camp in a dirty orange color; the smell of refuse and unwashed sweat contributed significantly. Most similar camps were grey, both in ambient and the resigned state of mind of their inhabitants. *At least this one has character.*

The makeshift shacks were built out of junk and lacked sturdiness. *Maybe that's it. Maybe they're so broken they no longer care. When a*

sandstorm blasts away their flimsy shelters, the survivors pick up the scraps and rebuild according to their momentary needs.

Leona walked to her pack animal and led it to the middle of the camp. Filling her backpack with gift bags wouldn't require such a long walk, and she hoped the camp residents would seek her out on their own.

She passed by a man wearing a coat with a missing sleeve and pink sunglasses. "Here, have some food and clean water."

The man grabbed the bag and ran away without a word.

"Compliments of EnrRrei!" Leona yelled after him.

It occurred to her that she was the only one walking with her head held up high. Leona truly believed in the humanitarian nature of her task: she believed that spreading the word and influence of EnrRrei, and thus denying the influence of other demons, was the best thing for these poor souls. *EnrRrei might be a power-hungry strategist, but at least she's not a raging butcher.*

Humans were drawn to the deserts. They hoped to escape the zombies and vampires preying upon them, and they were willing to accept horrible living conditions as last resort. But, they rarely realized in time that the desert was also a battlefield: the demonic entities used humans for their own nefarious purposes, and without the distractions of overabundant life, their presence was strongest in desert areas.

It was no accident that most desert dwellers had at least one screw missing. Though hopelessness alone could drive a person crazy, the botched or expired possessions of demonic entities rarely left minds undisturbed. The ones who didn't resist sometimes managed to avoid insanity - but at a deeper cost.

Leona knocked on and peeked inside an abode with two occupants. "Hello! May I talk to you?"

"Come in!"

Leona bent her back and kneeled to squeeze in. She tried to refrain from grimacing at the horrid smell that greeted her.

"Come, friend, share a meal with us!" The hunched man offered her something sticky and grey, which she accepted.

"Thank you. What is this?"

"Dried desert rat meat, of course! The leg's a delicacy. We know how to treat our guests right," he elbowed his partner, "huh Emelyn?"

The hunched woman smiled with a toothless grin.

Reluctantly, Leona downed the rat leg in one gulp - she didn't want her taste buds to get into any contact with it. "Mmh, delicious!" With a timely increase of hormone secretions or minor induced mutations, EnrRrei's influence protected her against most diseases.

"Right? I told you," the man beamed.

Nutty, but adorably sincere.

Leona's smirk conveyed sadness, and she nodded. "To repay your generosity and hospitality, please take this." She offered one of her gift bags.

The man took the bag and peeked inside. "Look Emelyn, what treasures!" Both of them looked at Leona with wide eyes. "Are you an angel from heaven?"

"I'm a priestess of EnrRrei; she rewards generosity and loyal worship. Here, take another bag. Give thanks to her tonight, will you?"

Too awestruck to reply, the man accepted the bag silently.

"We've had a priest of Shkazzrt pass through here..." the woman rasped, "but you're much nicer than that fellow. I'll pray he chokes to death." She illustrated with a two-handed choking gesture, complete with gurgling sounds.

Leona's smirk was more mischievous this time. "Take care." She got to her feet and left the tiny shack.

Leona considered herself lucky to avoid their fate. Thanks to her skillset and quick wit, several demonic entities approached her years ago - the ones who wanted her mind and personality intact protected her from the others. In the end, she chose EnrRrei, who offered partnership rather than subservience or possession. *She stayed true to her promise.*

Leona noticed a man - not far from her mutated mule - banging on his own head with a piece of metal pipe. She found that peculiar, but nobody seemed to care. *An everyday occurrence?*

She approached the man with open arms held high and one of her gift bags in hand. "Good day, my fellow human! Why are you-

When he noticed Leona, his pained grimace turned into a furious one. "You!" He shoved her and started swinging the pipe menacingly. "This is my kingdom! Mine!"

Leona dropped the bag and deflected the blows without much effort - a moderate knowledge of close-combat restraining techniques came in useful when dealing with crazy people on a daily basis.

One of Leona's blocks hurt the man's pipe-holding hand, and he dropped it. "My kingdom! Get out of my kingdom!" Regardless, he continued the assault.

Camp-folk started gathering around, not out of concern, but out of eagerness to be entertained. They kicked up the iron-rich sand and the color red infused the dreary landscape.

Leona considered her options as she defended herself: *Retreat looks bad. Subduing the bastard or putting him out of his misery looks worse. Involving the audience looks bad too, unless...*

Being a priestess had its perks - for example, being alone never meant truly alone. Although EnrRrei usually initiated contact, Leona learned to focus her thoughts a certain way to start a conversation inside her mind. In case of danger, fear or pain would also serve as triggers.

Talking to EnrRrei was always a peculiar experience. Sometimes EnrRrei talked to her in delicately crafted sentences in languages she understood. At other times, it was more of a turbulent exchange; an ebb and flow of thoughts, emotions, states of mind, and even identities - these were brief, but quite exhausting. When it was a matter of urgency to EnrRrei, the diverse mental imagery was accompanied by sentences in demonic languages - none of which Leona spoke, but she could always understand the words while they reverberated in her mind.

Despite fending off the blows and being increasingly scrutinized by the observers, Leona calmed herself and held up the outline of her plan clearly in her mind.

EnrRrei's attention turned to her - it felt like consciousness being sucked out of her body and spit back. Temporarily dazed, her hands moved on their own to defend against the clumsy, but increasingly frustrated attacks.

An emotion of complete acceptance echoed through her being and calmed her once again - EnrRrei's way of saying 'okay'.

Feeling significantly stronger than usual, Leona grabbed the man's arms and held him immobile. She yelled out for everyone to hear: "Souls weak and lost, hear me, for ye shall be lost no longer! Witness the power and benevolent embrace of EnrRrei!"

The man squealed and struggled to no avail, but like a switch turned off, the willingness to resist left him abruptly.

Leona had a vague idea how this worked: after cutting the Gordian knot of dead-end patterns of the mind, EnrRrei pushed out the leftover jumble of demonic energies and replaced it with her own. Being merely touched by a demon wasn't the same as being possessed by it, since a large degree of free will remained. *Probably that pest Shkazzrt or Orummagh. Not Rremine though, she doesn't do sloppy.*

Leona let go of the man and started chanting. "EnrRrei's the greatest! EnrRrei's the greatest!" She vehemently waved her arms around as she tried to motivate the camp dwellers to chant as well. At first, only the most feeble of mind joined in. It slowly gathered momentum and grew louder - merely by its nature as a chant and not its meaning.

The man's eyes popped open. "I can see," he murmured. "I mean, I can think! I'm 'me' again!" He grinned wide and lifted his arms to hug Leona. "You have my eternal gratitude!"

She smiled back and accepted the hug. *Much good it will do you, a cynical side of her remarked. Just wait till the endorphin high wears off, you're in for a mighty headache.* She felt EnrRrei's energies slowly withdraw.

In her mind, a leftover thought stood out prominently: *"Keep up the good work."*

The crowd cheered and kept on chanting. *You had your show; time to pay up.*

"Please, may I have your attention!" The clamor subsided. "Let's give praise to EnrRrei by joining in worship and praying together - may she bless this community! I'll be happy to hand out whatever food and water I have left afterward."

Leona inhaled - the wind whistled a broken tune - and she shouted out at the top of her lungs: "EnrRrei's the greatest!"

Being always right is easy. When you don't know something, say: "I don't know."

- Dreamer's Handbook

Nerat stumbled, but that didn't slow him down. He scampered on all fours until he restored balance, and continued running.

Go, go... don't stop... His breathing was erratic. They'll regret what they did to us...

The plants and trees of the Ashen Forest thrived due to ample sunlight, high humidity, and the leftover radiation from ages past.

Nerat focused on keeping his body running without losing consciousness. His subconscious used whatever emotions it could to achieve that goal: fear of death, fear of motionlessness, and a burning, but wholly unrealistic desire for revenge - sprinkled in with a dash of excitement.

Born in captivity to the Crimson River clan, Nerat's mother raised him the best she could. Childhood was denied to all the young ones; the vampires kept them fed, but treated them like cattle. When she died, he mustered the courage to escape.

She had told him tales of clans treating their humans with respect. The people had the freedom to walk away, and the trade was also a fair one: food, shelter and protection in exchange for clean blood. These mythical vampires liked the taste of blood better when it was voluntarily given, but in Nerat's experience, the Crimson River preferred the flavor of stress-inducing hormones. Though he believed the tales when he was younger, he often wondered: why didn't these strong and honorable vampires come and rescue them? As he grew older, he came to the conclusion that even if they existed, they didn't care about humans enough to interfere with other vampire clans.

Nerat dreamed of a place where humans lived free from everyone else, yet, strangely, his mother told no such tales. Closest to it were the stories of deranged people living in the desert - unwanted by anyone except the scorching sun, the cold desert nights, and the deadly caress of sandstorms.

I should have escaped before blood-draining, not after... I should have waited for another opportunity...

Another misstep yanked Nerat back to the present. *No!* He forcefully cleared the doubts from his mind - he couldn't afford them.

Although maintaining coherency of thoughts was hard, at least his legs carried him forward. Running more on adrenaline than blood, Nerat's brain adjusted to the deficiency by alternating between the senses: the colorful and humid scent of the forest was accentuated by the smell of the animal excrement he got smeared over his left shoe.

When the smells retreated, for a short while, his vision unblurred and came into focus. He could see the path ahead: *Those branches will make too much noise when stepped on. I'll hop over that big rock and go around that patch of thorny plants - they might be poisonous.*

When his sight blacked out like a fading memory, hearing took over. He heard his own steps hitting the soft ground - the rustling of leaves, the birds' song, his own heartbeat, and the loud absence of sounds that would give away pursuers. *I know you're there.*

Nerat didn't even notice when hearing turned tactile. Awareness of his footsteps and heartbeat remained the same, and the wind rustling the leaves conversed with him through his skin. When the sensation of the sun's warm rays turned into sight again, the circle began anew.

Taste imposed now and again, but it was suppressed at once: his subconscious decided that being reminded of the foul, dried up feeling in his mouth served no useful purpose - it tasted too much like defeat.

Nerat's sense of time fell casualty to the jumble of perceptions. The run wasn't something he was doing, but a state he existed in. He ran and ran, keeping up the will to move forward and not even noticing the occasional stumble anymore.

A distant sound broke this strange continuity of awareness. He stopped, and listened. His focus narrowed almost to a single point. The sound didn't repeat itself, but he replayed it in his memory while it was still fresh: the sound of a large twig breaking. *Have they caught up? How did they find me?! I have no open wounds; they couldn't have smelled my blood!*

Nerat knew he had to make a decision before his focus diminished. He inspected his surroundings, but saw only trees and leaves everywhere. A grim realization brought cold sweat on top of regular perspiration: *I hope I haven't been running in circles!*

He calmed down and dismissed the thought. *Not much I can do about it.* He looked around again, and headed for a denser part of the forest. *I have to find a place to hide. Who knows how long I'll have strength to run, and if they're near, they'll hear me.*

Darkness descended as fewer of the sun's rays penetrated the leaves, and the ground got muddier, too. *If I go farther, they'll surely be able to track my footprints... I'll just hide here.* He hunkered down behind a mound of earth raised by the roots of a large tree.

The tiredness hit him as soon as he stopped moving. His lungs burned with each shallow breath, and he could barely keep his eyes open.

In the next moment - he didn't notice he dozed off for a considerable length of time - he heard the sound of another twig breaking, merely a few steps away.

There was no time for panic to set in. A hideous creature - *what's wrong with that face?* - lunged for him. Before Nerat could fully stand up and run away, the creature scratched his side and grabbed him at the waist. Nerat turned around and kicked up with his knee, but the creature didn't let go.

A zombie! Its clothes were ragged and most of its flesh decomposing. Nerat saw zombies before; the vampires brought them in for sport when fleeing captives didn't provide enough entertainment. The worst were the eyes - those empty, disconcerting eyes.

Nerat fell on his back, which gave him the opportunity to kick with both legs. He managed to knock the zombie back, but couldn't get up fast enough before it closed in again.

Nerat felt the zombie's bony claws draw blood and its teeth sink into his upper arm. Pus and diseased fluids pressed against and smeared all over his torso.

Even in such a moment of pain and lethal danger, his fear of vampires was dominant: *The blood! They'll sense my blood!*

He pummeled the zombie's face with his elbow, trying to shake it off. *Was that 'crack' its nose breaking or my elbow?*

The zombie's grip lessened. Nerat pushed the decaying mass off - it stumbled backwards and fell. Not letting the advantage go to waste, he followed up with kicks as powerful as he could muster.

Momentarily catching his breath, Nerat backed off and got hold of a thick branch. He started pestling the body with deadly pokes and striking it with wide swings.

When the zombie's skull was smashed to pieces and its brain to pulp, Nerat let go of the branch and slumped down beside the corpse.

He expected to faint from exhaustion, but minutes passed... and instead of feeling worse, he started feeling better.

Nerat's breathing steadied; shallow breaths were just as good as deep ones. That hazy, dreamlike feeling... gone. All his senses were alert and functional - he felt not only rested, but better and sharper than ever before in his life. The taste of freedom brought exhilaration, sure, but it went deeper than a mere feeling. His wounds already clotted and he felt no pain from them whatsoever.

With newfound sharpness, his mind pointed out matter-of-factly and without mercy: *I'm becoming a zombie and my brain is cannibalizing itself. If I don't find brains to eat, I'll become mindless like this corpse.*

Nerat was running out of time in more ways than one. The vampires were presumably on his trail, and though he had a lot more time before becoming completely mindless, his sharpness was bound to fade sooner than that.

Getting used to his current self would take a while, but the decision what to do next was easier - the cognitive second sight opened up possibilities and brought clarity of consequence.

I'll stand my ground and fight. If I succeed, I'll be free of the Crimson River and feast on their brains. The notion no longer disgusted him. *If not, at least I die a free man.*

A plan slowly formed in Nerat's mind. *I'll need a weapon. Tools. I'll set up traps if there's time.* Even though he knew nothing about traps, the interconnected working of many things became clear to him. *False tracks and trails of blood. Maybe I'll find more zombies to distract them with. I'll split them apart and surprise them one by one - I doubt they're used to resistance from fleeing captives. Arrogant, egoistic bunch... they won't see me coming.*

Nerat walked to the corpse and looked for a protruding bone fragment. He jerked it free, and with it, started slicing off the flesh to get to the femur. It wasn't too difficult; the decaying flesh was softly obedient.

When he retrieved the bone, he checked if it was brittle - it was not. He carefully cracked the bone on a nearby stone, and then snapped it in half, resulting in a clean break with sharp edges on both ends. "Excellent! My first weapons!"

Self-confidence was an unfamiliar, but welcome feeling.

I'm at peace. Let's get to work.

Cultivated for religious and societal control, 'sin' and 'evil' are concepts important to understand and dismiss:

The 'original sin' refers to the birth of human self-awareness. Similarly, all other sins refer to acts of carving out pieces of God and claiming exclusivity over them.

A human perspective on a divine process, 'evil' is when God sins against itself through the act of creation.

- Dreamer's Handbook

For mages, only one concept comes close to making sense as a sin: 'boredom'.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"It's a butterfly! Scarlet, look!"

Elise held up her seared hand and the butterfly landed on her fingertip.

Scarlet bristled up. She eyed it suspiciously.

"It's a butterfly..." Talking was difficult for Elise; her throat would have been dry, if not for the blood lubricating it from the inside.

It's a hallucination. I am delirious. It didn't make sense for a butterfly to be in the middle of the desert, with no vegetation or other life in sight.

Her previous estimation of their time of arrival has been grossly exceeded. The sun sailed high in the sky, raining down its deadly rays in full force. The world spun.

Gone was the mild, prickly sensation which made Elise feel alive. Layers of her skin peeled off faster than it could regenerate, and in several spots exposed the underlying muscle tissue.

The pack she carried lay discarded somewhere in the desert. Her shoes, too, were lost.

Her feet were a bloody mess, contained by ragged socks she dared not look at. The heat from the quarterstaff was barely insulated by the piece of

cloth around her grip. Each exhausting breath brought scraping particles of sand shredding her lungs.

Her sense of direction ceased to function a long time ago... but moving forward was better than not.

"Oh," she rasped, "the butterfly is gone..."

Her state of mind was no better than could be expected under the circumstances.

She occasionally glanced at the sun, which caused burned-in afterimages in her vision. Because of these bright spots she unwittingly stared right at it too, effectively blinding herself for the short term.

Sensory deprivation followed the overload, which helped Elise maintain a state of detachment from her situation - it was the pain that kept bringing her back.

Scarlet endured the challenges better, maybe because Elise carried her most of the way. Despite a lack of major wounds, she was shedding fur and skin flakes.

Now and again she went hunting, returning with insects or small reptiles, neither of which had the warm blood to nourish them both. Desert rats were more difficult to find.

Elise slowly noticed a change in Scarlet's behavior: she flailed around with her paws like she was trying to swat away imaginary flies.

She thought nothing of it at first, but this behavior started to irritate Elise. By embracing a rhythm of placing one step after the other, Elise had found a kind of escape from the reality of the situation - and these nervous movements dispelled that.

If she could just stop...

Elise tried just looking away, but that didn't work. Each hissing breath and slight shifting of sand made her acutely aware of the movements and the underlying agitation.

Relationships never brought Elise anything but trouble. All the other vampires were right - one should care only about one's own self. Caring about others was a weakness which prevented one from experiencing true freedom.

Such an annoyance.

Even in her state, under the death-birthing sun in the middle of the desert, she could be free. Truly free.

Elise picked Scarlet up, who still tried to swat the flies away.

With just a quick motion, she could be free... It would be so easy to kill this being in her hands. She could enjoy the power such a freedom would bring. No chains, no limits... She imagined its neck snapping...

Scarlet stared fiercely into Elise's eyes. She wasn't looking at Elise, but something behind her eyes. The nervous tick was gone and she was wholly unconcerned with the possibility of death.

Elise's hands almost moved on her own. She could hear echoes of laughter, torment, and the purity of no attachments. But that complete trust in Scarlet's eyes, so unnerving... so infuriating!

Something snapped within, and the house of cards that propped up Elise's line of thought came tumbling down. She no longer wished to kill Scarlet - quite the opposite. She continued to look into Scarlet's eyes, chasing the reflection, trying to see what she saw...

Elise put Scarlet down and yelled out: "You have no hold here, demon! Show yourself!"

She heard a cruel, yet playful laughter, thankfully more outside of her than inside. It was toying with her.

"Which one are you, so I know whose name to curse!"

The cruel laugh turned into a menacing roar - SHKAZZRT - trying to lock her in and devour her from outside-in. Every fear and anxiety she ever had imploded on her, tugging at the touch-points of her consciousness.

"Fear? Is that all you have!" It was Elise's turn to laugh. "Don't you understand? I'm empty - I have nothing left to fear!" She laughed and laughed. This time it was the demon's presence being locked out, wailing against an invisible barrier with voices lost... and fading fast.

The silence was welcome, but Elise continued laughing - and crying - until she began coughing up blood in significant quantities. The laugh then turned into a gurgling giggle. Despite all, she felt strangely cheerful.

The laughter cleared her mind. "I'm sorry, Scarlet." *My sense of direction is gone to hell. We can't give up, though.*

They walked on, placing one foot after the other, Elise leaning on her staff. It wasn't before long that the void caused by the demon's absence - or rather, his forceful eviction - attracted undue attention.

Scarlet stopped and hissed.

This time, Elise noticed the presence intruding from the direction she was made aware of before. "We have company again."

The changes which started occurring in Elise's body were innocuous at first: a twitch here, a flutter there. Nothing her body wouldn't produce on its own.

The flutters could have been just her imagination, but cramping and muscle spasms followed. Elise missed a step and almost fell. The intermittent bright pain of pinched nerves, clearly distinguishable from the constant dull ones, lightening from the inside.

This demon needed no introduction. Her body was familiar with the influence and responsive to the demon's will.

Still, that canister of blood - in another life - made it easier to anticipate the changes and put up a resistance. The rage without reason, the mindless desire for destruction... Elise had no remaining energy the demon could turn against her.

The experience was similar as before, but she sensed the living consciousness behind it this time. Nerves and muscles coordinated, and parts of her body tried to move against her will.

Unlike Shkazzrt, Orummagh made no effort to communicate with her or influence her psyche; the rage he conveyed was a side-effect of the interaction. *My body is a resource... But it's mine and not his.*

Elise fell to the ground.

The mind-invasion apparently worked both ways. She saw glimpses of the demonic consciousness: the way it worked and existed, its equivalent of emotions and that other, rage-filed plane of existence - but she cared for none of it and wished it would go away.

Vying for control was not enough for Orummagh; the mutations commenced. Elise's flesh puffed up in places, drawing energy from beyond, cracking bones and bringing more irrelevant pain, only to simmer down and start anew a moment later.

Elise tried to prevent the expansion of her flesh by curling into a fetal position. She contracted her muscles to keep her original form. Her shoulder, her thigh, her bloodied foot - she kept gripping and applying pressure to the problem areas to prevent them from ballooning up.

Scarlet helped too: she sunk her jaws into her thigh and later her upper arm, trying to lock it down without tearing out a bite.

Elise screamed, and kept screaming...

It was normal. She had no way of knowing if that meant she was still fighting off the demon's influence, or that she has already lost.

After a while, she saw Scarlet in front of her eyes, coming closer to touch noses. Elise was still screaming in her mind, but heard only a gurgle.

It's done? Is it done?

Scarlet kept licking her face for comfort.

Elise tried to relax, but her body knew not how. She rocked back and forth, lying curled up in the sand, which was roasting her to the degree of almost cauterizing her wounds.

Elise didn't know why Orummagh left either, but she was relieved that he did.

His attention may have been required elsewhere or he might have gotten bored. Or maybe it just wasn't worth the effort for him. She grinned through bloody teeth and with lips pressing against the sand. I'm no one's tool.

She suspected that unlike last time, there simply wasn't enough foreign material in her body to facilitate the mutation.

Due to being thoroughly weakened, her innate regeneration slowed down even further. The sun claimed more layers of her peeling skin going up in smoke. She welcomed the pain, for it meant she was still alive.

"I'm sorry, Scarlet... Go. You can make it out of here without me."

So this is how I die. Victorious, under the flames of the sun - an appropriate death for a vampire.

Scarlet kept gently petting her face with her paw and meowing.

Elise breathed shallow breaths, drifting between the strange wakefulness and the welcoming lack of it. She could still hear the fizzing sound of her disintegrating flesh.

Suddenly a new kind of sharp pain in her forehead burst forward, greeting her:

"I have been observing you, mortal. You're not weak. You're now under the protection of ENRRREI; follow the direction marked by your

instinct and my devoted will meet you. I will prevent your consciousness from passing out, but you'll have to find the strength to survive. If you're worthy of my attention, you will."

Your emotional attitude toward your goals is often the most significant obstacle to achieving them.

Emotional self-sabotage comes in many forms of attachment: to suffering, to unworthiness, to entitlement, to delusions, to the status quo, to stereotypes, to poverty, to comfort, to loss etc.

These kinds of inertia can be excruciatingly hard to notice and beat. In each case, you'll find fears behind these attachments - or the realization that the goal you set is not really what you wanted in the first place.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"I don't think she is alive," Nerat remarked.

Elise was unsure whether the voices she heard came from outside of her head or inside it. Despite complete mental and physical exhaustion, she still clinged to a thread of consciousness. Her senses, however, were mostly shut down.

"She is still alive. Barely," Leona said.

Elise had no energy left for analyzing the words, they just registered and disappeared without comprehension.

"Could you lift her head?" Nerat asked. "I'll pour some water."

Drops of water trickled down Elise's throat. The cough reflex was present, but powerless.

"I don't think that's going to do it," Leona said, rolling up her sleeve.

"What are you doing?"

"Whatever it takes."

Elise felt her mouth open, and then her jaws were pressed together to bite down on a familiar softness. At first, the flowing blood was greedily absorbed before it could travel down her throat, and her body reacted reflexively by biting down hard and not letting go.

The taste was exquisite, like nothing she has tasted before. It was life itself. All reactions of her newly electrified body served one purpose: to get more of this ambrosia.

"Enough!" Nerat yelled.

Leona tried to get her heavily bleeding arm out of Elise's locked jaws, but the attempt only made it worse.

"Let me try." Nerat worked to pry her mouth open, but the exerted force didn't suffice. Elise's teeth were sharp, nicking his fingers, and the multiple tries smeared some of his blood on Elise's lips.

The godly nourishment suddenly became tainted. Elise's body reacted with revulsion, releasing Leona's hand.

"Do we have bandages?" Nerat asked. "You've lost too much blood."

"That won't be necessary," Leona waved him down. "I'll live, and so will she."

"We also have to drag the girl... I can't carry the both of you."

"Well, I didn't make it in time for you, but I'll be damned if I let this one waste away. My wound will clot soon and EnrRrei will give me strength. If necessary, I'll ask her to send people to meet us."

Elise felt the ground move as she was briefly dragged across the sand.

"You have a lot of faith in this demon of yours," Nerat grumbled. "And what about the cat?"

Leona walked back and inspected Scarlet. "It lives." She laid her on top of Elise and into her charred arms.

"It's alright, you can sleep now," Leona comforted Elise. "EnrRrei has released your awareness. We'll take good care of you, just rest."

* * *

I thought only humans could dream.

Elise's awareness drifted and soared... The vivid colors, the freedom of motion and the lightness of existence were unlike she has ever experienced before.

Young and expecting Mothers were known to have rare dreams, which were often ascribed visionary or even prophetic qualities. Such dreams raised the Mothers' social standing as arbiters of wisdom.

Give me wisdom, but keep the pregnancy, thank you very much.

For Elise, falling asleep usually involved the gradual dissipation of mental focus, until she finally transitioned to a dreamless oblivion. Her mind played out possible past and future scenarios which grew increasingly unrealistic - however, they never took off with a life of their own.

The short, deep and dreamless sleep was generally sufficient to rejuvenate her body, but she never realized it was possible to achieve such extraordinary clarity and freshness of mind.

Despite everything, humans dare to dream. As far as Elise could tell, dreams brought them fleeting happiness, but at the cost of disproportionately more suffering. *How odd...*

The concept of happiness wasn't easy to relate to, because most vampires could only be fulfilled with power - in any and all of its forms. Yet, Elise was beginning to understand why many humans paid such a high cost gladly.

In a roundabout way, she finally acquired the freedom she was looking for. It didn't come from being free from life-threatening dangers or the pressures of society; it came from being free from herself.

This freedom brought a precious present in form of a new perspective: she was out of her body, outside of her usual self.

When misused, hardened egos and bodies can be a prison.

Yet, forgetting and wiping the slate clean of pressure didn't weaken her - on the contrary, it strengthened her. The patterns defining her and holding her in place dissolved into the background which was also herself.

I can recreate herself. I can forge my own destiny!

No longer content to simply drift away from the unwanted, she moved in a direction which resembled her fire burning within, steadily transforming the past and solidifying it into the purity of a backbone.

As her awareness expanded, she encountered more pain, which in turn led to anger and encroaching helplessness, setting a boundary on her movement in that direction.

She glimpsed flames which were not readily her own. *Demons rage against all the wrongness grating at their awareness - and they end up creating more of it.* There was a self-fueling, cannibalizing structure to all of it.

The presence of demonic entities left a bad taste; negative feelings threatened to swallow her and she didn't venture closer to examine. Nevertheless, they offered points of reference to orient herself by.

Elise moved away from anger to the opposite direction, towards a feeling of love. A vast open space unfolded, filled with sand and marked with obelisks.

Scarlet!

Scarlet was engaged in a hunt or a battle, ripping through enemies with superior speed. She was motion incarnate, a projectile of teeth and claws. When blows diverted her from her path, she homed in again without stopping.

Elise felt the emotions driving Scarlet as her own: the heat of the battle, the sheer exhilaration, the hunt of challenging prey, and oddly, a concern for her two-legged partner's well-being and the strong desire to protect her.

When Elise concentrated she could see through Scarlet's eyes - but it was too fast and confusing. She could comprehend the motion only in time-sliced chunks.

Scarlet attacked a towering enemy, and after inflicting a mortal wound, picked up the pace even more. Her heart beat rapidly.

An explosion from behind singed Scarlet's fur and propelled her airborne body forward-

The suddenness surprised Elise and dislodged her awareness. Without mercy, to deal with the sudden loss of context, the act evoked and imposed a scene from her recent memory:

A husk of a body lay on the desert sand, disintegrating, Scarlet still in its arms.

Oh... Elise observed from above. So this is what death feels like... I guess it's not so bad.

Integrate death into your awareness; whether you like it or not, it is already an integral part of your life.

Not doing so creates a bubble which distances you from your own life. It distorts the perspective required to appreciate the important things in life, and robs you of its beauty.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"Will she awaken?" Gareth asked.

Humid air and the happy chirp of birds filled the wooden cabin. The overabundance of demonic influence made Scarlet uneasy, but she's gotten used to it enough to relax.

Leona answered with a shrug. "No reason why she wouldn't; her will is strong."

"Hmm... Even if her spirit lingers, that doesn't guarantee she will regain function."

Scarlet was grateful for the rescue, and their intentions towards Elise remained benevolent. Still, she rarely left Elise's side, and conveyed with threatening clarity what would happen if they tried to forcibly remove her.

"Is she combat-trained?" Gareth asked.

"I assume she is," Leona said. "She's a vampire, after all."

"Experience taught me never to expect too much... but it would be nice not to have to train her from scratch. Assuming, of course, she's going to be my ward. What is EnrRrei's interest in her, anyway?"

"As I mentioned, her will is strong. Beside that, EnrRrei said she has the ability to push back."

"Push back?' What does that mean?"

"No idea, your guess is as good as-"

The mood in the room changed abruptly. Leona and Gareth looked up to the ceiling, and for several seconds stared motionlessly into the distance. They turned around and departed without saying a word.

Their sudden change in behavior placed Scarlet in a state of high alert. That highly suspicious and precise synchronization sent a chill along her spine, and she pondered from what depth this feeling of disturbance originated.

Scarlet circled in place as she deliberated her next move. On one hand, she wanted to stay by Elise's side to protect her, but on the other hand, unknown dangers had to be explored before they could be defended against.

Scarlet licked Elise's face and exited the cabin.

Vegetation thrived under the limited space and abundant resources of the oasis. The weighty air and that damned sunshine were small discomforts, but Scarlet continued running toward the dry air of the desert.

Slowly, jungle-like vegetation gave way to an agriculturally relevant biosphere. Swarms of humans worked diligently to support it.

Farm buildings multiplied over the timid landscape, with rammed earth and cob replacing wood as main construction materials. Leona and Gareth were faster and more enduring than Scarlet expected, but she did her best not to lose sight of them.

The ground under Scarlet's feet dried up and hardened. The gentle breeze turned into a gust toying with increasing amounts of sand.

People prayed and lived in the desert, in tents and makeshift shacks with no real protection against sandstorms - but closer to EnrRrei. Religious cohesion and a sense of aliveness thoroughly permeated their community. They moved with purpose and conviction, blending in a kind of majesty with the squalor.

An arrangement of obelisks adorned and pierced the desert as far as eyes could see, with the sole purpose of anchoring EnrRrei's influence. The oasis life in the center of her territory was a drain on EnrRrei's energy, but she got back way more from the human worship it supported - this vortex of energy constituted the spine of her presence.

Scarlet felt this flow, but she also sensed a disruptive turbulence.

More and more people gathered to march forward in the same direction. They held farming tools: pitchforks, scythes, axes, mauls, and knives.

Scarlet was closing the distance, but Leona and Gareth continued to dash forward, joined by the trickling stream of others.

She finally saw what the fuss was about: humanoid figures kept rushing in from the opposite direction. Farmers caught without weapons couldn't put up much resistance, and were promptly slaughtered.

With the source of the danger known, Scarlet considered turning back and standing guard at Elise's side. She concluded it would be better to stem the tide here - if they broke through all the way to the oasis, she wouldn't be able to help Elise anyway.

Scarlet kept observing and analyzing the incoming battlefield:

She saw Leona fighting with unyielding conviction and a metallic baton.

With twin blades in his hand, Gareth whirled like a dervish. No longer an assassin, he became a holy warrior meting out desert justice upon those who would desecrate the spirit of the place.

Scarlet recognized the smell of the larger foes: Orummagh's thralls were few but powerful, leaping through the air with hulking jumps. They charged at groups and swung around wildly - mostly at air, since the assailed scattered quickly. The few who failed to avoid the smashes died quick deaths.

The movements of Shkazzrt's regular-sized thralls were fast and erratic. EnrRrei's folk had difficulty adjusting to the savage and unpredictable strikes, and had success against them only in groups - which, in turn, attracted the attention of the big ones.

The advantage of EnrRrei's devoted lay in their superior numbers and eerily supernatural coordination. Though their harmonized dance was beyond that of pack animals, perhaps even hive insects, alone they were no match for either the power of Orummagh's thralls or the instinctive furor of Shkazzrt's. Still, they had no choice but to fight defensively, aiming to minimize losses until the attackers' number dwindled.

Scarlet has grown significantly in size since her first encounter with Elise, and so has her confidence in confronting increasingly larger and dangerous prey. At first, the enemy didn't perceive her as a threat, which she turned to her advantage.

Scarlet avoided the first strike of a thrall in her way, and then the follow-up as well. His movements were chaotic, but thanks to her exceptional reflexes she rended the thrall in response.

Changing course mid-air was not an option, which made Scarlet vulnerable when jumping to attack. She mitigated that risk by positioning herself carefully and feinting as required.

After inflicting a few more wounds, the husk fell to the ground. The eyes looked human, but they were so... empty.

Scarlet threw herself into battle:

She ripped through enemies with superior speed. She was motion incarnate, a projectile of teeth and claws. When blows diverted her from her path, she homed in again without stopping.

Scarlet ignored the strong déjà vu effect rippling through her, and shook off the double vision which followed, too.

Despite the obvious danger they presented, the thralls were not worthy prey - Scarlet did them a favor by killing them. Nevertheless, they too possessed a degree of shared awareness, and by racking up kills Scarlet's presence gained corresponding weight.

Suddenly, a hulk exploded nearby.

That atrocious, familiar smell... A few things began to make sense for Scarlet. That gather-scatter dance, for one. EnrRrei's tactic comprised of spreading out her followers, and triggering the explosion while sacrificing as few as possible. They seemed to obey gladly and without second thought.

When more explosions followed, Scarlet involuntarily imagined one of them reaching the wooden cabin... but put the distracting image out of her mind.

Despite EnrRrei's intention, the thralls rarely exploded on a single individual. Their deaths were not completely in vain; by observing carefully, Scarlet noticed a red haze and a delay between the induction of an explosion and its inevitable finality.

She was confident she could outpace that delay. Turning the tide of battle would contribute greatly to Elise's safety, and as a welcome side-effect, save a few of the people who gave them support in a time of dire need.

Scarlet neared a group engaged in a similar dancing attack, and timed the pattern of the smash.

Being on all fours, closer to ground, proved to be a vital advantage: she flanked, and at an opportune moment, hopped to the back of the monster's leg and continued scaling it. To keep herself stable, her claws sunk in as deep as they could, and she withdrew them with enough force to rip the flesh in her wake.

Undeterred by mistimed slaps from the giant, she sought out the eyes and tore them out.

A weird, shrieking roar came from the thrall... Scarlet jumped off right away, avoiding a lethal smash in the nick of time.

Enrrei's fighters continued to attack while it became increasingly enraged. Scarlet waited a few heartbeats, and just when she was about to go for another run, she noticed the thrall stand momentarily still.

Immediately, Scarlet turned around and ran as fast as she could. The others started to run as well...

Scarlet's heart beat rapidly.

Pressure from behind lifted her up into the air and propelled her forward. With her fur sizzling and internal organs possibly rupturing, Scarlet felt like she was flying apart in more directions than one.

She landed rough and tumbled even longer. A cloud of sand followed her and refused to settle, impairing her vision. Her body ached, and that awful smell violated every pore in her body...

Scarlet sneezed.

She stretched to see if her body still obeyed - it did. She could still move. She could still fight. She was alive!

The pain pushed worry out and magnified the thrill of the hunt - a steep price for getting closer to her true self.

Despite the pain, she ran forward... there were enemies to dispose of.

Those who don't get into the habit of dying frequently, wither inside - and death comes all at once to finally free them from their fear.

- Dreamer's Handbook

On wings laced with the shimmer of demonic energies, the butterfly flittered not-so-innocently toward the rabid priest. With a strong, unnatural push, it flew inside the frothing mouth and continued down the windpipe. The possessed human started coughing, but the obstruction in his airway remained lodged, as if held there by an invisible hand.

Unlike other demonic entities, Rremine learned to control the rage in her eons of existence. She didn't forsake it, of course, but she preferred to express her aggression with refined elegance rather than clumsy brutality.

Guiding the butterfly from the overgrown park in the abandoned city all the way to the edge of the desert required patience that not many of her kind exhibited. She enjoyed gliding her consciousness over the urban jungle - so much life, so much strife, yet so little of the rage characteristic of demonic existence.

The priest croaked and punched himself several times in the chest and throat. This earned him a miniscule amount of air, just enough to prolong his suffering.

Possessing small animals was Rremine's favorite pastime; several others could possess rats and cats without frying their puny brains, but none could control a butterfly. This was not only a source of pride for Rremine, but also a source of great power: since she could achieve more with less, she wasn't dependent on humanoid worship to assert her will and domain.

Elder demons respected her power, but those looking to expand at her expense occasionally mistook finesse for weakness. The youngest often pissed in her backyard, ignorant of her presence altogether.

The priest fell. With bulging eyes, he continued the struggle against the inevitable.

Rremine considered herself a teacher and a scholar amongst demons. A teacher, because the young ones who went against her - knowingly or unknowingly - had to be taught harsh lessons. A scholar, because gently

poking around humanoid minds helped her appreciate languages and cold logic. *One thought after the other - the linearity is so limiting, yet so carefree.* She considered curse words delicious.

No one knew for sure how demonic entities came to be - humans thought they came from some other world. Rremine's theory was that the sleeping spirits of nature, which kept laws of physics in check, got rudely jolted into awakening by the suffering from numerous apocalypses. She suspected human emotion - especially billions crying against their fate - molded them into these raging, seemingly otherworldly entities. However, she was careful about voicing such opinions, even among her more thoughtful brethren.

At last, the priest's heart stopped beating and Rremine released her grip. *That dimwit Shkazzrt... reinforcing for physical strength without setting up any kind of internal resilience makes it so easy to kill them.*

She condensed her awareness to inspect the present locality: it was a makeshift camp at the edge of a desert. Some of the inhabitants gathered around the corpse and poked it a few times. A quick, non-intrusive touch upon their minds confirmed that they all suffered severe mental illnesses - most caused by Shkazzrt's directionless and botched possessions.

Though conscious worship granted demons the cleanest and least volatile form of energy (that's why Rremine cooperated with only a select few), subconscious worship through fear and terror provided lots of brute energy. It fueled rage and made a demon feel powerful - but didn't have much controlled use.

This should teach him not to bring such filth near me.

The deceased priest barely deserved the title. 'Hatemonger' or 'instigator' would have been more accurate, since he wasn't preaching the tenets of a well-designed demonic religion, just sprouting whatever hateful nonsense came to him. Maintaining that elevated level of fear and hate kept Shkazzrt in the forefront of their minds.

A strange kind of silence settled upon the camp. With the loudest of them gone, the ragtag survivors struggled to find something else to fill the void with.

For people as thoroughly broken as them, the one thing worse than starvation or the assault of the elements was to be left alone inside their own minds, with no distractions to ward off the abyssal anxiety tearing at their souls. A few rocked back and forth hugging their knees, others mumbled or yelled to break the horrifying silence.

Rremine pondered whether killing them or letting them live would be kinder - but in the end she decided she didn't really care. Possessing another demon's pawns, even just for the second it took to fry their unprotected minds, was not only impolite, but tantamount to a declaration of all-out war. *Not worth the effort.* If left alive, like wounded warriors in the battlefield, they'd continue to be a drain rather than a resource.

Having successfully disrupted Shkazzrt's hold on these people, Rremine slowly prepared to withdraw from the locality. *Maybe I'll look for another butterfly.*

Not satisfied with only poking the corpse, a few of the deranged started biting. The last thing Rremine heard was a woman's voice as she slapped one of the biters on the back of the neck: "No eating yet! We're gonna chop it up and fry it first!"

Many think the brain is an isolated black box, catching the meager input of senses and conjuring out of it a locked-in, limited consciousness, hopelessly apart from all else. It is not so!

It is a kaleidoscope by which you bare your shining soul and express it into reality.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"Have you decided yet?" Leona asked.

Elise rested her arm on the wooden table, admiring the starry sky revealed by the setting sun. Scarlet previously ran off with a group of children, all loudly insistent on playing with her.

This is a different kind of peace... at least compared to my latest encounter with death.

Done with work and prayers for the day, EnrRrei's humans retired to their dwellings.

Elise looked over the oasis to her right and then the farm fields to her left. The obelisks beyond reminded her that the desert was always nearer than she thought.

To combat the cold desert night, campfires were kindled and set ablaze. *That's one reason why the community is so close-knit: they have to physically huddle closer to each other.*

"I doubt the desert is a suitable place for a vampire," Elise replied.

In the past few days, Elise has gotten to know EnrRrei's headquarters and the people inhabiting it. Her humans were mostly sane and untouched, with possessions kept to a minimum.

Under EnrRrei's supervision, their lives revolved around ritualized worship: adhering to specific schedules, they pilgrimaged to different obelisks and performed various litanic and dancing prayers.

The complex pattern of such liturgies didn't make much sense to Elise, but it appeared to strengthen EnrRrei's peculiar brand of demonic presence over the land.

The trustworthy few - like Leona - had increased privileges and responsibilities, and served in accordance with their skills and personal judgement. These special few were able to sense the flow of demonic energy and contribute to it as they deemed fit. *EnrRrei trusts them*. Due to their willingness to yield without resistance, they could also channel that energy.

Such utter and complete trust - unheard of in vampire society - was hard to comprehend. Elise couldn't eliminate the possibility that maybe something sinister was going on under the surface, but their relationship seemed like a truly symbiotic one.

At least compared to parasitic entities who prefer to micromanage using direct control.

Possession was a much more complex topic than she initially thought.

"EnrRrei finds you interesting, did you know?" Leona mused. "She said you don't wall yourself off against her influence, but push back instead." She looked at Elise questioningly, waiting for a response.

Elise just blinked.

"So it doesn't make sense to you either... EnrRrei is rarely curious; it must be important. She even wants to introduce you to a friend of hers! She said it was like as if you were already possessed by another demon."

Bugs buzzed around, and Elise swatted the loudest one.

"Anyway..." Leona let out a sigh. "Those who can resist possession but ally willingly are great assets, no matter what path they choose. You are our guest, for as long as you need to recuperate fully. That said, you should think about your future - this may be the most important decision you'll ever make. Serving EnrRrei is a fulfilling life, and we really do good here."

Elise listened, because having more information opened up more possibilities, and she also didn't want to be disrespectful.

"Despite the obvious drawback, you can live a simple life here if you wish. Evangelizing in the desert may not be for you, but you are welcome to join me regardless. I'm proud of the work I do, and I think you could be too."

Elise chuckled. "Thanks, I appreciate it, but I'm definitely not a fan of the sun."

"I understand... Are you perhaps interested in bringing EnrRrei's word to vampire communities? It won't be easy, but since they're susceptible to demon blood, they might be willing to worship."

Elise shook her head. "Junkies' worship must be worth less to EnrRrei than that of deranged humans."

Leona shrugged, following it up with a nod.

"Vampire physique bestows significant advantages in the martial arts: the obvious choice would be to train you as a fighter under Gareth. Your nimbleness and preference for the dark also make you a candidate for being an assassin."

That piqued Elise's interest. Gareth mastered his art, and getting trained by him seemed like a valuable proposition. *Still, all the strings attached... maybe under a different arrangement.*

"We also have an unceasing need for information. Because of the Reach Initiative's troublemaking, EnrRrei closely monitors the various vampire organizations."

Elise didn't like where this was going.

"Now, I'm not saying you should spy on your own clan... Although the possibility exists if you-"

Elise laughed out loud. "That bridge burned down and its ashes have been scattered in the wind!"

Well, I wouldn't mind if some misfortune befell the Crimson River... but I don't want to be anywhere near that bunch.

Leona smiled awkwardly.

"Of course, EnrRrei is open to many forms of cooperation. Do you have any suggestions?"

Elise scratched her head. "I don't know... I will think about it. I wish there was a less binding way of paying back the debt I owe you."

"You mean for rescuing you? You owe us no debt. Well," Leona smirked, "we do usually expect a good-faith return... However, your companion's valor in battle has saved numerous lives. Consider the debt paid in full, and as I said before, enjoy our hospitality for as long as you need."

A butterfly fluttered around and settled on the far edge of the table.

Leona suddenly became very alert and straightened up. "EnrRrei is saying she abstained from talking to you directly, so you might meet a friend of hers. Her name is Rremine."

The butterfly flew closer and settled on Elise's arm. It reminded her of a recent memory she thought was just a delirious dream.

"Okay... is she coming here? Strangely, I had an-"

"We meet again, vampire girl."

The repressed memory screamed at Elise, making her relive the powerlessness of her recent dying experience. A presence intruded, which magnified these feelings and twisted them around. *Not again!*

Trembling, Elise resisted the best she could. Since the intrusion came from within, she soon lost sight of where the lines should be - *and what for?*

A demonic laugh reverberated near enough to brush upon Elise's thoughts. Surprisingly, on closer inspection, the malice she attributed to it seemed to be a result of her own imagination.

"Clearing the pathways for communication is rarely fun for the subject... I'm Rremine. Rest assured, the deviations imposed do not exceed the variance of human presence."

Elise was neither convinced nor satisfied. Thoughts and emotions swirled inside her in waves, and she had difficulty breathing.

"Did you know that possession is actually a two-way street? This is what enables us to gain power from worship."

"Not many can bear the intensity of this existence, though. Vampires build walls inside their minds. Zombies with their sponge-like psyche divert attention to other horizons. And humans... they make themselves feeble to avoid our gaze."

Elise heard the demoness chuckle.

"Humanoids like you make us uncomfortable. Your empathy is an aberration in this world, but it makes you one of the few who are brave enough to meet us head-on."

Elise felt the presence approach even closer, inspecting her like she used to inspect salvaged gadgets.

Rremine seemed amused. *"Would you like to become like us? Become a half-demon?"*

Dread seeped in... Elise bent over and held her head. A vision of the demonic realm tormented her, exposing her to the pain and misery of leftover anger. *Is this her sense of humor? Would she actually force such an abominable process on me?*

"The alteration would be invasive and irreversible, causing you to desync from your body."

"Just speak out loud," Leona suggested. "That's easiest for newbies."

Even though Leona was sitting right next to Elise, her presence felt so faint and distant... *So inconspicuous.*

"You're making a persuasive argument against your offer," Elise said. "Filling my head with your misery does not help you get your point across."

"Concessions have to be made for the sake of communication. Magnify your glimpse thousandfold, and you'll have an idea under what circumstances we awoke to self-consciousness."

Elise was tired of being exposed; physically to violence and the elements, sociopolitically to vampire machinations, and now psychospiritually to demonic entities. *What more could be ripped off of me?*

"I decline your gracious offer."

Elise's face contorted into a laugh as it absentmindedly mimicked the demoness's merriment.

"I don't blame you. Being a demon is not a pleasant existence. But, if you change your mind..."

Elise shook her head for emphasis. "No."

"The world wasn't always like this," Rremine pushed on. "Humans inadvertently succeeded in creating a collective over-consciousness; it was born out of the cumulative suffering of multiple man-made apocalypses, and fractured at birth. At least that's my theory."

"It's as difficult for us to look in certain directions as it is for you, and we deal with our existential lack in different ways."

"For example, Orummagh is obsessed with incarnation, but he has only volatile patience and no sophistication; the best he can do is blow his thralls up. And that just makes him more frustrated," Rremine laughed. "He's unintentionally pinging the vibrational resonance of the

technomages too, and the overlap annoys him to no end. They'd crawl under his skin if he had one."

Elise's attention was drawn again to the fluttering butterfly, watching it through the strange lenses imposed by the demoness's influence. *She touches the butterfly, filling it with light, and when it withers, Rremine's consciousness flutters on. Communicating with her feels like that, too.*

"And you?" Elise asked. "What is your weakness?"

"Are you seeking an advantage over me?"

Elise shrugged. "Just curious. Since you're in a talkative mood."

"Well, old age makes me increasingly self-aware and bored - a nasty combination. I'm unable to achieve my true purpose, whatever that may be, and the limitations of this existence are weighing me down. Unlike you, I don't have a way out through death; there is only oblivion."

"Since demons were likely created from human suffering condensed around strong personalities, we are also shortsighted, raging, and ultimately empty like the suffering we were created from."

"That is... sad," Elise said.

"It is what it is. Experience taught me that raging mindlessly against the boundaries doesn't help. The greater issue is that the fabric of reality is fragile; forcefully increasing its influenceability could cause it to unravel. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, I don't know. Maybe that's what the world needs."

Elise heard a sigh.

"It's not just ragers like Orummagh - the zombies might not measure up in raw power, but with that persistent and systematic approach of theirs, they could bring about the end of the world just as easily. Now you know why I keep a small footprint."

Elise nodded to herself. Control over one's life may have been an illusion, but even trying and failing was better than giving up. *Why should I carry my captivity with me, like most humans do? I will not mourn such a world should it burn.*

"I hope I have revealed enough to earn your trust. I can't match EnrRrei's offer, but we can find a way to work together. If, in the course of your hopefully long and fruitful life, you find historical scriptures revealing clues to what may have happened, I'd like to learn about them too. Think of it as a scholarly collaboration, if you will."

"Beyond that... Your ability to dream may grant you peeks to places which I can't access. Such perspectives could be useful to me. In return, I can serve as a dream guide to my corner of the world, teach you techniques, and provide insight and fortitude against other demonic entities."

"A mutually beneficial exchange of information, yes? I don't mind if you take EnrRrei upon her offer as well - or whatever else you decide to do with your smidgen of a life."

Remine's presence began to withdraw, but that dreaming-while-awake sensation continued to envelop Elise.

"I'll leave you to your thoughts. Consider my words, and let me know what you decide later."

Remine's offer for scholarly exchange made sense to Elise - assuming she could be trusted. Enjoying EnrRrei's hospitality for a few more weeks could give her time to evaluate their trustworthiness.

Maybe EnrRrei would consider cooperation on a case-by-case basis, in exchange for martial training. I could be a freelancer or a mercenary...

She didn't want to say it out loud, but even with chains loose enough to allow free rein, subservience was out of the question. *The constant sun is ticking me off, plus all that sand everywhere is annoying.*

Ultimately, her deepest desire was to live her own life and charge forward on her own path, wherever it may lead. *Alternatives detracting from that are not worth considering.*

Elise realized she was ignoring her surroundings and slowly returned to the present. The conversation exhausted her, and she could feel the blood pulsing in her head.

Leona looked at her questioningly. "Are you well?"

Scarlet rested at Elise's feet. *A desert life wouldn't be fair to Scarlet either...* The fires died down, but the embers still glowed. The breeze had a chilly bite to it.

Elise nodded. *I know what we have to do.*

She lifted Scarlet into her lap, grabbed her paws, and looked into her eyes. "We are going to Oakheart!"

External power is based on the duality of controller and controlled; it casts an outward-facing, net-like structure with weights and levers and stimulus thresholds.

Anemic feedback loops, delayed decisions, false assessments of risks and capabilities, etc. do not simply weaken the link between perception and reality - the inherent duality insists that such control is always an illusion of itself.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Connor wandered the streets helplessly. Society let him down, and the future seemed bleak with Elise gone.

"Three for one... guaranteed quality! You won't find a better price than this."

Despite his past behavior, the offer for the coveted assistant job came through. *It was in another life.* The initial anger dissipated, and he understood Lady Cellie's reasons for driving Elise away, but still... he just couldn't bring himself to accept the job.

Connor roamed with resigned restlessness, forlorn, not knowing what to do with himself. *Not even art makes sense.* The allure of menial work increased each passing day, the repetitive rhythm of which promised to take his mind off the futility of his existence.

"Not interested, thanks," Connor replied.

The junkie problem has gotten worse. Pushers dealt demon blood on every corner, creeping ever inward from the outer districts. As far as Connor could tell, three standard rations for one ration of demon blood was indeed a good price. Not that he would do such a trade - the void he felt within couldn't be filled by such a paltry thing.

The price went down. Either their supply increased, or they watered it down with regular blood. Or both.

"Have you tried it? I insist."

Connor looked up to examine the speaker: the expression on his ugly mug matched the unfriendly tone.

Three of his comrades moved closer, while a fourth stood guard farther away. *Deadbeats lured by the promise of power.* They weren't particularly strong, and likely held no distinctive skills either.

Connor tried to walk by, but the speaker blocked his way. Debris littering the rundown street made running away unfeasible.

"Let me pass," Connor said.

The others strolled about, situating themselves in a half-circle around Connor, eliminating any remaining possibility of retreat.

"Buddy, stay put. If you don't intend to purchase our fine merchandise, we'll have to insist on a road toll. These are our streets, y'see?" The thug spread his arms in an encircling gesture.

Connor shrugged. "I don't have any coin on me."

Metal coins could be redeemed for rations of blood stored in the underground blood bank. The humans' semi-voluntary donation ran on a tight schedule, and emergency rations also contained vampire blood to delay expiration.

The thug frowned while sizing Connor up. "Ugh, is this your first time?" He turned to his colleague farther away and yelled out: "Go get the boss! Bring a sample!"

To Connor he said: "You're in luck; the boss likes to give out samples to future repeat customers. You know, a personal touch."

"...That won't be necessary."

The thug frowned again. "Maybe you didn't hear me the first time: I insist. You don't want to insult the boss, do you?"

The boss appeared promptly, a stocky fellow, walking in their direction with wide steps. He held a translucent satchel with a thick crimson liquid inside.

Connor's eyes grew wide. *By blood, it's Bron!* The scarring across his face was prominent and unmistakable.

During the raid on Midflower, Bron and his crew managed to appropriate many of the salvaged goods for themselves. In a short time, their operation evolved from petty theft to smuggling contraband and peddling demon blood.

Since the easiest way to get a bigger piece of the market was to grow the market itself, they aggressively pursued getting people addicted - with

success. *That feeling of control must be on par with the quenching of Thirst.*

A gleeful malice awakened in Bron's eyes; Connor expected no other reaction.

"Connor, my friend! Have you come to purchase the smoothest, most potent demon blood ever to grace vampire throats?"

"As I said to your associate, I have no coin for-"

"Nonsense! A gift, then, for an old friend."

"You're... Regrettably, I cannot accept."

Bron's gaze hardened. "But I insist." He presented the satchel with his arm extended.

"Just let me pass," Connor said while meeting his gaze, but more quietly than he wanted to.

Bron held out his hand for a while, but then turned away. "That's disappointing..."

He's seething inside, Connor thought.

After a single step, Bron pivoted and slapped with the back of his hand. "And insulting!"

Connor smiled, partly as an act of defiance, while a few drops of blood dripped down his lips. *There, the mask is off.*

Such derisive resistance angered Bron even more. "You are weak, just as you always were!" He slapped and pushed. "Being a junkie is your true place in the world!"

The slaps turned into punches, which Connor endured stoically. *Nothing new under the stars.*

"I'm gonna make you drink, the same way I made your precious girlfriend drink - thank me for my generosity!"

Instead of getting a rise out of him, a wave of sadness washed over Connor, numbing him to the pain.

The punches and shoves kept up, but Bron couldn't bring Connor to the ground. He tried to spray the blood from the satchel into Connor's mouth, which, because of the height difference, Connor would have found amusing, if not for the detachment he felt toward his own state.

Connor finally tripped while backpedaling. He hit his head - it made ignoring Bron's meaningless insults easier.

Although the satchel was half-empty, some of its contents found their way down Connor's throat. The liquid tasted as bland as the anger it tried to fan.

When the satchel emptied, Bron discarded it and continued punching, all the while mumbling something.

He's broken... a cracked mirror. Connor had no other explanation for Bron's shallow existence. *And pathetic. But who am I to judge? It still reflects; I'm broken and pathetic, too.*

Connor recoiled in disgust: *I'm like him.* However, an overwhelming feeling of resignation washed over the disgust and expelled it. *It doesn't matter. Nothing matters.*

Letting go felt good; a liberation from the knotted emotions within. With the world pulled out from under him, it made no sense to cling to this useless self.

Bron stood above him, kicking, droning insults in that annoying way of his. The pain didn't register, only the jerking momentum from the repeated impact.

So much fear was buried underneath... Connor pretended, especially from himself, that it didn't exist. He acknowledged its existence only when it dissolved by being let go.

The vacuum within demanded to be filled; cold and disciplined strength surged forth from the emptiness and the discarded shackles of his former self.

If nothing matters, I might as well do something. He could clean up his corner of the world. *Because why not.* Actions were not problematic, only the attachment to results.

I judge! It's my responsibility to myself.

Letting go capsized the resignedness. Part of the problem - a secondary manifestation - was right in front of Connor, kicking and punching. He could do something about it.

When Bron kicked again, Connor grabbed his leg. *No sense of balance.* Bron lost his footing and fell.

A surprised expression replaced the smug superiority. Wrestling wasn't Bron's strong suit, and he quickly ceded the upper hand.

Connor climbed on top and started punching him in the face. Bron's flailing arms were no hindrance, and they soon ceased to flail.

The others approached slowly.

Connor lifted his head, and while continuing to pummel, calmly stared the nearest thug in the eyes. He was taken aback, and the others halted the approach. Connor's ice-cold gaze was in contrast with the bright red blood smeared all over his face and dripping from his lips.

They expected rage - even regular blood could evoke a blood frenzy under stressful situations - but this was new. No vampire has ever conquered demon blood before.

I embrace death in order to illuminate life.

Connor didn't care about pain or sensory feedback; his attention followed the forces that flowed forth from within.

He exerted more of this potential, gradually forging a new identity through single-minded focus. Pummeling Bron was an exercise of this state of mind.

There was no blood rage or a berserk compulsion for violence... just the trance. The soothing rhythm of one punch after another. *It feels right.* He gave in to the rhythm and lost track of time.

It took a while before the motion achieved its purpose and lost its meaning... at which point Connor considered his next step.

He looked at his blood-covered hands, and then at the meaty pulp he was mashing. The face was disfigured beyond recognition.

Connor felt no remorse, nor did he see a reason why he should. For a moment, he wondered if Bron could recover from that - but decided he didn't care.

Despite his mushed state, Bron still lived. Coughing, wheezing, making strange noises... his airways were completely mangled.

Connor stood up. *I have exorcised both of us.* He looked over the thugs standing in awe, observing meekly.

The one standing closest cleared his throat. "What do you want us to do, boss?"

'Hope' is the expectation of desired outcomes, and its virtue arises when complemented by trust and self-confidence.

Don't reject hope, because doing so blinds you to desirable potentiality. Don't get attached to hope either, because that blinds you to unwelcome possibilities.

Instead, figure out how to make it reality; the clarity of your vision decides the probability of success.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Unexpectedly, a zombie lunged at Elise from the bushes.

She reacted a fraction of a second late: the charge knocked her down and the staff fell out of her hand. She avoided the gnashing and chomping teeth by holding her attacker back at the shoulders.

After a strong push, Elise tucked in both legs and kicked the zombie high into the air, where it kept spinning until it got stuck on a branch.

Right away, Elise used the chance to hop to her feet. She analyzed the situation with a quick glance - *Scarlet and Gareth are handling the attackers in the front.*

The zombie from the branches fell with a crack and splatty thud, breaking both legs.

A rustling of leaves caught Elise's attention - she twirled around, just in time to see a second zombie rushing from the same direction.

Without hesitation, Elise decapitated it with a single strike. The head flew away, while the rest of the body remained upright for a second before collapsing.

She turned back, picked up her staff, and walked to the first crawling zombie to bash its head in. She stomped the decaying torso for good measure.

Ahead Scarlet growled victoriously - Elise rushed to help, but they were already finishing off the torn and dismembered bodies.

"Is everyone all right?" Leona asked. A zombie lay splattered on the ground behind her, but she remained vigilant while slimy remains dripped from her battlehammer.

Gareth grunted in response. The brunt of the attack came from the front, and he went around squashing and slicing remains. "Rest in pieces," he mumbled.

Elise looked at Nerat, who kept cover behind a mossy boulder. *He's aware of his weakness: intelligence isn't worth much during an ambush.*

The journey from EnrRrei's camp through the Reddusk Desert had been otherwise uneventful.

Considering the piles and thick layers of charred remains that greeted us at Midflower, we can probably expect more zombies here as well. The air was noticeably humid, at least relative to the dry desert air.

Pain reported from Elise's hands, and she inspected them: *a few scratches. They'll heal soon.*

Dense vegetation of the Oakwood Forest obstructed their path and view alike. Their formation remained unchanged as they waded through: Gareth in the front, followed by Scarlet, Nerat, Elise, and lastly Leona protecting the back.

Except for the recent bunch, they have seen zombies only in the distance and managed to avoid them. *Perhaps the plant life is masking our scent? Or there just aren't too many of them crawling around.*

Although she considered her stay at EnrRrei's headquarters a positive experience, Elise couldn't imagine living her whole life under the constant sun.

She trusted EnrRrei and Rremine, but not without reservations. She believed the symbiotic coexistence truly served EnrRrei's self-interest. *They don't think like we do. They don't exist like we do. More unpredictable than wild animals, they must be treated with utmost care.*

Still, the impression they made was a sound one and Elise didn't mind future cooperation - as long as it didn't involve worship or servitude.

Each person had their own motivation for embarking on the current journey; Leona's mission was a diplomatic one, while Gareth provided additional protection. *Maybe he has some other job at Oakheart.*

As a human, Nerat would have been a valuable member of the desert community, but as an afflicted - he was better off with his own kind.

Although branches and leaves obscured the view above, Elise noticed something in the distance: a tall, bright structure. She kept trying to catch glimpses as they journeyed on.

"Is that our destination?" Elise asked, pointing in that direction.

"Yes," Leona answered.

The group trudged through the forest, alert for another attack. In time they reached a glade with colorful flowers, where Elise was able to get a clear view.

The structure was round and tall. It reflected the sunlight brightly, making it difficult to look at directly. There were many taller buildings in the City, but none so preserved, pure, and proud.

It reminded Elise of a mage tower. *Tall, yet narrow.*

Gazing at the tower evoked various feelings: hope for a better future, the pursuit of perfection, mastery beyond mere competence, and overwhelming yet humble power.

In quick succession a number of images and their related association-chains flashed behind Elise's eyes, overloading her awareness:

A vision of ancient mages and their towers - as told by human stories and fairy tales, which were probably stories even in those ancient times.

Shamans and druids, in union with the earth and spirit realms, performing rituals for the good of all. *They surrender their egos to rebirth the world with a new dream.*

Children playing joyously. '*Come*', they speak to her. Elise has never seen children so innocently happy before; a feeling of belonging and freedom enveloped her.

It felt so vivid, and she was in the middle of it all.

What's happening to me?

The analytical half of her brain worked under pressure to offer up possible explanations:

Prolonged exposure to the demonic realm and the subsequent departure from the demons' sphere of influence may have caused a withdrawal of some kind. This apparently resulted in a kind of emotional afterimage, where complementary emotions resurfaced with heightened sensitivity.

Elise almost cried, not knowing why. She was surprised by her own reaction, since these visions were so much in contrast with her experiences so far.

There is good in the world! There are things to strive for - noble, worthy things.

She wanted to hang on to this warmth as long as she could. The impression remained, but the connectedness and wonder faded, partially robbing the images left in her memory of meaning.

While lost in self-reflection, Elise didn't even notice that they've bridged the distance. After only a few more steps, the trees withdrew and revealed the base of the tower.

Up close it looked grayer and less perfect than she imagined, but it did strongly reflect the sunlight, and she quickly stepped into the shade it cast.

The vegetation encroached on one side of the tower wall, while in front of the other was a small crater with a curious texture. *A garbage dump? It's like whatever they dumped just walked away... And I'm guessing that's exactly what happened.*

Gareth circled once around the tower, looking for any such stragglers. "All clear."

"Is there a secret entrance or something?" Elise asked.

"Not that I know of," Gareth said.

Elise put her hand on the wall and scratched it with her nails. *Coarse, but quite resilient.*

It occurred to her that Orummagh's thralls could climb the structure by damaging it. Demon blood users could possibly do it, too, but a fall from that height would surely incapacitate unfortunate climbers and attract nearby zombies.

The tower is a distraction; if there's an entrance, it must be littered with traps and tactical chokepoints. Midflower was too exposed in comparison... There must be other, better hidden entrances.

"What do we do now?" Nerat asked.

"We wait." Gareth sat down.

"For what?"

"For them to let us in, or for another group of zombies to attack," Gareth replied. "Whichever comes first."

"I hope you're joking," Nerat said.

Gareth sighed, "Me too."

They didn't have to wait for long, because a shout came from above: "Heeelllllooooo!"

Were it not for the high pitch, the sound would have been barely audible by the time it reached the base of the tower. "We've been expecting you!"

She's been expecting us? It could be a trap... or is EnrRrei communicating with someone inside the facility?

A face popped out from the edge above. "Can you hear me now?"

"Yes!" Leona yelled back. "I'm Leona, negotiating on behalf of the demoness EnrRrei!"

"Okay, I'll lower the ladder!" The face disappeared.

Well, that was easy... But, a ladder? How is that going to work?

Slowly, and with a continued rumble, stone slabs extruded out of the wall, spiraling all the way to the top.

Oh, I see. That works.

"Well, it's time for me to say goodbye," Gareth said.

Elise turned to face him. "Aren't you coming with us?"

Gareth shook his head. "I'm not really welcome here. Besides, I have other things to attend to." He walked to Scarlet and petted her. "You're a ferocious fighter; I wouldn't want to be your enemy."

"Maybe we'll meet again," Elise said.

"I'm sure of it," Gareth replied with a smirk. "Take care."

After collecting a few supplies, Gareth departed.

The spiraling stairs beckoned, and after a deep sigh, Leona took the lead climbing them.

Elise followed with gutsy hops, which were necessary because of the gap between consecutive steps. *Stumbling is dangerous.*

Despite that, looking down on the surroundings felt exhilarating; the forest stretched over green hills and rivers, right till the line where it battled the desert. *A storm is coming.*

Elise's enthusiasm dulled momentarily when she saw the top of the tower was flat and unremarkable, made out of the same material as the sides.

"Nice to meet you! I'm Devon."

Devon's excitement was contagious, like she was bouncing on clouds with a prominent absence of weight on her shoulders. *So chipper... happy even.* She seemed younger than Elise.

For Elise, a great deal of anxiousness mixed in with the excitement. *My life can only get better. It will be better.*

She remembered the elderly technomage from the caravan, and hoped that the others were at least somewhat like him. *They'll teach me, and I'll learn everything!*

"Step here, please," Devon instructed. "Yeah, a little bit closer together."

The five of them huddled together in the middle.

"We're ready," Devon said to no one in particular. *A communication device?*

The ground rumbled and hissed - Elise clenched her fists - and the platform they stood on started descending. Fear gripped her insides as the circle of sunlight above their heads continued to shrink.

Breathing became increasingly difficult, and darkness swallowed her.

Time is the symmetry-breaking act of the mage's vision. By distinguishing this vision, we introduce the concepts of 'change', 'speed' or 'phase'. The context they manifest in we call 'space'.

By now we have enough to observe the Holographic Principle, the corollary of which is that all dimensions curve. Understanding gravity is not that hard:

As a response to the continuous exhale of sight, space/time inhales in the direction of time. If you prefer to think in cause-and-effect chains, think of it this way: mass doesn't cause the gravitational field - the curving of space/time causes that which we quantify as 'mass' and 'matter'.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Emerson rattled the chains binding him to the operating table. "Increase the dosage! More Serum!"

Dyna observed calmly from behind the bulletproof glass. *Too bad surgical research yields no results.* Experiments with Serum overdosing were cheap in terms of time and equipment, but required cripplingly large quantities of the refined substance. *All that Serum down the drain... but at least it's good for morale.*

Unlike the operating room which was fully staffed and equipped, the observation room was completely empty - for safety reasons.

"What are you waiting for?! I said more Serum!" Emerson yelled.

The head technician looked to Dyna from the other side of the glass, questioning.

Dyna nodded. Beyond a certain point, oral intake of Serum had a diminishing effect, and intra-venous delivery helped overcome that barrier. Other than Emerson's brusque attitude, she saw no signs against continuing on to the next stage of the experiment.

Emerson calmed down once the tech began preparing the IV.

The Serum significantly improved intelligence, but it had a serious limitation: it didn't improve wisdom. *Problem-solving ability soars, but decision-making remains in the gutter.*

Since most defects of the ego remained present not because of an inability to heal them, but because of unwillingness to do so, the curious situation arose where the technomages - the best of the best who received the highest Serum dosages - refused to acknowledge their own personal flaws. For if they did, their hyper-intelligent minds would promptly point out the solutions - which they were almost never emotionally ready for.

We should start grooming them from a younger age. The current culture is becoming a problem... I'll have to find a way to steer it. Maybe promote more non-afflicted to keep the balance?

Because of such personal flaws, almost all researchers and technomages were specialists - brilliant in their fields, but much less so in everyday life. To them, the Serum dosage became not only an enhancer of intellectual abilities, but also a measure of self-worth. Unsurprisingly, Serum overload experiments never lacked volunteers; they saw it as an honor bestowed upon them, an acknowledgment of their rightful status.

Dyna sighed. She wasn't immune to self-aggrandizement, but to her, status was a reflection of responsibilities and not of worth. Beyond having the final say in research, she was responsible for ensuring smooth day-to-day operation of the facility, including security and defense. So far, a trade and research based policy worked - having electricity and working tech assured superiority in warfare, at the cost of mobility - but the demon attacks have gotten stronger, and she could almost feel the vampire packs plotting to exploit any weaknesses.

"Administrator Dyna, how far do we go? Dr. Emerson expressed his wish to break the record." The tech's voice came somewhat muffled from beyond the protective barrier.

"I doubt his mind can handle it," Dyna replied. "Let's take it to B-2 saturation, and we'll see from there." Echoes of the amplified sound whispered back with a slight delay.

The tech nodded, and turned her attention back to Emerson.

As more of the Serum dripped into his vein, Emerson slipped deeper into the luminescence of his mind. Mixed emotions showed on his face, unearthing an inner struggle.

He won't make it far. Dyna ran a tight ship, both in the facility and inside her mind - a strict diet helped reduce the strain on her body. Judging by

his facial reactions, Emerson was more of a 'pills and surgeries' kind of person. She feared the worst: *If his ego can't handle the influx, he'll go through schizophrenic burnout and we might not be able to piece him together.*

Lost in delirium, Emerson started rambling. "I'm a prototype of a much larger- Algernon should have eaten more of that Jaspers cheese!"

His mind has tilted. Dyna raised her voice: "Cut his supply! Stabilizers!"

All volunteers undergoing similar experiments were given drugs for enhancing memory retention and stimulating the brain's language center. Unlikely that the completeness of their vision would be preserved in memory, they were instructed to formalize their experiences, and bring back the words rather than the direct memory of the insights. After the experiments, a special team would go over all utterances, mining them for symbolism and interpreting them in all conceivable contexts.

Slowly, Emerson's ramblings turned into inarticulate yells, and his restrained body started seizing uncontrollably with increasing force.

Dyna saw this before - her mind warned her not to go in a similar direction - and she had an inkling of what would happen. "All support staff out, now!" *Toast. Good for research, bad for Emerson. Who knows, maybe he won't turn completely vegetative.*

The techs were conflicted between tending to the seizing patient and making sense of Dyna's words.

"That's an order! Emergency protocol Gamma! Drop everything and get out at once!" Dyna repeated.

This time they obeyed. All except for the head tech, they exited through the steel door and locked it shut.

"Marie, you know the drill. Please be careful!"

Immediately, the remaining technician started putting away surgical knives, needles and other sharp objects that were out in the open.

One reason why the heaviest Serum users were called technomages was because they came up with subjective, but coherent theories which furthered everyone's understanding. Their special ability to smooth and influence electro-magnetic fields, thereby enabling technology to work, was another reason.

As Emerson's seizures grew more violent, a rumbling tremor shook the walls around them. The tremor lasted several seconds, and when it

subsided, small objects - pens, syringes, gauze - rose up into the air and remained floating there.

There was no consensus if high intelligence alone enabled the smoothing of EM fields, or if it was through the mechanism by which the Serum worked - it may have somehow interfaced with the reality-changing Virus that rendered most technologies obsolete.

"Suppressors! Now!" Safety of the facility and its inhabitants came before Emerson's well-being.

Dyna found electro-magnetic fields orderly and symmetric. Like waves through a kaleidoscope of colors, she was aware of all EM fluctuations in her immediate vicinity. *Did you know that from the perspective of light, it is everywhere at once? Neither time nor space exist.* She felt the tear in the fabric that Emerson's mind caused, and she also felt the controlled effort of mages on tech-enabling duty whose minds counteracted the damage and smoothed the tear.

Marie retrieved a large syringe filled with grey liquid. *Even failed bioweapons may have their uses.* After recovering from getting hit in the head with a floating pack of gauze, she plunged the injection through Emerson's ribcage and into his heart.

One... two... three... Right on time.

The seizing stopped and the floating objects fell abruptly.

We understand EM, but gravity... gravity is something different altogether. Maybe Emerson's sacrifice won't be in vain.

Dyna addressed the tech before leaving the room: "Good job, Marie. Go get the rest of your crew and see if you can salvage Emerson. I'll assemble a team to review the data."

Seeking out win-win situations and warping win-lose situations to one's advantage, with machiavellian focus is if necessary, are well-studied best practices in politics and elsewhere.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Seeing Merryn at the table surprised Leona. *Why is the vampire here?* She thought they would simply discuss trade schedules.

"Please, have a seat," Dyna gestured. "Since I hope to discuss a plan of strategic consequence, I took the liberty of inviting Lord Merryn to our meeting. Orummagh is a threat to us all, and we should do our best to preempt any such threats."

"I'm pleased to see you again," he said.

Leona nodded. "Likewise, Lord Merryn."

Being used to open spaces, Oakheart's winding hallways dwindled Leona's fortitude and made her uneasy. However, the conference room was clear of distractions and larger than necessary, which she was thankful for. The improved ventilation was a welcome touch.

Leona took her seat. The ambient lighting had a calming, yet energizing effect - it moved and lived on its own. *She's manipulating it directly.*

Dyna sat down as well. "Before we start, I'm curious; how come you picked up the afflicted boy?"

Leona frowned. "He became afflicted after I set out to meet him. Thankfully, EnrRrei's grace extends beyond the human race."

"Hmm, I understand. And you'd like us to take the boy in?"

"Indeed. Nerat is young, but his heart and mind are in the right place. Integrating him into your organization should pose no difficulties."

"Well, bright minds are always welcome. Thank you for bringing him to us. However, like everyone else, he will have to prove his worth to earn his Serum."

"Of course," Leona said.

"And what of the vampire girl?" Dyna asked. "Isn't she the one we were supposed to take in, as a favor to Lady Cellie? We expected her sooner."

"Yes," Merryn cleared his throat, "we expected Elise to arrive with the Midflower technomages, but Orummagh obliterated the caravan. We assumed she perished, too."

Leona nodded. "She almost did, were it not for EnrRrei's benevolence; we found a tormented mind in a desiccated body, breathing her last. Meanwhile she has earned our trust, but declined to worship. Since she's eager to learn, we would like her to have access to your channels of information."

"That's good to hear," Merryn said. "On Lady Cellie's insistence, and with your approval," he nodded to Dyna, "I would like to take her in as an apprentice. Her experience with demons can prove useful."

"Very well. She's your responsibility now," Dyna said. "I'll see to it she has the proper clearances. I understand she came with a vampirified cat?"

"Yes. Fiercely loyal and highly intelligent," Leona said. "The cat, too, is considered a friend of EnrRrei."

"Vampirified animals are notoriously difficult to control, even with drugs," Dyna mulled. "Allowing it free reign is out of the question. The cat's going to grow, people will get scared..."

"Elise will leave if Scarlet is not allowed to stay. In my humble opinion, it would be unwise to lose an asset like her," Leona said.

"Well, I already received complaints from the usual bemoaners..." Dyna shrugged. "But let's give it a try. At least we'll have more people to send on outside missions. Now, on to the matter at hand... Do any of you know what a bioprinter is?"

Merryn shrugged, and Leona shook her head.

"A bioprinter is a machine capable of producing custom biological tissue. Bioprinters enable and expedite all kinds of research. Now, there is one ancient bioprinter in particular, the 3000x, which can also print complex nervous tissue."

Dyna placed both her hands on the table, leaning forward. "I want this Bioprinter 3000x. I know for certain the Midflower has one."

"Procuring it might be difficult," Merryn said. "Does it fit into a backpack?"

"No," Dyna laughed, "it's about a third of this room's volume. Given enough time, we could take it apart into, say... a hundred manageable pieces."

Leona glanced around. *Impossible.*

"As you correctly surmise, Oakheart is not equipped to handle the extraction alone," Dyna said. "Even a three-way extraction might be dangerous."

"An understatement! It's nigh impossible," Merryn said.

"Maybe..." Dyna agreed tentatively. "But not for all of us - together. Therefore, my initial proposal is the following: we join forces to organize the extraction, protection and transport of the Bioprinter 3000x."

"Setting aside the latent absurdity of such a large-scale cooperation," Merryn argued, "there's a greater problem. Our raiders closed up the facility, and who knows what horrors lurk behind those sealed barriers."

Dyna waved dismissively. "We know the dangers that may lurk inside. Given enough resources, we could even temporarily restore the base to working condition."

Access to Midflower would benefit Oakheart in other ways, too: research info, salvaged tech, rare specimens...

Dyna looked to Leona. "An early warning system is essential for defending against incoming attacks. In addition to manpower, we need EnRrei's ability for instantaneous communication across distance. If she can offer any deterrence against other demons, that too would be most welcome."

Leona acknowledged the demand with a nod. *She has my respect.*

Dyna turned to Merryn. "We lack the muscle to secure supply and transportation routes; we require mules and disciplined soldiers to endure multiple trips."

Merryn waited expressionlessly for Dyna to continue.

"In return, we offer: Preserved blood rations. Quality tools and weapons. Commitment to blood serum research. Commitment to demon research. Naturally, information sharing. Chemicals. New gene-manipulated plants from our hydroponics section."

"I can't help but notice: these are either shared benefits, or they benefit the vampire clans more," Leona remarked. "To even consider such a

commitment, we also ask for endorsement of proselytization on Oakheart premises."

Dyna smiled faintly. *She expected this.*

"Endorsement is out of the question at this stage, but we will tolerate proselytization as long as it is benign."

Leona smiled with satisfaction. *Good.*

Merryn squirmed, and greed lit up his eyes. "Since our grunts would do the brunt of the work and shoulder most of the risk, we expect any compensation to reflect that."

Dyna paused to adjust her response.

"We give all for the sake of the future." She raised her hands for emphasis, "Our future, together! The Orummagh threat is considerable, and the Bioprinter 3000x, along with the joint extraction itself, would strengthen us all."

She looked directly at Merryn. "Lord Merryn, a functional Bioprinter would benefit the clans directly: beside weakening Orummagh, demon blood research will reveal ways to turn it into a stimulant, and bring us closer to a blood serum. Improved ways to preserve blood, without sacrificing quality, will help Starfire City maintain social stability."

Leona saw his face brighten. *Political clout - she almost had to spell it out for him.*

"Oakheart's main concern right now is not to end up like Midflower. The Bioprinter might help us develop a weapon against the exploding thralls. We might even find a way to weaken Orummagh directly, on a spiritual level - if not, then perhaps through empowering EnrRrei. We have to find a way to turn his annoyance with us into a weapon."

Careful, that's a lot of 'mights' and 'maybes'... and the 'wills' do overpromise. Furthermore, weapons against Orummagh could be used against EnrRrei, too.

"I reckon you did something to piss Orummagh off," Leona said.

"That is our suspicion too - at least Midflower did. Unfortunately, we have no access to Orummagh, and no way of measuring what exactly evokes such a response. If we did, we could use it as a means of control."

They contemplated the possibilities in silence.

"Anyway, such concerns are reactive," Dyna said. "We care more about future potential. What we've discussed so far are precursory considerations, while the real meat of the proposal is this:"

"If we are to survive, we have to become a regional power. Together. We have our differences, but this is an opportunity to strengthen the whole region among the three of us."

Dyna continued. "Getting the Bioprinter should serve as the basis for long-term trading and strengthening of ties. The resources we offer, and the salvage from the Midflower, will kickstart this deeper level of cooperation."

Merryn shifted in his seat.

"Do you see it yet?" Dyna asked. "Humans! The main advantage of the proposed alliance is resource pooling. Their blood, brains, and worship. Sharing all these resources among all of us would increase their quality of life and desire to breed, starting a virtuous circle."

A grand plan... well, it's not like we haven't thought of it before. But people can be so damn shortsighted and stubborn! We can trust the zombies' sincerity, because they don't have a more intelligent choice. The vampires... we'll have troubles with them.

"To facilitate the collection and distribution of respective resources, we'll establish consulates in each location. In addition to the responsibilities of trade and diplomacy, technomages will enable essential tech. Similarly, EnrRrei's devoted will provide spiritual guidance and communication across distance, and vampires will secure supply lines and freedom of movement."

Feeding EnrRrei with intel and worship spanning the entire region is worth almost any cost.

"According to my estimates, we have reached the point where we either trust each other and cooperate, or perish," Dyna concluded.

After a period of reflection, Merryn spoke first. "Administrator Dyna, the vision you present is compelling. I will champion the idea among the clan leaders and gain their approval. I'm sure they'll see the wisdom of it."

No doubt selling the idea as his own - more power to project that way. As the allied might increases, so will his influence.

Leona emptied her mind to invite EnrRrei in. Except in emergencies, EnrRrei's intrusion was generally gentle on her psyche.

Soon the familiar presence touched her, lasting just enough to convey a single word: "Agreed."

Leona looked forward to having more worshippers. The alliance would usher in an era of increased political and strategic control, along with significant economic growth. *More negotiations! More diplomacy!* The zombies' research could weaken EnrRrei, but even so, it would weaken the other demons more.

Leona looked back at those staring at her. "The proposed alliance pleases EnrRrei; further planning is officially sanctioned. We are blessed!"

"Wonderful," Dyna exhaled with relief, "let's get down to the details. We shall proceed in stages. First..."

Beware of entitlement. When you claim more of the world than you give of yourself, your bloated ego curls inward, causing shortsightedness and festering anxiety.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Lester kicked the motionless hunk of flesh. "Move! Feeding time."

The zombie on the floor let out a growl which ended up being only a whimper... but when Lester put down a vial of translucent blue liquid and a slab of processed meat, the zombie found the strength to down the liquid at once.

Lester backed out of the cell and Kieran bolted the door behind him.

"I hate this job!" Lester complained. "Why do *we* always have to do it?"

"Standard rotation," Kieran said. "We finish this floor, plus two others, and it won't be our turn for a while."

The large, dome-shaped floor of the underground facility housed sixty cells in circular arrangement. The cell walls were made of a see-through, impenetrable material capable of withstanding another apocalypse. In addition to the out-of-order electronic keypad locks, the door panels had large bolting mechanisms installed on the outside.

The lights flickered, and Lester flinched. "I bet those bastards at other facilities have working cryo equipment - none of this low-tech preservation for them!" He nudged his colleague with the elbow. "Am I right or what?"

Kieran shrugged. "We don't have any say in the distribution of resources."

"That's what I'm saying! It's not right!"

Kieran moved on without a reply. He unbolted the door of the next cell and Lester entered with his pacifier at the ready.

This zombie was unresponsive too, and Lester vented his anger with a strong kick to the ribs. "Mealtime, you worthless Serum-waster!" Lester

sheathed the pacifier, and dropped off the meat and vial Kieran handed to him.

The lights flickered again, giving the large dome an eerie look.

"We can't even get reliable lighting!" Lester said loudly while Kieran bolted the door. "Seriously, if we would get just a fraction of the Serum we give to these third-rates, I'd show those Serum-gobblers on top! Meritocracy, my ass..."

The lighting wasn't the only irritating thing; the fact that most cell-occupants wore the same kind of white overcoat as his own - albeit tattered and covered with drool - constantly teetered around the threshold of Lester's conscious mind.

"Studies show diminishing gains of intelligence upon increased consumption of Serum, and moreso in the case of unrefined brain matter. Ours is supposed to be a cost-effective distribution," Kieran replied.

Lester glanced at the pile of locked supply boxes in the center. "That doesn't stop the high-and-mighty technomages hogging it for themselves, now does it?"

Kieran looked around nervously. "You shouldn't say such things. The walls have eyes and ears."

Lester's held back an outburst, but his face showed disgust mixed with anger. "...you know what? Let's just get it done. I'll continue here, you go in the other direction, and we'll finish twice as fast."

"But, security protocols dictate-"

"Damn the security protocols! I don't want to spend more time here than I have to. Besides, they're starved and brainless, surely we can handle them!"

Kieran shrugged. "Fine," he said and walked away.

Lester unbolted another cell door. He suspected Kieran agreed to the faster work arrangement only to avoid his company. Kieran, along with almost everyone else, didn't show much susceptibility towards Lester's ideas - even though he often spoke loudly to help get his point across. Like-minded colleagues tended to get reassigned to worse jobs, perhaps even ending up in preservation cells much like these. Lester didn't want to admit it, but as a third-rate scientist whose research showed no results, he was sliding towards a similar fate.

Kicking zombies wasn't as fun as the first few times; after the pent-up anger found its outlet, only anxiety remained.

A few of the prisoners were new arrivals, their life energies not yet completely depleted. These zombies pounded on cell doors, screaming, their bloodshot eyes and not-yet-tattered coats marking the descent to instinct-based undeath.

In addition to providing a break from anxiety, Lester found a degree of joy in putting such a lively one down. He entered the cell with his pacifier at the ready, shocking and hitting till just a bit after the subject stopped resisting. Such action didn't invigorate Lester, but it assured him he was still above the bottom rung of the ladder.

After the beating, he looked back to make sure Kieran wasn't watching and meted out the real punishment: drinking half of its allotted Serum dosage and pouring out the rest.

The zombie fervently licked the spilt liquid off the floor.

The lights glared, and Lester's overcoat wasn't as white anymore. He was genuinely convinced that with just a bit more Serum he would be destined to great things, most of all great status.

"A dozen more and we're done with this floor," Lester said loudly. The dome shape amplified and briefly echoed his voice.

"Yeah," Kieran replied from the other side.

The transparent cell walls made it easier to effectively supervise the floor at all times. Whoever designed the place clearly felt that the advantage of control outweighed the disadvantage of perceptive prisoners monitoring their captors' behavior.

Lester entered the next cell distracted by the usual mixture of anxiety and overconfidence.

"Move, you decaying bastard!" Came the command accompanied by the usual kick.

In a split-second, Lester's eyes grew wide with surprise as the zombie grabbed his foot and twisted it. Lester swung the pacifier as he fell, but missed his target by a wide margin.

When instinct bestows an advantage, intellect can be a hindrance: the zombie pounced at once, with much more dexterity than expected. It kicked away the pacifier and held Lester's head in both hands - the eyes reflected only fear.

Thump thump thump... the zombie repeatedly bashed Lester's skull into the floor until it cracked and left a small, but growing puddle of blood.

The bloodlust didn't last long: the zombie let go of the head and reached for the vial that fell from Lester's other hand. After downing it in one gulp, it moved on to the almost empty unlocked box of vials outside the cell.

The undead creature drank one dose of Serum after the other while watching Kieran make a run for the elevator.

With the hunger still unquenched, the zombie went back into the cell and kept bashing Lester's skull until it could be pried open.

One hasty bite of pink goo after the other, the zombie's demeanor changed. Its eye movements and breathing steadied, and its posture straightened. Despite the wrong taste, it ate the last few bites slowly and with a sense of indifferent duty.

Presently satiated, the zombie walked tall next to the locked supply boxes in the center of the hall. Facing the elevator, it kneeled down, placed its hands on the back of the neck, and waited.

Long heartbeats extended into minutes; soon the elevator door opened and armed guards swarmed through. Kieran, too, held a mean-looking pacifier, and they all pointed their weapons at the zombie who tried very hard not to move.

Blood dripped from its hands onto the floor. After an attempt to clear the throat, it spoke with a raspy voice:

"I believe there's currently a job opening for me."

Dreaming, or indeed consciousness, is the wholesomeness of All being filtered down for an overreaching, yet seemingly extern view.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Elise bumped into someone rushing around the corner. "Excuse me."

Walking the hallways and reflecting helped Elise clear her mind. Interacting with the touched on a daily basis was challenging - and quite exhausting.

Her impressions of the Oakheart dwellers were mixed: very organized in some ways, but also scatter-brained in others. The pressures of limited space and resources noticeably influenced their societal structure.

Intelligent, but seldom wise.

Elise found their sense of personal space barely existent and she almost lashed out reflexively at times. She had to intentionally hold back - it took effort to remind herself the zombies were friendlies and that she was safe.

Strangely, the one who bumped into her had a distorted grimace; it surprised her and delayed her reaction. He looked healthy, and almost human - except for the quick eyes and the wasteland behind them.

The zombie bit through the cloth and nearly tore a chunk off from Elise's shoulder.

What the hell!

Elise punched the zombie with all her might. Being weaker than most vampires, Elise seldom thought of herself as physically strong.

The blow twisted his guts and flattened his lungs, propelling him a short distance backward. He hit the wall with significant force and collapsed.

Before taking flight, the zombie had let go of something - *a chest?*

The metallic container dropped to the floor with a clank. Subsequently, it made a grinding noise while being dragged, and a similarly frenzied zombie holding the other end swung it at Elise.

The surging adrenaline dispelled her initial surprise. Elise aimed to evade the swing and hit the zombie before it connected, but at the last

second - with reflexes better than her own - the zombie flipped his end of the chest upward.

The container deformed under the force of Elise's strike and the altered trajectory pushed the zombie back all the way to his incapacitated accomplice.

Her hand hurt. It hurt worse than striking a wall of concrete.

Ignoring the pain, Elise opened and closed her fist a few times, and tendons snapped into their proper places.

The hallways felt even more narrow and claustrophobic than usual. All that tech-stuff filling up the space... although working technology never ceased to amaze her, she doubted any of this garbage was actually useful.

Elise was not used to fighting in cramped spaces - and it showed. Despite their relative squishiness, the zombies were more agile and unpredictable.

The zombie recovered first; this time, he spun around and hurled the chest at Elise.

Elise sidestepped.

Upon hitting the edge of a shelf, the silvery container burst open - spilling most of its precious content on Elise. Vials of translucent blue liquid shattered into shards, drenching her clothes and coloring the floor.

Enough!

She pushed off the charging zombie, kicked the opened container out of her way - and slipped. Trying to get hold of something only made it worse, and her head hit the floor hard.

She lay motionlessly in the pool of blue fluid, and her skin began absorbing it... An acidic, sinking sensation held her attention; it kept her from passing out, but also from being fully awake.

The droplets on her lips tasted sweet.

When Elise could focus again, she saw the zombie holding her head in his hands - contemplating to either gouge her eyes out or bash her skull in to expose the brain.

He sniffed the air, nostrils flaring. After a few heartbeats, he tilted his head slightly; Elise smelled wrong. He let go of her head, and hopped over to the container to join his previously incapacitated partner in gulping down the remaining vials.

Elise tried to move, but her body didn't respond - the absorbed blue liquid paralyzed her.

Lights shimmered - unwittingly reminding Elise of Midflower - while the zombies continued to slurp and lick all remaining fluid they could. *Their movements are more deliberate, and their eyes no longer reflect a void.*

They heard footsteps approaching, and with all shades of blue licked clean, ran away.

If Scarlet were here with me, this wouldn't have happened. They must allow her to accompany me all over; poor thing is always cooped up...

Despite the humble living quarters - *at least we don't share it with others* - Scarlet took the relative confinement stoically. Going outside required permission and the danger grew steeply the farther they ventured, but they both missed the twilight sky and took every chance they could. Plus, the food tasted better when they hunted it themselves.

The hard footsteps belonged to a uniformed security officer. *They mostly guard the lower levels I have no access to.*

"Are you alright?" Kieran asked.

"I don't think so," Elise replied. "I can't move."

Kieran surveyed the scene, and knelt by Elise. "You're the new vampire, aren't you? It's probably temporary since you people are immune to the Serum's effects. That bite won't bother you for long, either."

"Who are they? Why did they attack me?"

"You were in the way, that's all. While we were busy apprehending one escapee, these two used the commotion to escape with a locked crate of Serum. Don't worry, there's nowhere to escape to and they'll realize it on their own in a few minutes."

Instead of passing, the paralysis has gotten worse. Strangely, Elise didn't feel too concerned about what was happening to her body; not having to care was almost pleasant.

Her thoughts drifted to day-to-day responsibilities and all the things that wouldn't get done while she's disabled.

Since they hammered out some kind of a deal, Lord Merryn departed and left it up to me to take care of the touched. Scarlet is surprisingly patient with those about to be exorcised, but they're pumped full of so many drugs...

The feeling of detachment turned into a floating sensation - and she looked down on her body from above. The lights flickered as she moved her perspective around.

Soon, she observed from afar as white robes put her body on a stretcher and carried her away.

The perceived vividness waxed and waned, and although it was difficult to focus on maintaining a single viewpoint, Elise decided to delve deeper and explore the facility.

Everyone needs tools for self-analysis, and since humans are social animals, our primary tool is using other people as mirrors.

The fancy tools and methodologies mages wield are not always accessible to others, with good reason: a disciplined focus is necessary for diving into the lake of tangled symbolism and cutting through the emotionally charged haze.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"Pick a strong opponent!" Connor lifted the grunt by the neck. "Measuring your strength against the weak is meaningless."

The vampire panicked and tried to break free of Connor's grip. He frenziedly shook his head.

"No? I didn't think so." Connor cast him aside. "Get out of my sight."

He cowered, took a few steps back, and ran away.

Connor stood tall. Not bending over in fear gave him a slight increase in height, and a considerable amount of inner and projected power. *I hate bullies... We'll have to find a way to increase discipline among the ranks.*

He looked at the victim: right away, he recognized the mashed face infused with the chemical blackness of a previous scar.

Bron's body recovered from the intense beating Connor gave him, but his mind didn't. Due to the potency of vampire regeneration, damaged brain cells regrew, albeit wrong, and the previous neuronal pathways disappeared forever. *He's literally another person.*

Disgusted and embarrassed by the mental deficiency, Bron's father disowned him. Yet, though broken to such a degree, Bron became a useful, contributing member of society: he helped the Mothers tend to recovering demon blood junkies.

Connor helped him up, "Here."

Although Bron's sadistic streak was gone, Connor felt like he had assimilated his cruelty. *Violence does solve most things... killing him would have been the merciful choice.*

One of Connor's men approached running. "Bloodthorn clan leader Aram is on his way here."

"Lord Aram? What does he want?" Connor asked.

The messenger shrugged. "How should I know?"

"Hmm, I guess we'll find out soon enough... Thanks."

After taking over Bron's gang, Connor decided to keep the demon-blood enterprise going. Demand kept swelling and it had to be satisfied - if not by his crew, then by others.

Naturally, business bloomed. They contributed a percentage of earnings to the Mothers' rehabilitation support, and when the tax decree came into effect, Connor decided to comply. It made sense that their enterprise should help out with research and recovery - and through it, maybe even improve Elise's situation as well.

Aram approached unhurried and alone; such an act signified confidence and trust, but also a need for subterfuge. For years Aram maneuvered politically against the Reach Initiative, pursuing to attain more power and influence.

The death of the councilmen left a power vacuum. Interestingly, the current first councilman wasn't as xenophobic as his late colleagues, but he did focus almost exclusively on the Orummagh issue, which aligned more closely with Aram's interests.

Aram glanced at Bron, who scuddled away under his dismissive glare.

Since Aram proposed the demon blood tax, it was in his interest the enforcement ran smoothly. Aram supported Connor from the beginning - he played straightforward and brought in the biggest share, which in turn helped Connor's organization grow more powerful than others.

Although Connor disliked politicking, he thought of their existing arrangement simply as good cooperation.

"Greetings," Aram said.

Connor bowed slightly. "Lord Aram, you're always welcome."

"Can we talk in private? I come bearing gifts."

I doubt that. Connor gestured toward a side alley. "Please, step into my office."

The shady, overgrown alley dampened possible echoes, and made sure not even Connor's men could overhear them.

"Are you aware that a Helldare clansman is stationed at Oakheart?"

Connor nodded. "As far as I know, he's an exorcist and liaison."

"Well, this Merryn character has recently arrived in our City, and brought news which should be of great interest to you."

Connor raised an eyebrow. His heartbeat quickened.

"The girl is alive. 'Elise' was her name, right? Somehow, she survived the demon attack on the caravan. I wanted to deliver this news to you personally."

Connor fell in momentary turmoil. *She's alive!* He didn't know what to do with his hands and almost turned away from Aram, but he owned up to it. A tear flowed down his face.

Aram waited, observing Connor's reaction. "In return, I ask that you listen to my proposition."

Thoughts ran wildly through Connor's head, catching up to his emotions. *This is not the time... I'll sort it out later.* "Thank you for letting me know. Of course, I'll hear you out."

"Only a few know of this, but Merryn brought other news, too. We're upping our alliance with Oakheart a notch, and maybe bringing EnRrei into the mix. 'Resource-sharing' is the keyword. Now that we have a common enemy in Orummagh, whoever comes out on top will have an easier time solidifying power."

Connor listened attentively.

"I have ambitions beyond the region - castle Aluin beckons. I think you're ambitious too, you just haven't admitted it to yourself yet. In times like these, the clan structure loses its rigid nature and becomes malleable, which presents opportunities for someone such as yourself."

"Here's the thing," Aram continued. "The new alliance will need a lot of muscle. Your men are neutral, yet relatively disciplined, with a trustworthy leader who inspires loyalty. Pull them into shape, increase your forces, and mold it into a proper organization."

"If you do, I'll do my best to get you monopoly on the demon blood trade. I think the other clan leaders can be persuaded to give their blessing. I trust you to enforce the tax collection, reducing the strain on me and giving me more room to maneuver. What do you say?"

Connor shrugged. "Although what you're saying makes sense... I'm not sure I want to shoulder so much responsibility. But, I will definitely consider it."

Aram nodded. "That's all I'm asking. However, let me kindle your imagination. You see, the nice thing about having power is being able to use it. If the alliance is a success, we could bend the narrative, attribute the success to your friend Elise, and frame it as if she were essential for the birth of alliance."

Lightning coursed through Connor's spine.

"Of course, that means I would have to cede a significant amount of influence. Cellie would probably support it, and Theodore won't speak out openly against a majority decision. I expect you to make it up to me, yes?" Aram's eyes glistened with excitement.

"Ha! Is that how you intend to bind me and buy my loyalty?"

"Well, it cuts both ways. I wouldn't use the word 'bind', but yes, loyalty is bought with loyalty. You just have to decide if your friend's freedom is worth that to you."

Connor chuckled. "When you put it that way... I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"Whatever you choose, you're the one who has to live with yourself. That's one of the reasons why I trust you with this... Just to reiterate, you understand that addressing the junkies as a systemic problem won't be enough; we have to be at the forefront of this alliance thing, yes?"

Connor nodded, then a more few times to himself while he kept thinking and suppressing his newfound excitement.

"One more thing before I leave," Aram said. "There's a rumor going around that the Crimson River have chained up a few thralls, thereby bleeding the situation for good profits."

Reluctantly, Connor nodded again. *That would explain the increased supply and potency, though my bet was on EnrRrei.*

"Please investigate your supply chain. If the Crimson River clan controls the supply, they are bound to become a threat in the future. It is also possible that Orummagh is flooding the market directly, or with their willing cooperation. It goes without saying, any such outside influence is bad for the City."

The 'self' is dynamic, to be observed in context, and spread across numerous abstraction levels. To actualize itself - to identify and define a new self - that very self is often required to 'self'-sacrifice.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"How long has she been like this?" Dyna asked.

"Two weeks, I think," Marie said. "Maybe three?"

"Mmhhh... Paralyzed the whole time?"

"The medics thought she would recover," Marie said. "She almost did, but then it got worse... that's when they notified me."

"Well, they should have notified us sooner."

Curled up on the side of the bed, with nothing to do and nowhere to go, Scarlet basked in the warmth emanating from Elise's body and shared her own in return. She acted with confidence in Elise's recovery, as if she could sit up at any time and be her usual, cheerful self.

However, Elise shared more than that: Scarlet continually felt her spirit surrounding her, and at times, she could almost sense her thoughts. *What's happening to me?* Such thoughts were not aggressively intruding - they were just there, floating insignificantly on the surface of Elise's being.

Deeper below, she could feel the effort Elise exerted just to exist: every eye movement felt like a sprint in that direction. Talking felt extraordinarily difficult, like constantly breaking through ice. Regrettably, everything from the neck down she sensed only from the outside.

Nerat came to visit often, and each time Scarlet felt Elise's spirit lift. Devon, too, dropped by now and again.

"What actually happened to her?" Dyna asked.

"Two escaped from the Panopticon and she happened to be in their way. She's got a bite on her arm which hasn't healed properly, and she absorbed a high amount of Serum through her skin. This peculiar state is probably a reaction to the Serum; we have seen similar responses before."

"Well, not exactly like this. And vampires are supposed to be immune."

"We simply have no relevant data for such high dosages. This could be an opportunity for us."

"She's a diplomatic asset," Dyna remarked sternly. "Her well-being takes precedence."

"Of course... I'm not suggesting otherwise. However, since we're in uncharted territory, preliminary analysis suggests that an experimental intervention might be her best bet. It could be simply a matter of proper dosage: she's been exposed to a dose too high for her natural immunity, but too low for sufficient adjustment."

"Well, direct solutions are generally the best... And our other subjects did lack her resilience."

All that talk bored Scarlet. She watched the images Elise showed her while wandering elsewhere: restricted laboratory rooms with cries and abominations, a dungeon with many mirrors and windows, huge Serum reserves. Mostly, an existence constrained by fear.

Dyna moved closer. "Hmm, let's see..." She undid Elise's gown to reveal her bare body. Her skin had a blue tint.

"The bite wound is on the left upper arm," Marie remarked.

"I see it," Dyna said. A black line laced the bite wound, and pus oozed from the inflamed flesh under Dyna's fingers. "Quite nasty."

Dyna observed Elise's eyes, and spoke to her loudly. "Can you talk?"

"Yes..." Elise answered faintly.

"I didn't ask before, but the reason you were sent here had something to do with overdosing on high-quality demon blood, right?" Dyna inquired.

"Yes."

"Was it voluntary?" Marie pried.

"Either that, or death," Elise answered.

"Hmm... and you almost died in the desert later on," Dyna mused. "Were you... approached?"

Elise nodded, just barely.

"By how many?"

"All of them," Elise whispered.

Dyna seemed surprised. "Did any of them possess you?"

"I don't think so..." Elise spoke slowly. "I was told I 'push back'."

Scarlet snuggled closer to reassure her. Being present was difficult for Elise while her being tried to flow out in all directions.

Dyna went over every part of her body. "What are these scratches on your arms? Like tiny black filaments inside minuscule scars."

"Scarlet plays rough."

Dyna waved dismissively. "That would regenerate without trace. Look, Marie, the discoloration is similar to that of the bite wound."

Marie leaned in. "So it is."

Dyna mulled it over while further inspecting Elise. "Did anything... peculiar happen to your cat?"

Elise would have shrugged if she could. "Almost died in the desert with me. And when she was tortured, I fed her my blood."

"I know about the vampirification. Tell me, how exactly was she tortured?"

"Liquid from a canister marred her. Her skin still feels bumpy under the fur. And the scar across her eye is still there, too."

Dyna furrowed her eyebrows, and stared at Scarlet for a long time. "Did the canister have an identifier?"

"Experimental agent 2711, from Midflower," Elise cited.

Dyna gasped. "Marie, that series... wasn't it a zombifying agent, weaponized specifically against vampires?"

"I think so," Marie said. "They shelved it after failing too many times."

"Becoming a zombie and a vampire at the same time..." Dyna muttered to herself. "Did she have a hunger for brains?"

"She left little waste from what she hunted," Elise said. "Grew a lot."

"In addition to the demonic influence, was she exposed to demon blood, too?"

"Yea... A big battle took place at EnrRrei's oasis, and she ended many of Shkazzrt's and Orummagh's thralls. Even the big ones. They hailed Scarlet as a hero."

"Impressive," Dyna said.

Marie looked to Dyna. "You're thinking what I'm thinking? A power trifecta; zombie, vampire, demon, all in one."

"A superbeing on kitten level," Dyna stated. "Or at least potential for it."

Marie laughed out almost maniacally. "We never even tried for anything other than humanoid subjects. It never even occurred to us!"

"Considering that the physiological differences are significant, this might not be as big of a deal as you may think. We have to find out how the bioagent interacted with our patient zero. Elise is the next best thing, but she needs a push to break free."

"The Serum is probably just incompatible with her," Marie said. "The solution is easy: harvest the cat's brain, purify it into a serum, feed it to the girl. If all goes well, we have a humanoid trifecta."

Dyna looked at Marie.

They both looked at Scarlet, who started getting antsy from all the attention.

Elise suddenly sat up and yelled with all her might: "No!!! Scarlet, run!"

The burst pushed her off, and she didn't have to be told twice: Scarlet raced out of the room and continued running.

"Get her!" Echoed the shout from behind.

Scarlet nimbly avoided the stuff in the hallways. She couldn't tell if she was being chased, but the people ahead haven't paid any attention to her. After putting enough distance between herself and potential pursuers, she slipped into a vent.

Although certain locations were off-limits due to heightened security, numerous nooks and crannies - not easily accessible for two-legs - presented themselves as hiding spots. Unless they mobilized everyone, she was confident she could survive indefinitely.

Even though Scarlet knew Elise succumbed to overexertion and lay comatose, she continually sensed Elise's enveloping presence, nagging her to escape.

Footsteps approached mired in the haze of heightened pheromones. Perhaps they could flush her out if they really wanted to, but she would fight, and it would cost them. She forced herself to relax.

Scarlet mulled over her options: barring an all-out war, she could scrape by. With luck and patience, she could also make it outside.

Without Elise, she had no reason to stay. But, abandoning Elise after all they've been through together, especially now when she lay exposed and vulnerable... She might as well be abandoning herself.

Besides, Scarlet sensed danger from the two visiting Elise, but not malice. They genuinely seemed intent on helping her. As long as they saved Elise... maybe going back wasn't such a bad idea, even if it involved sacrifice.

'Scar, no, I forbid you! Leave me!'

Elise fighting against the decision only made Scarlet's determination stronger.

She exited the vent, and snuck past the pursuers. The lights went out temporarily, and things kept flying off the shelves to obstruct her progress. Scarlet evaded and otherwise ignored all of it.

She approached the door; the light shining through seemed more vibrant than usual. In contrast with her impending doom, the whole place became filled with an undercurrent of liveliness and passion she never noticed before - as if coming into existence just to say goodbye.

When she stepped through the doorway, surprised expressions greeted her.

The basic operation of analysis is to put distance between observer and observed, enabling it to break things down into composing parts.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Intelligence, regarded purely as analytical ability, leads to paralysis when taken to extremes.

Due to an echo chamber effect, any introduced fault becomes steadily amplified, derailing the whole chain of analysis long before such extremes can be achieved. With inner clarity, such faults can be held off for many iterations.

However, when approaching said extremes, the exponentially expanding dualistic mirror-images strain the consciousness. When such movement extends beyond the domain of identity, the distance within snaps and the consciousness fractures - leaving you all alone within yourself.

To prevent the world from becoming static, one should be mindful of the limitations of intelligence and use it accordingly: a practical approach is to use vision to build things up at a pace commensurate with breaking them down, while another solution is to extend or shift the domain of identity.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Needles pierced her skin, and Elise observed from above as Scarlet's transfused blood began coursing through her veins. Although she regained some sensation, Elise remained locked out of her body. *Enough of this limbo! I would like my body back, please!*

Thankfully, Scarlet still lived. Her brain remained intact, but for the past few days, she was being continually drained of blood. *At least they're feeding her rich meals.*

Doing research before committing to an irreversible option was simply good science; for the time being, a renewable blood supply was more valuable than a one-time harvest.

Administrator Dyna waded through the bustling techs, accompanied by a wobbly old man on her arm.

"Dr. Emerson, meet Elise. She's our vampire subject."

Elise's frame was chained to the operating table. The meager sensations were kind enough to withhold pain.

Emerson leaned over. "Can she hear us?"

"We're not certain, but please talk to her anyway."

Emerson nodded, and shakily clutched Elise's hand. "Dear child, don't chase intelligence at all costs. It's a dead end."

One look at this place and that much becomes evident. There's quite a disconnect here - which is saying a lot, coming from a disembodied vampire.

Dyna waited for Emerson to continue... but he didn't. "That's it? I could've told her that myself. Why don't you dispense some mystical words to your aftercomer?"

Emerson chuckled. "That *was* my mystical advice. Of regrettably limited value, I admit."

"Different circumstances make us see differently, so who knows..." Dyna pondered. "Anything else?"

"I guess stability could be important," Emerson shrugged. "Courage alone isn't enough, either. I'm sorry, but I can only advise on which path not to take."

"Ah well," Dyna sighed. "It was worth a try."

"If she, too, goes the way of Algernon, I might have more advice for her then," Emerson smiled wryly.

Dyna frowned, and turned her attention to Elise. "You've done well to survive thus far. This is not the time to break that habit, do you understand?" She tapped Elise's limp arm a few times. "...of course you do."

Elise chuckled. *On par with the old guy's advice.* Nonetheless, she appreciated the sentiment.

Dyna yanked Emerson's arm. "Enough of your self-pity, old man. You regained full mental capacity, and sadly, you didn't lose your sense of humor either."

Emerson laughed, which turned into a coughing fit.

"Let's get you out of here," Dyna said. "Thank you for coming down."

Emerson hobbled away with wobbly steps, relying on Dyna for balance. *Aged beyond his years... So this is what awaits me.*

Elise still had access to her emotions, as well as a degree of mental composure, but without the possibility of interacting with anything - a lack of outside pressure - Elise surmised that even if her physique held, her mind would be gone soon.

The odd curiousness of such a state long since faded, and only the annoyance and lack of meaning remained.

Dyna reappeared behind the security glass on the upper floor. "Marie," her voice crackled from the speakers, "proceed to the next stage when you're ready."

After being resigned for so long, Elise observed the experiment with enthusiasm: she was excited to see if she was going to die or not.

Despite a sense of locality, she existed in this place without feeling alive. Even exposure to demonic forces was preferable to this intense lack; the separation within corrupted her being with each breath.

When death comes, I'll welcome it.

Under Marie's direction, the technicians poked holes and shoved more tubes into Elise's body. The bustle slowly subsided, but the expectation on their faces only grew.

"Auxiliary personnel, thank you for your good work," Dyna's voice echoed. "For your own safety, please vacate the area immediately."

While many exited promptly, a few refused to budge.

"You're not authorized for the next stage!" Marie barked. "Get out before I have security remove you!"

Shortly after the commotion subsided, a luminescent blue merged in with the crimson of Scarlet's blood, melding and fizzing into a shimmering purple... and invading Elise's flesh right after. *My blood is no longer my own.*

Her body tingled all over while the liquid ravaged it - but then all senses stopped supplying sensations. Yet, a ringing in her ears remained, which gradually expanded to all other aspects of her being.

She tried to seize it and tear it out. As she flailed around, some of the lights in the laboratory shone more brightly, even to the point of bursting, while others flickered to the tune of that damnedly irritating ringing.

The ringing finally overwhelmed, sweeping through and over her awareness with a whoosh.

Elise's sense of locality expanded explosively. Instead of floating above her body, her awareness enveloped the whole of Oakheart - and beyond.

She tried to adjust, but footholds became obsolete upon recognizing them. Her sense of time curved inward as the near future became the past. Yet, traveling the myriad pathways all at once was the greatest rush she ever experienced; spiraling ever outward, her attention exceeded the minutuality of this realm.

The ultra-dose of Serum wasn't a cure; quite the contrary. The omniscient omnipresence of her state was alluring, but instead of reversing the partitioning process, the Serum has only accelerated it.

A multitude of infinitely separated parts looked at her from the outside; it was palpable and highly disconcerting.

Unlike demonic entities, constantly self-burning to assert power over their claimed domain, these forces were self-eating and expanded only to cannibalize.

Brilliance came not only in glimpses, but as a hunger driving the process forward. It offered and granted many admirable qualities: simplicity, discipline, edge. Reaching out to take, and then consuming and reducing a thing to its essence felt tremendously satisfying. Manipulating such distanced abstractions enabled a reach to unseen before places.

The process refused to stop. Edges of highway brilliance underwent localized implosions, but there was always more fuel to take on the outside.

Control was ephemeral and transient. Fractal fractures of the soul cried out as they became the interference of light, but none of its wholeness.

The motion itself was a pattern that could be relied on - therefore, predictable. Irritated by the excluding unevenness in her being, Elise tried to smooth it out, but that remaining observer broke too, and her sense of self gave out.

The surrender triggered stirrings within her disjointed self: not resistance, but a familiar countermovement.

Demons, for all their self-burning anger, understood sacrifice and tenaciousness. Zombies pursued enlightenment with cold efficiency, even at the peril of losing the spark of life. Vampires, with their bloated egos, sought to pound everything they could into submission, yet they intuitively grasped the importance of circulation and give-and-take.

The three aspects flowed together from complementary directions.

The knot of Elise's existence untied and the walls of her being blasted open. It was liberating... and utterly terrifying! Who knew there was this much more to herself?

Like a wire framework, only the outline of an ego structure remained: observing from many localities, and enduring by not resisting. She used that framework as handle - a set of temporarily fixed points and motions to unhinge the universe by.

She was alive!

The expansion of her awareness continued, this time in a more balanced and willful way. Nevertheless, it forced her to reevaluate her existence on a higher state of reality, and her consciousness whited out.

Look back at those who gaze into the abyss! It's your duty.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Rose breathed life into the realm. Time began to flow, and a gentle breeze rustled the leaves. It was only a bubble realm dreamed up for communication purposes, but for this brief period, it was hers.

She enjoyed the soothing touch of soft grass beneath her palms, and felt a surge of pride on getting it just right. *Honestly, having no one around to brag to is a tad disheartening.* She considered adding fauna too, but keeping the environment bright and uncluttered was a priority.

Right. There's work to do.

After composing herself and getting into the required state of mind, Rose focused on gathering the relevant touch-points for anchoring an outside consciousness.

I hope this works. I've never done such summoning before.

Under Rose's caressing guidance, a glitchy ego-image began taking shape in front of her. Thankfully, the targeted consciousness welcomed the tethering, flowing and connecting with trusting sincerity. *No sense rushing the process.*

Rose dimmed the sunlight's happy brightness. She didn't want to blind the guest awareness, or trigger the reflexive aversion to daylight.

She double-checked to confirm the bubble realm remained stable. Keeping it void of unintentional manifestations and shielding it from the crushing influx of outside forces was no small feat.

I look forward to a purification ritual later... The more searing the better.

Here seemed to be a case where nightmares subverted and permanently changed the nature of a whole realm. It wasn't as earthy as her own, but if it were to implode, a cataclysm of such magnitude would have unimaginable repercussions.

The sheer hopelessness emanating from the place was enough to bend neighboring realities. There was nothing else for Rose to do, but decide on a good spot to inoculate against the corruption, and hope for the best.

And the vampire girl is the one to bear the burden.

Despite the difficulty and the offers to help, Rose wanted to do this on her own. She has grown, and wanted to prove she could handle more responsibility. *Either way, there's not much more to do at this stage.*

Creating a bubble realm wasn't that challenging, but maintaining it on the edge of Elise's world was. Furthermore, incarnating there directly without extensive preparation was nigh impossible.

That realm is like a knot: difficult to enter, traverse, or leave.

Although Rose tried not to carry her own nightmares with her, she did harbor a few dark thoughts. She knew that death was a clean tool, oftentimes preferable to a fearful existence, and occasionally wondered if it would be better to just euthanize the whole realm...

The children here have no childhood; even the ability to dream is denied to them. Rose couldn't think of many crueler things. The others may be right regarding triage and excision. Still, there have to be better options... Or does that make me naive?

Many of those who did carry their nightmares with them had a philosophy of celebrating the rottenness they were mired in. *The problem is not the acceptance, but the lack of courage to envision something better.*

Rose sighed. *Maybe I'm just stubborn.*

She banished the gloom from her thoughts - such darkness may have been necessary at times, but it wasn't the friendly and social Rose she chose to be. *I have to make a good impression.*

Rose continually aided the infusion of Elise's consciousness into coalescing. Preventing the pullback and a relapse into old patterns took a lot of effort.

She adjusted her figure for age and height, making herself appear slightly older than her vampire guest.

Rose chose a simple white dress, and tinted her hair a brighter red than usual. Such a gentle way of projecting power was bound to appeal to vampire sensibilities - and it also made her hair seem slightly less curly.

The ego-image in front of her eventually stabilized into a living, breathing, albeit unconscious humanoid body. While waiting, Rose noted the worn and somewhat dirty clothes covering it. *Flexible and practical.*

Gradually, Elise came to her senses... and opened her eyes. After making sure there was strength in her limbs, she noticed Rose and sat up. Only a rasp left her lips when she attempted to talk, so she cleared her throat.

Elise looked vulnerable, with a piercing gaze, accentuated by the canines and the red rings around her irises. *A bright wildflower growing in a crack of concrete. Let's see if she's strong enough to make that concrete crumble.*

"Hi there," Rose greeted with a smile.

Elise stood up. She seemed at ease, but not entirely trusting. "Have I died?"

"As far as I can tell, you still have a body and your ego hasn't dispersed either. So yeah," Rose grinned, "technically that means you're alive."

Elise pondered for a while. "Are you an angel?"

"What? No," Rose laughed. "How sweet of you! Do you even know what an angel is?"

"I saw images on the stained glass windows of our old church building..." Elise shrugged. "I was told those were angels."

"I see," Rose said. "Well, we mages reserve the term to describe the pillar-bases of reality. Angels rarely take on the form of an ego-consciousness, but they're more prominent in your realm since they fell pretty hard."

After a curt nod, Elise examined her surroundings in greater detail. "Where are we?" She was wary of the light, but it didn't hurt her.

"In a tiny dream bubble just outside your realm," Rose gestured all around. "It's not really a 'where', more like a 'how does it feel'." She smiled sheepishly.

"I didn't know dreams could be like this... Everything is so vivid."

"I do my best," Rose beamed. "Dreams do regain much of their color when no longer reduced to mundane pattern processing."

The words seemed to have saddened Elise. "Yeah. Life is rarely... full."

"That's not exclusive to your corner of the multiverse," Rose smiled sadly. "Anyway, you should be proud of your achievement: you're the first in a long time to be able to dream properly. The pervasive nightmare of your realm will try to reject you, and it will fall upon you to master it."

Elise rolled her eyes and laughed heartily. "So I have a destiny to fulfill?"

As if responding to danger, Rose's pupils narrowed slightly. "A belief in destiny mutilates one's vision. Just... don't."

"Good," Elise chuckled. "I was starting to think you're full of shit."

The stink of excrement filled the air, and Rose reimposed a citrusy scent at once. "You feel vulnerable, but I'm not here to harm you. Do you believe me?"

"I do," Elise answered.

The calm joyfulness seemed almost foreign and undeserved to Elise, but judging from her expression, she felt deeply rejuvenated and at peace. They enjoyed each other's company in silence.

Elise survived without losing her empathy and giving up her soul. She transcended her limitations to become human! But, I don't think I can give her much time.

This success matters only if it's the first of many. Procreative energies have been diverted towards ego-feeding, and all three factions lean towards asexuality in their own ways. The change Elise brings will be like puberty on a large scale.

"Does your world have zombies and vampires and demons, too?" Elise asked.

"We have the same archetypes, but they do not come to expression as strongly as in yours. They're just common nightmare deviations."

Rose resisted an urge to impress upon Elise the severity of the situation. *If that realm fails again, there will be wide-reaching repercussions.* Putting her under more stress would have been counterproductive, so she kept these troubling concerns to herself.

She felt the pull of forces increase, along with Elise's subconscious desire to return and become truly whole. *Time to go. I can't keep her here any longer.*

"I don't pretend to know what you went through," Rose broke the reverie, "but I do know what it feels like to be pulled apart by a whirlwind

of forces. I also know what it takes to put yourself back together. You're still in the womb, yet to give birth to yourself."

Elise snickered.

"Yeah the analogy sucks, but you get the point. Remember what wholeness feels like, and let that feeling guide you when you return to your realm. You will have to recreate and maintain such an exalted state, for your sake and for others. It will prevent your existence from unraveling."

"I see." Elise took a deep breath, and breathed out.

In a theatrical gesture, Rose held out her hand and wiggled her fingers. Condensed lightning began dancing upon her palm. "Catch!"

Elise caught it readily, surprised to see she was holding a book. "What is this?"

"A handbook of magic, filled with metaphysical advice," Rose said. "I was given one, and now I'm giving one to you. If your head starts to hurt, make sure to take a break from studying."

Elise examined it; the title 'Dreamer's Handbook' was featured prominently on the cover. She nodded tentatively and put it into a pocket. "Thanks!"

"You're very welcome." Rose reached out to caress Elise's cheek. "It will be a while till we meet again. Be strong, okay?"

Elise nodded. "I'll try."

Rose opened her arms, offering a hug. "I know displays of affection are frowned upon in your world, but maybe you can change that. I don't think there's a cause more noble."

After brief hesitation, Elise accepted the warm embrace and responded in kind. She wept, and her shifting presence began flowing out of Rose's arms. "Are you sure we'll see each other again?"

"You bet!" Rose grinned despite the wave of sadness washing over her. "Are you ready?"

Elise nodded with forced vigor.

Rose stopped counteracting the pulling forces and they staked their claim. "Goodbye." She let go of Elise's presence, but held on tightly to her disappearing body... until it vanished from her arms completely.

Rose lowered her dangling arms and dropped to her knees. She cried, too - touching a soul with her own was always a profound experience.

She deemed it almost cruel to send Elise back. *When she starts dreaming regularly, the nightmares will come. Afterall, the realm fractured to keep them at bay.*

Rose let the tears flow their course. *No point mourning the living. She's more alive than ever, and I have faith in her.* After the tears inevitably dried up, Rose gathered herself and stood up.

My work here is done.

Time froze; the gentle breeze ceased caressing and the sunshine lost its warmth. Previously rustling leaves disappeared, then the trees, and then the field of grass beneath Rose's feet.

Lines of awareness marked the remaining frame of reference. Those imploded, too, as Rose finished folding up the bubble realm.

Her shining ego-image no longer resembled a physical human body.

Ignoring the foul breath and general yuckiness of Elise's world, her awareness snapped to familiar reference points as she realm-walked back in the direction she came from.

Maintaining a newly achieved state of enlightenment is much more difficult than reaching it. Make sure to forge the requisite infrastructure: form good habits of body, heart and mind.

- Dreamer's Handbook

"Are you ready for the next test?" Dyna asked.

Scarlet growled and pawed at one of the instruments.

Elise shared Scarlet's annoyance, but she understood the reasons for testing. *There's also the matter of curiosity.*

The prior gravitational anomaly gutted the structural integrity of the base and resulted in extensive damage. Except for the three of them, the whole wing has been evacuated. *Such mayhem... They told everyone it was an earthquake, but I doubt anyone believed that.*

"Yeah," Elise answered. "Let's do it."

"Give me a minute to calibrate the equipment," Dyna said.

Elise's consciousness drifted along aimlessly in a state of enduring dizziness. The concrete beneath her feet felt like a swampy ocean. Her perceived reality was unstable, but also pleasantly malleable.

Being a grown-up is oversold. Growing up to what? Since I've been born, I've been surviving life instead of living it... and I'm done being a passive observer.

She relaxed, and comforted herself with the fact that not being imprisoned in one's body was already a significant improvement.

"Alright, done," Dyna said. "We're increasing the distance and measuring the power of the burst, so make it fly as far as you can. Just a single push, no levitation."

Elise nodded. She concentrated on the designated canister farther away, as if swallowing the target onto herself and spitting it out after a slight delay.

The can swung up gently like a feather in windy weather - and was shot down abruptly by an imaginary slingshot.

My control is lacking. The resulting haziness proved difficult to dispel, but at least it no longer induced vomiting.

"We should probably differentiate between pulling and pushing motions. Hmm..." Dyna mumbled.

The swirliness was in jarring contrast to the clarity she experienced in Rose's presence, but Elise's perception began to normalize. Said experience had been so unreal, so unbelievable, that except for the handbook as evidence to the contrary, it may have never even happened.

Elise couldn't recall much, but it was a happy state and a welcome pause from this existence. She remembered crying longingly at the feeling of profound beauty and connectedness, and the memory was almost enough to make her cry again.

Dyna reset the can. "Let's try it with both of you at this distance."

Scarlet's presence leaned on hers, comforting her and making it easier to breathe. *Her mind doesn't obstruct itself as much as mine does.*

This time, Elise didn't struggle much: the canister shot straight into the wall. The aim was better and the sway more stable.

"I can always rely on you," Elise petted Scarlet. "I hope I'm deserving of your friendship."

Scarlet yawned, while Dyna marched to pick up the deformed canister.

Despite continual attempts, Scarlet couldn't move objects telekinetically without Elise's participation. *Either she's unwilling to do it in Dyna's presence, or it's just not interesting enough without me.*

"That's it, we have all we need from this one. Good job."

Although the tests served to determine the extent of Elise's latent abilities, her limits kept broadening fast. *She's worried we'll collapse the whole facility. So am I.*

In addition to electromagnetic manipulation, telepathy was also within reach. She caught confusing flashes of Dyna's thoughts at times, but was reluctant to impose, since that's what demons did. In comparison, the ever-present connection with Scarlet worked on a more emotional level.

With technomage-level intelligence, the arcane secrets of all the nonsense manuals she ever read became more readily apparent, and the inner ticktock of gadgets felt natural.

Elise perused the Dreamer's Handbook while waiting for Dyna to finish up. The book had an otherworldly glow and served as proof that the meeting with Rose actually happened. *Mind-boggling how it just appeared, but without it, I would've thought I've gone bonkers.*

Reading the book between tests lightened her state of mind and gave Elise something to do. Not everything she read made sense, but she tried not to take it too seriously.

Dyna's livelier than usual. Elise envied the tenacity and purpose by which she pursued her goals. She said the zombies didn't blame Elise for the destruction, and that despite the high cost, everyone was rather proud of the experiment's success. *Yet, those anomalies didn't cause themselves.*

Elise wondered how they intended to use the newly acquired knowledge from testing. *New machinery? Enhancing the power of the technomages?* The tests pointed to her progress and circumstances being a one-off, not replicable by crude scientific means.

Elise tapped the cover of the book. For her, it was about self-knowledge, mainly to prevent the power from consuming her. Saying she had a thorough understanding of how wrong things can go would have been an overstatement, but she did have a better appreciation of risk.

With the future uncertain, she focused on getting herself together before gazing further along. *I have to find out who I am now - before I start getting scared of myself.*

Despite the quiet contentness after all they've been through, she could feel the unseen currents in and around herself, and sensed that this was just the eye of the storm.

The determination in her eyes was calmer and more restrained than before - a steady flame.

Hard times will befall Oakheart. With a significant part of the base destroyed, they'll have no choice but to fully rely on the alliance with EnrRrei and the vampires.

When asked when the evacuation would be over, Dyna expressed a concern that the wing could collapse once Elise left. Unfortunately, that also implied that Elise's volatile presence continued to be a threat to the whole facility.

Elise sighed. *Worries for another day.*

"Do you need a longer break?" Dyna asked. "Or are you ready for the next test?"

Elise petted Scarlet who had settled in her lap, and turned her attention back to the handbook. "Let's wait for a bit longer."

EPILOGUE

A vision should strive to be whole: one encompassing vision, not two or more disjoint ones.

First, a mage has to look inward as well as outward, unifying the vision of self and world.

Further methods involve shifting the center point: Looking outward from a deeper level envisions the self as an abstract domain over emergent phenomena, whereas looking inward from above invokes the humbling palm-of-God experience.

Lovingly integrating such aspects straightens the vision and prunes it of obstacles - it has no choice but to become reality.

- Dreamer's Handbook

Elise sat on the throne.

Scarlet occupied most of it, her fur shiny and whole. Since she has grown the size of a young panther, Elise used her as a pillow. *Scar will always be a kitten to me.*

Tubes siphoned away the blood coursing in her veins, already for the second time tonight. Despite the slight wooziness, Elise felt on top of her game; she has healed fully, with no remaining addiction to either Serum or human blood. Even the mental space touched by demonic awareness remained unusually silent.

Thankfully, her body's regenerative powers withstood the frequent exploitation; since her blood cured physiological addiction to demon blood, she deemed it worth the discomfort.

It still gave a rush, and psychological addiction persisted, but the cure subverted any psychosomatic traps Orummagh may have devised - at the cost of altering sleeping and dreaming patterns. *Who knows, maybe they'll develop other powers as well.*

With its open spaces and modestly grandiose architecture, the old church was a fitting throne-room. The light shining through the stained glass windows illuminated the faded frescoes.

Vheila was busy preparing the round table in the side area for the upcoming meeting. Any previous dislike she held for Elise vanished, and she performed her duties with almost religious reverence.

Connor sat beside Elise on a plain chair, keeping her company while her blood was being drawn. *He rarely let me out of sight since I came back.*

"I don't see the appeal," Connor said, flipping through the pages of the Handbook. "No pictures... It can't be as great as you say."

Elise laughed.

That's not that bad - some are blinded by light when attempting to read it, and for some people the book is completely invisible! She refused to hand it over to Dyna for experimentation.

Having to attend meetings with tubes sticking out of her body was annoying, but she was happy they were in the old church, reminding Connor of his art-loving self.

Spending the time together in silence was reassuring. *He matured and bulked up, but also lost something along the way.*

Connor's organization grew, not only in size but also in structure and discipline. Many of the junkies joined up to get access to demon blood, but stayed as muscle men furthering the goals of the Alliance.

Due to the organization's monopolistic status and it being a major source of income for Starfire City, Connor couldn't avoid exposure to politics. Thankfully, Aram kept his word to sway public opinion in Elise's favor, even before reports arrived of her newfound abilities.

The hardwood gate opened and three clan leaders stepped through, leaving their aides and bodyguards outside. When the gate shut behind them, they began their long walk up to the throne.

After she left Oakheart and returned to the City, everything about Elise clicked into place with eerie precision:

Being welcomed as the face of the regional alliance bestowed political influence. Due to her newly balanced physiology, being stronger than other vampires displayed physical prowess, which was compounded by the supernatural power of electromagnetic and gravitational control.

Vampires revere the food chain and those on top of it.

These three aspects instantly elevated Elise to a category of her own, beyond the judgement of her former peers. Because of the effects of her

blood and the vampires' instinctive sense for demonlike presence, the resulting spiritual power further cemented her status.

Queen Elise, Mother of All Vampires... What a gaudy title. And that rumor-turned-superstition about my blood curing infertility! Bah.

The three vampire clans united under Elise without major conflict. She didn't like being placed on a pedestal, but decided to make the best of it.

"I'll be right with you!" Elise yelled out.

After briefly exchanging looks with the clan leaders, she turned to Vheila. "Please show them to the table and make sure they have refreshments. No blood - I can't stand the smell right now."

"Of course," Vheila replied.

Elise held no grudges against Lady Cellie. *She did more than she had to, and I'm thankful. Her administrative expertise is the glue holding the alliance together.*

With Connor carrying the attached equipment, Elise carefully walked toward the table in the side-hall.

Trade routes opened up following her return. Extracting the Bioprinter was a huge undertaking, and the ruined Midflower has been thoroughly stripped of treasures.

Although the regional cooperation had its hiccups and some of the underlying friction would never get smoothed over, the vampires of the City delighted in the greater diversity of available blood. Advantages like the rudimentary communication infrastructure or improved safety due to EnrRrei's warnings were less visible, but their effects could be felt as a quality-of-life improvement for all residents.

"Nice to see you all together," Elise greeted. "I can only assume this is important."

Lord Aram smiled awkwardly. "Please, take your time. We're not in a hurry."

Connor made sure Elise settled properly. "Everything okay?"

"Yes," Elise said.

"I'll take my leave, then," Connor said. "Until next time."

"Please, stay," Lord Theodore waved him down. "Our business today concerns you as well, and you've done a splendid job so far."

All these new developments are unsettling to Lord Theodore, but he keeps the City in order while the others handle new responsibilities.

Connor nodded, and sat down next to Elise.

"Allow me to summarize our situation," Aram said. "The Crimson River clan is aware of the alliance's success. They're scared, and they're making others scared of us by spreading propaganda."

"We suspected them of backhanded dealings for a long time, possibly with Orummagh," Theodore added. "Since Connor confirmed they were our previous source of demon blood, our alliance with EnrRrei caused their profits to dry up."

Aram nodded. "Their hostile actions are forcing our hand. On the plus side, the alliance and your blood provide us with a significant power advantage over other, more distant clans. They might even have addiction problems of their own we could exploit!"

"So far the operational arrangements of the alliance, including the Midflower extraction, have been a success," Cellie said. "However, if we don't move forward, we'll be hobbled by this initial success."

"If we let the fearmongering in Aluin go on, we will be the enemy they unify against," Aram elaborated. "Besides, even those sympathetic to us would prefer us to have our backyard in order. Better to be unifiers ourselves: we must flex the muscle and complete our control over the Reddusk region. Now, I'm not necessarily advocating violence, but certainly the threat of it."

Aram continued. "We essentially have the beginnings of a demon vampire army, all we need is to give them purpose and an official leader. Connor has already organized the rejects of society and established discipline. Their blood is volatile, but such excess can be channeled, and it's up to us to give them an outlet. The psychological addiction will remain until we replace it with something more meaningful."

"So you've already decided?" Elise asked.

"Pretty much," Aram smirked.

"We have discussed it amongst ourselves, and all clean leaders are in agreement," Cellie clarified.

"The savages of the Crimson River will yield easily, assuming a sufficient show of force," Aram said. "And when we continue our campaign of conquest, projecting our military ambition beyond the region, the next logical step is to advance on Castle Aluin, the hub of-"

Elise used her telekinetic power to push a plate of snacks to Lord Aram. "Please, have a bite while I consider your words. I insist."

A lot of ambition boiling within this one... Most of my powers are just for show, but I'm not going to be a puppet.

Aram gulped. This small proof of Elise's abilities did indeed awe and shut him up, and he reached for a cookie.

"Tell me, what is it you want from me?" Elise lifted her arm with the tube hanging out. "Beside this, of course."

Cellie cleared her throat. "Naturally, we seek your insight and blessing in this matter."

"We also have a fine candidate in mind to serve as our military commander," Theodore added. "He might take some persuasion, though."

"Oh? Do I know him?" Elise asked.

The clan leaders snickered. "He's sitting right beside you."

Of course. He has a favorable reputation and the trust of his men. His loyalty to me, rather than individual clan leaders, is unquestionable - all of which makes him a strong and neutral choice.

Elise turned to Connor. "What do you say? You're the obvious candidate."

Connor maintained a stoic expression. "I'm not a fan of violence."

"That's exactly what makes you perfect for the role," Aram said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "By the way, did you name your organization yet?"

"Not yet."

"Find a name. Something that raises the morale of your troops and imbues them with purpose, all the while striking fear into the hearts of your enemies. Something like 'Elise's Demons', right?"

"I will think about your suggestions," Connor said.

Elise addressed Aram. "I support your overall vision, contingent upon you getting back to me with a viable strategy. You have my blessing. Now go, you're all dismissed... I have to reflect on this on my own."

"Are you sure? I could stay until you finish drawing blood," Connor offered.

"I'm fine, thanks. I'll take it out shortly. Go strategize!"

Connor chuckled. "Okay."

After Connor departed with the clean leaders and the reinforced gate slammed shut behind them, Elise remained alone with her thoughts.

I'm surrounded by good, experienced leaders. My job is to provide a bit of extra vision to make sure their flaws cancel and their strengths amplify each other.

Honestly, my only achievement so far is that I survived whatever the world threw at me... It's time to change direction and let myself loose on the world.

Elise sighed, her eyelids heavy.

There's no other choice but to grab the bull by the horn and ride the momentum. Such a decision pushes us into the unknown, but either way, there's nowhere else to go.

This is the only way to effect lasting change...

Elise passed out and bumped her head on the table.

* * *

"Silly girl."

Elise awakened to Dyna removing tubes from her body. "Huh?" She straightened up.

"I told you to take it out in time," Dyna chastised. "It's a good thing Scarlet came to alert me."

"I forgot," Elise said sheepishly. *I must have dozed off. It happens frequently of late, and not just because of the blood loss.*

As Dyna's focus shifted to the alliance, she insisted on being where decisions were made and left Oakheart in Marie's capable hands. *With Dyna as a resident technomage, we can hopefully put my collection of ancient comm devices to good use.*

Dyna slowly shook her head. "Drinking blood is no longer optimal nourishment for you. You should eat more."

"I ate recently," Elise said.

"You're no longer dependent on blood and Serum, but food and air remain as addictions," Dyna explained. "Your current diet should resemble

that of humans, except in about fourfold quantity. I've asked Mother Vheila to bring us warm food... It shouldn't be long."

Elise's sleeping and dietary patterns changed, but her dreams have also gotten more vivid and elaborate - and not necessarily in a good way. The continuous struggle against fetid forces tearing at her was exhausting and affected her waking emotional state.

I thought I had seen the worst of the world... I was wrong.

She occasionally dreamt of nice things, too. Glimpses of clarity angled her perception in new ways and exposed her to diverse lines of thinking. Although Dyna expressed fleeting interest in her nightmares, she was more fascinated by the underlying biological processes.

Elise's restlessness was made bearable by her guiding light and feline companion, who experienced similar states of being, but tore right back at the malevolent forces with unwavering determination.

Elise cleared her throat. "I've met with the clan leaders, and they want us to conquer the region and extend our influence to Castle Aluin."

"Well, that's the obvious next step; we have to find out the extent of Crimson River's cooperation with Orummagh and put a permanent end to it. However, I forbid you to strain yourself!" Dyna commanded. "No blood draw for three days."

"No, that would set our schedule back..."

"Three days," Dyna said sternly.

Beyond being a symbol of success for the alliance, Elise also became the epitome of being a vampire. Some worshipped her; she could feel the power gathering.

Though EnRrei's devoted were allowed to proselytize, many humans directed their prayers to Elise instead. Even among vampires a kind of religion began to take root; it appeared among the weak and hopeless, but those with strict adherence to traditions also claimed it as their own.

Elise didn't know what to do with such demonic power, so for the time being, she just let it flow past her.

Vheila arrived with a tray of warm food and served it.

"Excellent! I don't know about you, but I'm certainly hungry," Dyna said. "Thank you."

Despite her hunger, Elise had no appetite. She pushed the food around till she committed to forcing down a few bites. Since yet another party needed to be consulted in alliance matters, Elise cleared her mind and reached out to EnrRrei.

The intruding energies were familiar, but also more disciplinedly powerful than before. "YES?"

Elise molded her thoughts into a specific shape. *"The leaders want to consolidate the grip on the region and project our power beyond it."*

"Vampire ambition for conquest is predictably reliable. Gareth is already on his way."

"Gareth? Why?"

"While the Crimson River clan is brought under control and made an example, blackmail and intermittent clandestine assassinations would go well with Lord Aram's more public efforts at Castle Aluin."

Not only is she okay with it, she planned for it in advance! "I see." With everything happening so fast, maybe I just didn't want to look that far ahead.

EnrRrei withdrew without further ado. While still in the frame of mind, Elise pinged Orummagh's frequency and laughed within at his irritability.

Vheila kept bringing more food and she placed another large tray near Elise. "Here you go."

"Thanks, but I can't eat all that."

"Sure you can. Look, you've devoured all of this," Dyna pointed to the numerous empty plates. "Your digestive system has adapted. Give it a minute, and continue."

"Did I eat all..." *Of course I did. I guess a few more bites couldn't hurt.*

"By the way, the results of the latest test came back. As you know, your body is still undergoing physiological changes," Dyna said.

"I have noticed..." Elise replied.

"Well, one of the things we check for is fertility, and... congratulations! You're now capable of bearing children."

Gritting her teeth, Elise slammed on the table. "Why would you check for that?!"

Dyna raised an eyebrow. "Scientific thoroughness, for one? It's a reasonable test to take, and we test everything. I don't get why you're upset. This is good news, right?"

Elise buried her head in her hands. *Everyone is going to be even weirder than usual and they'll start pressuring me as soon as they find out, and they won't stop until I give birth to a new race or at least an entire royal clan...*

Elise took a deep breath and raised her head. "Never mind, having such exceptional health is good news. Thank you."

Dyna nodded. "If it's any consolation, we also confirmed that your blood allays fertility troubles in others."

So the rumors are true. Elise laughed out in discomfort. "It's not."

Dyna dismantled the equipment and scooped up the filled satchels. "As I said, this is good news, so don't read too much into it. Many of us would give anything for the ability to procreate."

Embarrassed, Elise nodded. "Thanks. For everything."

"You're welcome." Dyna turned around, about to depart. "And remember, rest for at least three days!"

Elise nodded reluctantly, and after Dyna left, finished the rest of her plate. "Thank you, Vheila, it was all very delicious and apparently just what I needed."

"I can bring more," Vheila offered.

"No, it was more than enough."

Vheila accompanied Elise on her walk back to the throne. Like many others, she treated Elise with utmost reverence, but also acted like their previous conflicts - or Elise's previous life - never existed.

Despite showing similar dedication as the people in EnrRrei's camp, she is kind in her own way.

"I couldn't help but overhear... It's wonderful that there'll be offspring!" Vheila beamed. "Motherhood is a privilege, and divine motherhood even more so."

"I'm sorry to disappoint, but I'm not pregnant."

"Not yet, but when duty and fate come together so miraculously, it's bound to happen!"

Why don't you decide for yourself and let me decide for myself, thank you very much. And what good would giving birth do? There's a good chance my children would turn out to be literal abominations.

Not having the will to argue, Elise just nodded curtly.

I doubt this blood-and-conquest business is as straightforward as they all seem to think. What will we do when the demon blood runs out? Sure, EnrRrei provides a somewhat potent substitute, and the technomages are working on refining it into a proper military stimulant. Yet, I fear that instead of being addicted to demon blood as individuals, we're only becoming addicted as a society.

Elise got to the throne and sat down, pushing Scarlet's posterior out of the way.

"It's been a long night for both of us. Go home to Maximillian; we are done for tonight. Leave me with my burden."

Elise could hear the loud excitement in Vheila's thoughts after she closed the door.

News will spread, expectations will grow. Being fertile legitimizes the honorary Motherhood - another push toward being worshiped. I'll have to find a way to channel these expectations, too...

Elise gave a heavy-hearted sigh.

Either directly or indirectly, more children will come into this world because of me. I can't make sure they will all be Loved, but I can work toward a world where they'll be able to pursue dreams of their own.

Elise snuggled up to Scarlet.