

Krymsin
Nocturnes

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Joseph Armstead



By Light Unseen Media
Pepperell, Massachusetts

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Hardcover Edition

ISBN-10: 1-935303-06-6
ISBN-13: 978-1-935303-06-0
LCCN: 2009941730

Published by
By Light Unseen Media
PO Box 1233
Pepperell, Massachusetts 01463-3233

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Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“Alone again,
Lords of the Tombs...
The Angels fly
on wings of black,
trailing smoke and ash
through the light
of the dying day.
Live by the Fury and dream
Of the morning light,
Helpless hearts forever torn
from the brightest day,
Dark minds praying to
The beat of a frightened heart.
Die under my kiss,
Weeping pools of blood,
Tyranny and slaughter,
forgotten victims,
Salvation lost,
Only the bitter flavor
of last regret remains.
We die in the Light,
Blind Angels in Flight,
Die in the Light,
We are The Fallen,
We are Chosen
of the pale moonlight.
Blind Angels fly
bleeding screams
of eternal black,
smoke and ash
their destiny,
cursing the light
of the dying day.
Alone again,
Lords of the Tombs.”

Aleksanzdor Marjdovik, “The Wolves of Heaven Cry,” 1764

Prologue

The fog had begun rolling in off the waters of the lake about an hour before the sun set. The winter day's wind had died down from a blustery rush to a few fitful blasts carrying the polar cold down from the mountains only twenty miles away. The water rippled as the wind crossed its surface.

The Woman Without Eyes stood on the lake's southernmost edge, a little ways off from the trail that led to the water, and waited for the Fury to begin.

Wrapped in a gray ankle-length cloak that flapped in the sporadic breezes, the Woman Without Eyes tilted her head, listening, as she faced the tallest clump of trees across the lake's mile-wide expanse. Taller than average height, wide-shouldered and blessed with the hourglass shape of an expensive courtesan, the auburn-haired, olive-complexioned woman seemed not unduly discomforted by her handicap as she surveyed the scene around her. Her world was black, she could not see, and yet she saw. She was in firm control of the ruling paradox of her existence. Her face was fine-lined and elfin, her features delicate, but the angry scarlet gashes where her eyes should have been were repulsive and shocking in their glistening nakedness. Though they were nearly a century old, the scars still looked fresh and incredibly painful.

She had been a nun once, a widow named Calianne who worked towards her novitiate name of Sister Clare of the Order of the Redemptoristines. She had felt the calling after the death of her young husband, a brutish man whom she would never miss, and had left her village without a backwards glance. She had learned to read, she had learned mathematics, she learned to speak other languages and learned the history of the world. She had been educated in the healing arts, understanding and mastering chemistry and herbalism, and had eventually turned to the more arcane study of alchemy.

Along the way she had dared to love again. Her heart had chosen a man several years her senior, a man from a far away land who spoke a strange language and held to fierce customs. He had been a sorcerer, a master of many mystic arts, and a warrior trying to mend his wounded soul. A friend to the King's Vizier and a frequent visitor to the High Court, named Amal el Habib Farzhad in his

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own country, but known as Meffystoh in hers, her mentor and lover went from fiefdom to fiefdom with no opposition from even the most contentious feudal warlord. His foreign ways were tolerated as long as he did not seek to rise above his station. For all his knowledge and influence, he was as much a servant as she. For all his worldliness, he was just as wounded as she. They were drawn to one another.

Then she caught the eye of Duke Marlys of Villard and everything had plunged into hellish chaos. He wanted her, strange ideas and odd customs and the taint of a dusky-skinned foreigner's touch notwithstanding. Her insolence and her stubborn mind inflamed his lust, and what the Duke wanted, he usually got.

Meffystoh met with an unfortunate and fatal "accident" while traveling in the Land of the Huns. His body was never recovered. She'd had no opportunity to say goodbye. With little money and no prospects, land that needed the work of a company of strong men to maintain, and a reputation as "the foreign devil's whore," she did her best to survive in a time when being born a woman was the greatest crime of all. Eventually, she became the Duchess of Villard.

In due course, she became a widow. Few knew that her widowhood was the result of her own mechanations. The Duke died a hard, painful, and supposedly heroic death while protecting her from savage vagabonds. The fantasy protected his dubious reputation. Neither his body nor the vagabonds were ever found. His bloody sword, his rent battle helmet and his punctured armor lay next to the carcass of his fallen horse. Nothing remained of the Duke himself but a small fleshy token, grisly evidence of his passing.

His eyes. She kept those for herself, close to her, always.

So much had happened since then, so many dreams had turned sour and she had lost so much of herself. She had been tried by Life, but had been found wanting. She could not turn away from the mean things in her broken soul and so, eventually, the darkness had found her. Over the many decades since then she had achieved a kind of peace as she'd realized just where it was the twisted road of her life was taking her.

She had left her home as Calianne, but seeking to earn the name of Sister Clare. Her strange journey had brought her here, to the dying town of Coeur Casse, in the shadow of the abandoned castle of Chambre Morne, and to the Lake of the Moon, where the Dead Men Danced.

It was a good enough place for a lonely and rage-filled former bride of God. Now she was known as Krymsin.

The dark devil that had renamed her was responsible for her rebirth into a strange world of pale angry beings of eternal beauty and limitless savagery. An ageless child of the night, he had shaped her into one of the Devil's Courtesans,

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educating her in the history of a world that had always coexisted with that of Humankind, but stayed forever apart. Her world became one of everlasting darkness, less to do with the dying of the daylight than with a perpetual eclipse of the soul, and she became heir to an endless unquenchable thirst.

She unwillingly became one of the Scarlet People. She became an immortal blood-drinker, a member of a family of blood-drinkers who prided themselves on their fierce rejection of Humanity.

Birds tittered and whooped. A flock of blackbirds disturbed by the approach of a waking night predator shrilled their displeasure as they streamed through the orange and silver sky across the lake. The wind rustled in the boughs of trees nearby.

It was quiet except for muffled weeping from the man kneeling on the dirt to her left.

She had already hit him once, very hard, for making too much noise bemoaning his approaching fate. She greatly disliked unrestrained displays of fear and grief. Still, she regretted losing her composure and surrendering to the urge to hurt him. This was going to be difficult enough without letting herself resort to savagery.

“Oo brohg mah jaw,” he moaned, whimpering.

“I know,” she said in a motherly tone that warned against testing her fading patience. “I underestimated how fragile you are, a momentary lapse. It was unintentional. I will try not to strike you again, but you really must get that awful caterwauling under control.”

“Eh hurzzz!” he hissed between snuffles.

“Please be quiet.” There was something more than just a stern command in her low, throaty voice.

“Ee wone *cum!* Nah now, nah lak zhis! Oo brohg zuh roolz! Oo lied!” The weeping man forced the words through his broken jaw and past swollen lips.

“He will come. He will not care if I lied or not. He will come because I broke the rules. Now stop trying to speak. You sound ridiculous.”

The Woman Without Eyes, the Lady Krymsin, breathed in deeply as a very cold blast of air rushed over the water and fanned out into this side of the forest. She spread her arms wide, the charcoal and smoke shadows on the cloak draping from her like the wings of a huge moth, and she again listened to the approaching twilight.

The weeping man began muttering to himself in a strained, high-pitched voice because he could hear it, too.

He could hear night falling, a far away sound that resembled that of a million shards of broken glass shattering onto wet stone. He knew what that sound

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meant.

His weeping became more energetic and he bent over his knees, hugging himself into a ball of dirty, bruised flesh over prominent bones.

The Woman Without Eyes let the wind dance around her, feeling the air currents rush and caper like a mischievous beast around her legs and shoulders, and the sky darkened just a little bit more. Her long, thin fingers worked as if they were plucking the strings of a musical instrument and her brow furrowed in concentration. A rumble began in the air, emanating from far away and slowly growing closer. The woman's body, tall and willowy yet visibly muscular as her cloak fanned out farther still, seemed to fill with a wild elemental energy, as if drawing power from the worsening weather.

"Here, here," she chanted. "I am here. Come."

When the sky-wraith finally came, rushing over the treetops from down the mountain, streaking towards the lake, it brought the storm with it. The wraith howled a deep cry that echoed through the countryside as it approached like a runaway comet.

As it drew near, she stooped to reach down and lay her hand across the damp, trembling head of the kneeling man as she intoned, "Be my eyes."

The man screamed, his agony overtaking his fear.

The livid purplish scars under the arched brows of Krymsin wrinkled, growing redder and swelling. Razor-thin crevices began to split the scar tissue. Abruptly a silvery-white light streamed from rents in the delicate and torn flesh. She saw the face of the Maker of Midnight, Master of the Lake of the Moon, as he approached. It was a face she did not fear, a face that filled her with an endless longing.

It was the face of a man who had once been named "Meffystoh" by the crude barbarians of an untutored culture that could neither understand nor accept him.

"This one has visions, my love, this one sees the future," she said to the storming wind, "He can see a place where I will no longer be haunted or hunted or bartered like livestock. These visions have nearly driven him mad, but their persistence tells him that what he sees is not an illusion, not a mere dream from a feverishly diseased mind, but a peek through the veil of time into the days to come."

She paused, unsure how to continue even though she had rehearsed the speech in one form or another for nearly a month. "This place sickens me. This place will eventually destroy me. Let me go. Let me leave. There is nothing here that means anything to me. I have been empty since the day you were taken from me. I have been cursed since the day The Dark One made me one of the Scarlet People. Carry me from this place! We will meet again across the boundaries of

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time and space. I will know you, no matter what face you may wear, no matter the language you speak or what land you live in. I will know you! I will know your soul!

“Take me to the place that he sees! Meet with me there!”

No sooner had she finished her entreaty than the winds urged like an ocean tide and howled invisibly through the falling gloom of night. The trees bowed, the soil was lifted into the air and flashed through it in dark streaks and the waters of the lake frothed as huge waves buffeted the shore.

The kneeling man by her side had been reduced to a drooling, convulsing mess of spasms that could no longer hold onto a coherent thought. In half a dozen heartbeats, a snaking bolt of lightning fat as a fencepost lashed down from the roiling dark clouds overhead. Tens of millions of volts of naked energy ripped across his quaking body.

As his flesh fried, The Woman Without Eyes laughed a hopeless, melancholy laugh and her body slowly disappeared, fading from view like snow blown off the face of a glacier.

Soon she was gone and only the kneeling man remained. His body was a charred and fire-scarred travesty of humanity. His flesh smoked. He coughed. Wet clots of snot and blood flew from his lips. He fell face first to the scoured soil, dying, and writhed a moment mewling one word, again and again until his voice, and his heart, gave out.

“Mother.”

It was the third time he'd been awakened and he was suffocating, clutched firmly in the embrace of a stifling, all-pervasive darkness. It was a thing apart, that darkness, a deepness more than night.

The inky sea in which he floated whispered to him, spoke to him, and it shared its most nauseating secrets with a frightening feeling of intimacy. It told him things he didn't want to hear. It shared ancient knowledge with him that he didn't want to know. It protected him jealousy while he was weak and vulnerable. It midwived him while he slept fitfully, changing, and it guided his metamorphosis.

The darkness was a thing alive—part master and part slave. He owned it and it owned him. The darkness was Nameless and that in itself gave it an undeniable identity. It defied definition and yet it was the Truth at the center of all things, a virus riding the current of the turbulent river of Time. It was the painful and infected splinter in the Right Hand of God.

And that pain, like himself, was both loved and reviled.

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He awakened for the third time in his long and tortured existence within spitting distance of a battlefield in Egypt, outside of Addis Arantia on the southwestern shore of Lake Mareotis. It was the year 1074 following the crucifixion death of the teacher-prophet humankind knew as The Nazarene. Forever marked by a quartet of four-story-tall, twenty-meter-square onyx obelisks, each stamped with the inscription of a winged bull, the city of Addis Arantia, a city founded by mercenaries, was once a gift from Cleopatra to Mark Antony and had flourished under Roman rule.

But outside the city, a battlefield lay atop white sand. Amid the hewn-stone ruins of a Roman temple called *Rotture del Dio di Spurgo*, “Tears of the Bleeding God,” he emerged from a nightmare-filled slumber. The temple, made from sandstone, black slate and red granite, sat at the edges of a five kilometer-square salt flat where monsoons often raged in from the Mediterranean.

The temple to the Tears of the Bleeding God was an all too apt place for him to have been entombed. He returned to the world of Man after eight decades of sleep.

His name was *Cu’hih-niwunn* in the forgotten tongue of his ancestors. When he had last walked the wastelands, he had been more commonly known as *Kuh-wynn*.

He greeted consciousness with a knife-edged scream of fury.

Within the hard confines of an alabaster crypt, he tore through the fibrous leathery bonds of an obsidian-colored cocoon. Beyond the diamond-shaped antechamber, past the cracked and crumbling portal to the temple, out on the salt flats, a fierce thunderstorm rained down on the chaos of a disintegrating caravanserai. A ragtag band of loutish Turkish slavers were embroiled in quelling a revolt by the twenty-seven Tamasheq Tuareg tribesfolk they’d kidnapped as potential slaves.

A cascade of a hundred thousand dying maggots fell from the leathery cocoon in a gritty torrent and his desiccated flesh suddenly rehydrated, magically softening and remoisturizing with each labored lungful of air he breathed. In moments, he changed from a shambling, mummified corpse-reanimate to a young, muscular warrior with kingly bearing. He stretched, his body again feeling gravity and heat, and he moaned and the sound was a hoarse animal’s rumble lost in the thunder from the storm outside.

He was not disoriented. He knew who he was and where he was. And something angry and primal in him joyfully recognized the nearby muffled sounds of warfare as tormentors and the tormented fought on the arid plain outside.

Such noises were all too familiar to him. The symphony of rage and death, the dread music of predation, had been his constant companion through each of

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his prior incarnations.

All was as it should be: he was Kuh-wynn, born of The Nameless, destined to be known to friend and foe alike as “The Adversary.”

Death was his dominion.

The tall black man moved out of the shadowy antechamber, graceful and powerful as a lion on the hunt, and stepped under the partly-collapsed temple portal to stand naked in the storm.

For a brief moment, he watched the slaughter with a paradoxical mixture of dispassionate curiosity and voyeuristic expectation. The violence of the scene momentarily entranced him.

It was gloomy. It was nearing twilight. The soggy, humid air was battering man and animal alike, unmoved by the drama that played out under gray skies.

The slaves, mostly adolescent boys and girls, had been lashed together with twisted strips of animal hide and they stumbled awkwardly as they tried to fight back against their captors. They were an underweight, wiry group, some of them clearly sick with fever, nearly driven mad by their plight. They’d been marched relentlessly under constant threat of violence for nearly one hundred miles. The slavers, thick, bullish men, swung and punched at them with ruthless fury.

Braided leather lashes and wooden truncheons pummeled dirty, scarred flesh mercilessly as coarse and hairy slavers brutally corralled shouting, spitting, flailing native blacks and Berbers. Frightened horses and camels wrestled with the criminal thugs not caught up in the fight as the Turks tried to restore order to the caravan. Swords were not drawn to quell the uprising for fear of damaging their patron’s merchandise. Hurt or crippled slaves drew very poor coinage at the bazaars across the waters. Slaving, after all, was a business, regardless its heinous morality. A flesh-merchant couldn’t expect top dollar for damaged goods. But blood had been spilled.

A very pregnant Tamasheq tribeswoman lay in a widening pool of blood on the muddy, sodden soil. She gasped and shook as she tried to regain control over her broken, battered body.

Kuh-wynn could see that she was little more than a child herself, thin, hungry, and weak, yet still defiant.

Howling winds lashed the curtain of rain as jagged fingers of lightning stretched from thunderhead to cloudbank in the purplish-gray skies. Someone screamed as a truncheon split their skull.

“No,” Kuh-wynn muttered hoarsely.

A Turkish trader straddled the supine body of the young woman. The bestial features of his face revealed the revulsion he felt for her. He was bent over, pulling her up by a fistful of her long, coarse hair. He shouted curses into her sweat-

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drenched face while the rain pelted them, drenching them both.

“No,” the man from darkness hissed, his eyes narrowing as they began to glow faintly with crimson light.

He thrust out one of his hands, palm outstretched towards the Turk, and the eerie light in his eye sockets seemed to swallow the flesh within them, radiating an alien red fire.

In an eye’s blink, the air around the Turk’s head thickened and grew more opaque. The view of the man’s piggish face became unclear and indistinct, and then, as the thunder rolled, his skull emerged from underneath his dirt-encrusted flesh. The skin surrounding the skull ripped open and, with a grinding wrench, his bloody, naked skeletal dome detached itself from the top vertebra of his spine and flew off his body.

The fallen pregnant woman screamed.

The skull rocketed across the space between the slaver and Kuh-wynn trailing a slipstream of gore. The bony globe slapped into Kuh-wynn’s palm with a loud concussive crack.

He looked down at the grisly object and noticed, with surprise, the exaggeratedly extended canine teeth. He knew of only one breed of human-like creature with such scythe-like teeth. Mostly they lived in shadow. They covered their translucent flesh with sticky soot to withstand the light of day. Human hyenas, they often hunted in packs and fed on the weak and diseased. They arrogantly held themselves above the laws of both Nature and Man. They were corruptors and murderers.

He knew them well. They were his born enemies.

He dropped the skull and crushed it beneath his naked heel. The headless body of the slaver, still standing, abruptly convulsed and, in a sulphurous flash, disintegrated into ash. Kuh-wynn threw back his head and roared.

It was a sound, and an act, that did not go unnoticed. Mercenary slaver and captive slave alike stopped their deadly struggle and stared with superstitious fear and growing horror at the naked man with the glowing scarlet eyes. Instinctively, each of them knew they were not looking at a mere mortal man.

Kuh-wynn’s dark face was contorted into a rictus of fearsome rage, his lips drawn back from his teeth, and the twin red suns where his eyes should have been blazed.

“No!” he growled in a voice that quieted the storm.

The Adversary had awakened.

Time passed in spurts out of an arterial rent...the wound was forever fresh.

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They stumbled on the uneven, gritty soil of the subterranean cavern, in the half-light cast from mounds of oily rags burning behind them in the distance. The bricked-in rough-hewn corridor seemed to stretch on into an infinity of trapped midnight. The place smelled of mold and moist decay. The only sounds were the music of skittering rats on rock and concrete, the tinny trickle of leaden water falling from crevices, and the hollow puffs of their own breathing.

It was a perfect place for the Forgotten Damned to choose as their haven.

“You didn’t tell me it would be like this,” a male voice complained softly from the darkness.

“If I had told you, would you have ventured down here at all?” The deeper, slightly sardonic voice was all culture and aloof erudition.

There were three of them moving in the darkness of a concrete catacomb almost two centuries old underneath the bustling modern metropolis some sixty feet above their heads.

“I thought it would be cold. It’s not. It’s humid and it smells,” another male voice said tremulously. “I thought I caught a whiff of something that smelled like sulfur.”

“What did you call this place again?” the complaining voice asked.

“They call it a barrow. It’s a den where they can slough off the mask of humanity they’re forced to wear. In their barrows, they can drop all pretence at normal human appearance. What’s going on with you? Scared of the boogeyman?” the deeper voiced man said in coolly professorial tones.

“That’s not it. This shouldn’t be...not at all. This is wrong on every level.”

“Yes. It is wrong. Many things in the world are wrong—that doesn’t stop them from being true, though,” the more confident man hissed. “It doesn’t stop the killing and the dying.”

“I had to see for myself if what you were telling me was true. You know that,” the first voice whispered testily.

“It’s true. You know it is.”

“This is criminal! This is public endangerment, this is a conspiracy, a cover-up...,” the first voice began blurting, the hiss of the man’s whisper taking on a hysterical edge.

“This is survival, pure and simple. What the hell else did you expect the government to do? What did you expect the Church to do? How much ‘truth’ do you think the average Joe and Jane Doe can handle? They made it secret because that was the only way to stave off rioting and a bloodbath of reprisals,” the educated man said softly. “Now be a man and shut your mouth.”

“To hell with you! Someone must be told!”

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The confident speaker stopped in the stygian gloom and turned to face his excitable compatriot.

“When we get out of here, if you go topside telling the news media or anyone else about this, I promise you, I’ll kill you myself. That is a guarantee, do you understand? This is a war. A *secret* war.”

“But secrecy is their greatest weapon!” the man spat between clenched teeth, the effort of keeping his voice a whisper making him hoarse.

“No. Stupidity is. Secrecy, on the other hand, is the only thing keeping this war small and preventing an apocalypse,” the larger man said. “Don’t tempt the gods of slaughter by being arrogant.”

“And what you do to them doesn’t tempt these ‘gods of slaughter?’ How many of them have you killed in the past five years, in three weeks, yesterday? Eighty, a hundred homicides? Do you really think they’re okay with that?”

“Hey! Do you think you two could stop fighting each other long enough for us to do what we came here for and get the hell *out*? I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling pretty damned vulnerable right now,” the third man, shorter and heavier than the first two, wheezed softly.

Wordless, his two comrades ceased their argument and returned their attention to navigating the dark corridor.

“We’re here,” the man in the lead said.

‘Here’ was a small ledge overlooking a seventy foot drop into an almond-shaped depression. A runoff drainage pipe vomited a constant stream of muddy, brackish water out into a void lit by fluorescent lights from a workman’s terminal grid. It was a terminus station for the Municipal Water District and it appeared to have been abandoned before construction was completed. The place was a muddy, mucky mess overrun with rats and centipedes. Water pooled under clouds of flies on the floor below.

Seven coffin-shaped metal containers lay atop a cracked concrete slab at the center of the chasm floor. The scattered remains of a dozen dismembered human corpses rotted in the oily muck ringing the concrete slab.

“Are those what I think they are?” the complainer asked, his voice shaking.

The leader, a tall bald black man, his lean, angular face calm and surprisingly serene under the circumstances, nodded to the speaker and raised a single finger to his full lips.

The shorter man, ruddy-faced and dressed in a policeman’s Tac-Team paramilitary uniform, nodded. He carried a Heckler & Koch UMP45 submachine gun. The complainer, a blond man wearing a gray business suit under a rubberized rain slicker and thigh-high fisherman’s boots, snorted derisively at the black man’s gesture.

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The black man shook his head humorlessly in warning. His eyes were deadly reptilian slits in an immobile face.

He pointed to the far wall across the chasm, where a set of concrete steps led down to the floor of the terminus, past a rack of rusted metal pipes leading nowhere and an abandoned mini-scoop excavator vehicle.

A single female figure stood at the foot of the stairs, her back to them, swaying gracefully in the dim gloom to music only she could hear. Her unkempt waist-length hair was oily, disheveled and in ringletted knots, and her clothes were in tatters, barely covering her mud-encrusted body. Yet for all that, she looked lean and strong.

“Fledgling,” the black man said in a breath so light it could have been an illusion that he spoke at all, and he pointed to the swaying woman. “Not a fully-integrated Moon-Chosen. A hybrid, still possessing human traits and frailties. Made, not true-born. She appears to have been abandoned by her Gather-family.”

“Is she the one responsible for the deaths of those gang-bangers who had their throats ripped out last week?” the man in the suit asked.

The black man nodded and waved a hand impatiently at the other two men to keep their positions and remain silent.

The woman slowly turned around and looked up to the ledge, facing them across the gloomy distance.

“I know you’re there,” she said, her voice a clear, unaccented contralto. “I can hear the blood rushing through your veins. I can hear your hearts beat. Especially yours, Adversary. Your heart sounds like angry thunder.”

The black man rose to his full height and stared down at the woman. “You’re sick, aren’t you? That’s why they left you here alone.”

“Yes.” Her voice carried across the chasm like a ghost on the wind. “We have you to thank for that. I am infected with the reversal gene...it’s eating away at me like a cancer. I am slowly becoming human again, in spite of my appetites, no matter how much blood I drink. Now it takes all my concentration not to vomit out what I drain from my kills. I am starving.”

“Being a Fledgling makes you more vulnerable to the illness. A natural born Moon-Chosen would be ill, weakened even, but not deteriorating,” the man she called “Adversary” said.

“So what do you want of me? I will not help you. I have no secrets to tell that you wouldn’t already know.”

“Are you Stroma, Verrigotta, Julianni, Kamenac...?”

“Why does it matter?”

“I would think your pride would demand that I know,” he said.

“Damianna. I am of the Damianna Gather. A Fledgling created by a Second

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Kin wampir in the year of Our Lord 1927 on the eve of my cotillion in Princeton.”

“1927? Did she say 1927? If she was at a cotillion that put her in her late teens. That means she’s at least ninety-six years old! But *look* at her!” the man in the suit said.

“This can’t be real. No way this is real,” the police Tac-Team captain muttered.

“Damianna,” The Adversary repeated, ignoring the two men. “This hole is far from your normal trappings. You are power-brokers and kingmakers. Dank barrows are not your normal territory.”

“We are what we wish to be when we need it.” Her eyes looked dull and hopeless, but her fangs glistened in the dim light and they could see that her soiled hands ended in razor-sharp talons.

He shook his head. “Where have they gone?”

“Why would they tell me? I am infected, damaged goods. I am no longer a hunter, but a scavenger. Only one step above being a diseased dog of a Nostrafeggi. I don’t belong. Telling me where they went would endanger them.”

“Then they should have killed you.”

She smiled weakly. “No. That is not our way. That is the way of animals and of humans. I was of them, once a member of the Gather. To kill me because of an affliction would dishonor the Gather. I am a killer among killers. I deserve some measure of honor in my final moments.”

“So they left you to fend for yourself, each day growing weaker, each day rejecting the very food that would give you strength, power and immortality. They left you to be found and hunted by the humans...or by me.”

“I will not fight. I am too weak. But I cannot betray my masters. I cannot let you have this body...”

That was when they noticed the round metal bulb in her hand and the length of rubberized tubing that ran into the gas tank of the excavator. A homemade detonator...

The Adversary grabbed his two companions in a grip far too strong to be that of a mere human. With impossible ease, he lifted the two men into the air and ran back away from the ledge into the stony corridor, at a speed so great that it took their breath away.

The explosion rocked the subterranean catacomb and a massive flaming fireball roared into the corridor behind them, pushing a bone-hammering shock-wave before it. The Adversary leapt across a jagged crevice as the area shook with the concussive force of the explosion, and he held the two men under his own body as the heatwave washed over them.

“...omigawdomigawdomigawd what in hell happened?” the man in the

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business suit sputtered.

The police Tac-Team officer raised his submachine gun and pointed it at The Adversary, his eyes wide, his face dripping perspiration as he nearly hyperventilated.

“Nothing human can do what you just did...no one is that strong or that fast!”

“Relax. You don’t want to do that,” the tall black man said.

“And why the hell not?”

“Because you’ll just piss me off.” The man’s tone was slightly arrogant, even a little amused, but his eyes blazed with something that looked like raw homicide. The cop imagined it was the kind of a look that a wolf on the hunt gave a jackrabbit.

“Are you human?” the officer asked.

“In a way, yes. In a way, no. But what matters most is that I’m *not* one of them.” The Adversary pointed down the corridor behind them.

“Let it go,” the businessman said sternly. His tone and his attitude surprised the policeman.

“What?”

“Let it go. Drop it. We need him. And we’ve got bigger fish to fry,” the man said as he vigorously slapped away dust and grime from his coat.

“What just happened here?” the cop asked as he lowered the muzzle of his weapon.

“You just got a glimpse of the real world,” The Adversary said. “Now you know that there really are such things as vampires.”

They didn’t speak again until after they’d left the catacombs and climbed the service ladder back up to the city’s streets, where sunlight blazed with the heat of mid-morning.