

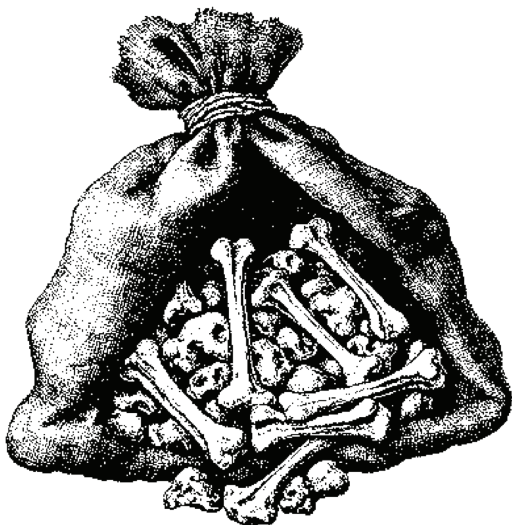
The Urykola Codex



THEODOROS SABBATIANOI

The Vrykola Codex

A treatise upon the subject
of the rise and fall of the Lord of Shadows.



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The names and places contained within this publication have not been changed.

The following account has been verified and approved for mass consumption.

*Dedicated to all those who seek to cast a spell
underneath the light of the Moon...*

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MAP OF THE
MIDDLE TERRITORY:
XECHASMENOS

I



KOILADA

FOREST
PSITHYROS

THE BLEEDING FIELDS

VILLAGE
NYX

WHISPERING WOODS

DIABOLOS MOUNTAINS



CASTLE
IFAISTEIO

KATHARSI
RIVER

THE MIDDLE TERRITORY
OF
PLANET XECHASMENOS

THE WARRIORS OF
SONIC ALTRUISM
II

NOODLES

Born of peasant blood and originally christened as Arkos Georgios, the village of Nyx referred to him only as Noodles, for his fingers danced in the invisible air to a melody of his own knowing. He was reported to officials as a “joy to animals” and a kind soul who “seemed to ignite a flame” in others. Prior to the discontinuation of the annual, kingdom-wide census, Noodles was classified as unremarkable; just another child borne into servitude. It was upon his 17th birthright day that he was given a rudimentary clavichord with which to summon the dulcet music of angels. His father, maimed by a rogue, cloven beast that had stumbled from the woods, was laid upon straw and thread, unable to see but soothed by the attempts of his son to serenade him with the instrument. During the annual Feast of the Ancients Ones, his father was consumed by vampires just after the midnight hour chimed at the village monastery.

DEX

Orphaned before his 11th birthright day, Dexion Mpáso was the beneficiary of his mother, a wealthy land and production owner, responsible for milling and grain processing. His home was modest, but he lacked for nothing. Embarrassment became a component of his daily travels to and from the bazaar, pretending to be of low moral and financial stock to avoid vicious creditors and harbingers of debt. Wealth was not prized by the vampires, but real estate was. Nests of nychterídes would roost in aban-

doned homes, waiting for the Moon to rise to transform and raid the village of Nyx and its surrounding brethren. Dex sought refuge in the dingy corners of the homes of his acquaintances and bandmates, plucking at his bari-tone, stringed instruments, a gift from his late mother. He would slip coins of gold and silver into his adoptive family's purses when their eyes were averted, thankful for the warm sustenance and the dry straw above his head while he strummed imaginary melodies.

KYV

The ancient art of sewing requires steady fingers, accuracy, and finesse. A simple pattern is easy to reproduce, but for Konstantinos Yannis Vasileiadis, the tedium of stitching and looping was an omen of song. Fast as a swooping hawk, his fingers danced from needle to thread, bringing a simple garment to life with the ease of an exhale. The fundamentals of his craft translated easily to the air-powered harpsichord, powered by the same pedal he used to ensure the straightness of a stitch. Haunting rhythms and echoing chants would emanate from the device, choking the vestibule of his childhood home, both a respite for weary travelers and a studio for textile repair for the aforementioned weary travelers. So sudden was the Feast of the Ancient Ones each year that his haunting melodies and expert tailoring fell upon deaf ears and invisible limbs; the clientele of the inn no longer needing them.

GIALLO

Under the blasphemous sign of the blood red Moon, his yellowed flesh was cast aside. Down into a cistern, squeezed through a rotting stone in the foundation, the river accepted him, depositing his wailing form into the arms of the Sisters of the Holy Veil of Tears. The malady

of his skin anointed him with the name Giallo; no other would he know. Strictness and conformity became his childhood: the keeping of time, a penance for tardiness, the thumping monotony of the ticking sun, and the warbling Moon. These echoes became the foundation of his love for rhythm and the unending beat of his heart. Fashioning calcified driftwood into mallets, he would thrash them against iron, stone, and cloth to document the different tones. Suddenly, his internal pacing led the processions of faith during daily mass, soothed the leprous and the dying into their eternal slumber, and, according to the Sisters, kept nychterides in a docile stasis long enough for the salvation of the sun to bring a moment of peace. He was gifted a goatskin drum, worn around his neck in a leather sleeve, and released upon the eve of his 16th birth-right day; tasked with bringing the light of the Sisters to the village of Nyx, and, Lords-willing, to the world.

MOON PHASES

III

NEW MOON

Upon the occasion of the New Moon, one needn't seek shelter from the creatures who sulk in the dark, for the light of the Moon must penetrate the atmosphere and the clouded sky to benefit the vampire. However, take heed, the briar wolves feast in any darkness, turned away only by the good graces of pale, golden light.

WAXING CRESCENT

To satisfy the Lords of yore, it is recommended that thine bounty, whether it be through the dirt or one's hands, begin under the auspices of the waxing crescent Moon. For it is here that the soil, the sow, and the stitch can all pass safely in the day, while idle hands clasp one another at night. The stench of blood must be washed before the sun's ritual of setting to ward off lurking nychterídes.

FIRST QUARTER

Here, the Moon has shed half of its darkness, with strength to blanket the planet with a bright light in the darkest corners. It is now that animal fat should be rendered and stored, ready to be coated between the folds of canvas tatters and ignited to signal the coming of the pale creatures of the night. While the sun will corrupt vampires, the First Quarter Moon is not a cure-all for their ways. Their strength will be minimized, but their hunger will remain vigilant. Fire, my friends, is a loving mother amongst the

fathers of night.

WAXING GIBBOUS

The time is nigh, the Moon is nearly fully unclothed. With haste, the harvest must be fully sown as the generations who survive the Feast of the Ancient Ones must have sustenance on the other side of grief. Clothing, livestock, hammer upon iron; this is not the time to be wasting watching the mountains yawn. To only begin now is undoubtedly a recipe for death in just a few days' time.

FULL MOON

The Feast of the Ancient Ones is upon us. As night falls and the Moon towers above all else, the loved ones of our past awaken and crawl forth from their resting place with dirt under their fingernails and dried blood coating their teeth. Take shelter and heed the call of those veterans who have survived the hunt. Vampires feast on blood and bone and must choose wisely. For just as a shepherd must keep his flock intact, so must Count Vrykola. Vampires are not born, they are made; selected carefully for efficacy and strength. Younglings are ineligible, and the elderly are merely sustenance. Embrace the amber flames, give graces to the penitent Lords, and keep close the relics of divinity. If thee survive the night, thee are far from safety.

WANING GIBBOUS

Though the Feast of the Ancient Ones reaches its apex during the Full Moon, it is here that the scourge satisfies their lingering hunger. One might suspect that silence in the mist signals the final death knell of the Feast, but it is but a ruse. Do not search for additional supplies in darkness; take advantage of the sun and forgo thy duties.

Fire and blade must be replenished, thine own sustenance jarred. The lesser vampire, the adýna, feasts on what their forefathers have already drained, finding solace in dried flesh and hollow bone. Their skin is devoid of hair, their mannerisms mimicking those of drunken wolves with an overabundance of bones, pounding the dirt on all fours. Their speed is unmatched, their strength ruled by a frenzy of hunger. Remain in the light and avert thine eyes from the dead; there will be time enough to lay them to rest when the Moon recedes.

THIRD QUARTER

The mist has begun to fade, but the squawking of the nychterides remains, even into the weak hours of sunlight. The messengers of the undead have no fear of the morning and afternoon, though their prey does have an affinity for night. Their memory is transfixed upon the movements of the living, their sense of direction illustrating a map in their minds, delivered to their masters in the pale, half-light of the Moon. Livestock, we are, counted and herded until the tally can be assembled and reported. Will thine harvests be bountiful? I pray that thou hast shielded thyself from harm, for only a matter of moments before the waning Moon ferries the vampires back to whence they came.

WANING CRESCENT

A sigh of relief must be held in the middle of thy mouth while the New Moon waits for glory. Darkness has returned to the land, and the baying of the wolves has ceased for the moment. Heat bears down, rarely cooled off at night, though the mountains do their part. Keep the notion of fortitude and foraging at the forefront of thy duties. Sow and sew, assess and rebuild. Rarely do the forc-

es of the undead return by the beginning of the waning crescent, but vigilance is a virtue and must be placed next to courage and fear on the mantle of our minds. Praise be to those who have kept blood in their veins, spilling only that which is unholy. The vampire shall return, but now ye know the cyclical nature of the beast. Take heed, and practice that which has been bestowed upon thee. Grace be unto thee and thine precious ones.

ELIXIR OF DIVINITY
IV

*To be writ upon clean vellum, in good order, for the
Fellows of Pipe and String.*

INVOCATION

In the waning light of Selene, when shadows grow weary and the nychterides makes counsel with the dusk, whisper softly: "*As wine draweth the virtue of herb, so let our melody draw the breath from the unholy.*" Invoke the Sign of Harmonic, thumb to middle thrice, and begin the ritual of application.

THE MATTER OF THINGS NEEDFUL

The vessel shall be a fair bason of latten or a copper-lined pot; a clay jar with a close lid; clean linnen for straining; a spoon of coarse wood; a ring of coals or banked embers for gentle heat.

INGREDIENTS AND NECESSITIES

Wine, red, sound, and strong. A single cup to openeth the bodies of simples and weddeth them together.

Honie crude. Two sumptuous spoonfuls keepeth corruption out and giveth gloss and sweetness for application.

Garleke. Two cloves, well bruised, for fierce breath. Putteth flight into unclean airs for maximum protection.

Leek or onyon. One quarter bulb, well-bruised, to sharpen the garleke and scoureth evil humours.

Sage. A small handful of leaves bindeth the mind and closeth the pores of the frailest of wood.

Vervain, or betony, if that fails. Three parts to chaseth phantoms and comforteth the head and beating heart.

Rose petals. A modest handful for purification and to lifteth the spirit of sound.

Fennel seed. One small spoonful, ground, for warming in leading the elixir into the grain.

Divine Spice Blend. Cynamon, ginger, clove. A modest pinch to awaken the string against corruption.

Wax of the Bee, virgin. A walnut's weight for thickness; to sheddeth water and begetteth a mild shine.

THE WORKING, OR THE MANNER OF MAKING

Of Bruising and Casting

Upon the Full Moon, bruise garleke and sage together with vervain, rose, honey, and the Divine Spices. Cast all into the latten bason. Pour thereupon the wine and stir till the honie be well dissolved.

Of Digestion by Nighte

Cover the bason and set it to digest with a ring of coals about the bottom, so that it simmers not, but only sends a little breath. Lacking a hearth, bury the pot to the neck in a warm dung-back or compost, which keepeth kindly heat. Let it stand for a single night, stirring at dawn and

evensong.

Of Reduction

Upon the second night, bring the elixir to a gentle steam, till the third part be wasted, the savour groweth thick and hearty. Do this with patience; boile not, lest the virtue flee. Begin the application of sage and fennel seed to penetrate the brew.

Of Straining and Ennobling

Strain through clean linnen into an earthen pot. While the liquor is yet warm, shave in the virgin wax, stirring always till it shines like a saint's lamp and falleth from the spoon in a solid ribbon.

Of the Curing

Stop the pot and set it where Selene waneth, that her pale eye may draw out malignity whilst the coat taketh body. Rest one evening, and it shall be deemed potent.

THE VIRTUES AND PROPERTIES, OR GLOSS FOR THE CURIOUS

The Rite of Anointing Instruments

When the company maketh ready to face the undead and other night-bearers:

- + Warm the body of the lute, clavichord, rebec, viol, citole, tabor, or nakors, talharpa, or bow near the hearth, hand-hot only.
- + Take a thimble of the elixir upon the linnen and rubbe thin over the sound-board, ribs, neck, and pegge-box; for bowes, a very skim.
- + Let it haze, then buffe with dry linnen till a low glow answereth the candle.
- + Renew regularly whilst the hunt endureth. Vibra-

tions shall erode its effectiveness. Thin upon thin worketh best, like prayers repeated in a whisper.

Caution and Take Heed

+ Boile not the elixir, nor let ash fall in, lest the spirit thereof be dulled.

+ Keep from eyes and skin of tender touch, the elixir biteth shrewdly.

+ Store close-lidded. It if grow thick as salve, warm gently and stir. If too thin, feed with a shaving of wax.

Thus made and ministered, this Elixir of Divinitie setteth a holy bridle upon the voice of string and wood, so that every note striketh as a sun-ray, and the undead findeth no harbour where such music ringeth.

Eítē oi theíkoí theoí na evlogísoun ti díkaíosýni sas me skopó kai dýnami.

THE CHRONICLE OF
THE LORD OF
SHADOWS
V

THE ENTOMBMENT OF A PEASANT

In the year of our Lords, sixty-three hundred and twenty-five, it was so marked as an uncharacteristically warm summer. The uneven sun dared not be tamed by mortal means; the prayers went unanswered for shade and solitude. It was here, in the village of Nyx, south of Koiláda by several nights, that nothing of consequence occurred; at least, according to historians of much more significant wealth and stock.

Borne between the shivering heights of the Diávolos Mountains to the north; the rock-laden, gentle Kátharsi River to the east; and the stalks of the Forest Psíthyros, fashioned as the Whispering Woods by locals for its ability to echo even the smallest of confessions, in the north-west and middle-east; the village existed solely to exist. The denizens had been cast out of nearby settlements and establishments, packed up their belongings, and huffed their way to more profitable pastures. A house of worship, a cobbler, an inn, a tailor, an alchemist. Nyx was of no consequence; a haven for those passing through to the capital, on a journey no less than a few cycles.

While the village center built a reputation, it was in the outerlands, in the fields and dales, where fortune and legacy were made.

His knees were embedded in the dirt; his chewed and crusted fingernails cleared a thimble-sized divot. From his palm tumbled a blood-red seed, quickly smothered by black, and drowned with a gulp from the rosette of a dented watering can. His eyes contracted in the unfor-

giving rays of the sun, the third time he had calculated its height in the last few moments. He estimated he had enough time to sow only a dozen more. His stained tunic cleared perspiration from across his brow and chin, the redness of his cheeks emitting their own heat.

Next, the livestock: the bovines of engorged milk; the fattened, slated hogs; the cheerful, bearded and hooved; the clucking birds of little flight. Their pens had been reinforced with a levered drawboard, a second bar of iron secured with a key to lock it into place. He dragged grain and grass into their feeding troughs and ensured that river water from the well had been boiled and transferred. The various creatures neighed and bleated, begging for a scratch upon their chins, a tap to their hides.

What of his own stock? A storage shed adjacent to the chattering animals rattled with jars of fruit preserves and pickled eggs. Mold had not yet set in, judging by the color in the yellow light. Slivers of beef lay nestled in salt, preserving their longevity for at least a handful of seasons. He lowered the drawboard and fastened it into place, offering a quick rattle to ensure its stability.

"Lefkó!"

He dismissed the call. *"Lefkó?"*

"A moment, pray thee!" He was buried in preparation. A bit of oil from a clay bottle splashed onto a linnen rag, the substance applied to the iron current that ran down the length of a crossbow. He checked the tension of the bow and applied an arrow. He polished the sight on the front of the weapon, making sure the delicate cross was straight and true. A quiver produced only five more projectiles, two of them rotten and in danger of splitting.

Not enough.

"Lefkó!" He set a pitcher of river water and a wool swatch onto a side table and knelt. His father's pained expression meant much more than discomfort. He was dying, falling further from the light just as the sun began its

same descent.

"Ye are prepared, no less?" the elder whispered.

Lefkó sighed and dunked the wool into the cool water, squeezing the excess. It found a home on the wrinkled forehead. "I was not able to fill the fields as I would have liked."

"Bah! Ye are the son of a carpenter. Even thine mother would have disregarded her bounty."

"That is because she knew she would survive the Feast."

"And ye won't?"

There was little confidence behind the exhaustion. "Of course, babás."

"There is strength *here*." His father tapped his own heart with a stern index. "Tonight does not belong to them. She survived long enough to deliver her own ritual. She may have gifted herself beyond, but she did not bow to those..." He searched endlessly for the word, but fell silent in the throes of fever.

Lefkó moistened the wool and replaced it, praying the calm interlude would quell the flames.

The entrance to their cottage heaved, the heavy iron plating smacking the wall, testing the durability of the hinges. The angered stomp of his brother's boots wafted over the threshold into their father's quarters.

"*I know...I am late.*"

Lefkó quietly exited, the doorway yawning enough to allow a sentimental view of the ailing patriarch, before confining him. "What hast thou brought?"

The burly shoulders, previously straight, slouched. A swollen hand through his curled, dry locks. He rummaged in his rucksack and produced a wax-wrapped gift.

"Cheese?" Lefkó spat. "Where is the garleke? The sage?" Shuffling feet; a lack of eye contact. "Arkos?"

His voice, normally hoarse with manual masculinity, squeaked: "Not...not much remains. Pray thee, I nearly

looted the monger!"

"Has the hour escaped thee?"

"And to whom do I answer? *Babás?*"

"To thine own self. The Feast is upon us, and thine head has been left behind in the sky!" Arkos pushed past him, palm to his shoulder. "Should the pastor expect you at mass?"

His brother sifted through a chest of carpentry tools, busying himself while he searched for a proper retort. "I am weak. *Tired*. Preparation has been costly on my bones."

"Should I send for the bishop?" he bleated sarcastically. "Should a blessing be offered?"

"I have other duties to attend to." Arkos slammed the lid and clapped his hands free of sawdust.

"Do not forget thy bounty." Lefkó tossed the hunk of cheese, caught with some sheepishness. "Remain close, the briar wolves have been loud this afternoon. I pray that they do not loot before the first waves. I have bled the beasts and fowl appropriately; should time be kind, please apply them to the doorways." Arkos barely offered a nod as he shuffled into the rear chamber of the cottage and out into the growing fields, his hands on his hips, studying his brother's sowing.

Lefkó retreated to his father's workshop, rough planks of cottonwood tucked underneath his arm. A serrated blade split the width, roughly the length of his arm. A dozen would do. A mallet evened out the triangular tips, and a honing rod sharpened the edges for maximum air speed and stopping power. He assembled the crude arrows and loaded them into the chamber of his crossbow. A little oil across the shaft would allow for a fastidious exit.

The remaining scraps could not amount to much, but a burlap string threaded over a few crossed switches was enough to appear divine. He chiseled the bark clear in intricate patterns and formed a dainty rose. Useless, he knew, but the process draped his shoulders in a serenity

that was difficult to conjure otherwise. Before he could continue in earnest, the syncopated clomp of hooves drew him to the threshold.

Upon the doorstep to his home slinked a weathered steed, her ribs outlined against a caramel hide. Her misery was temporary, her rider offering sugar as a reward. His burlap robe marked him as a penitent man, his necklace of mountain ice betraying him as a monk of the Order of the Sacrificial Crystal. Mostly harmless, his people had retreated to the Diávolos Mountains to worship the naturally forming crystals forged from millennia of pressure and climate. His blade-shaved skull beaded with anxiety as he unfastened a sloshing bucket and ladle from his horse's saddle.

A nod and a wave from Lefkó initiated the contract: blessed water splashed along the perimeter of his home. A few pieces of bread and a handful of dried fruit wrapped in linnen was the penalty; not much, but the nearly toothless grin and clasped hands were worth the offer. The monk continued his ritual, splashing the water to and fro, forgetting accuracy.

The sun now dipped, suddenly weighted, the descent casting jagged shadows across the tiny mounds that would one day bear a lucrative harvest. The bucket fell, the soil barely swallowing the water before the monk's sandals were striking his conveyance, propelling the two towards the horizon. His reward was left behind, for life was far more precious than an earned meal.

Lefkó was upon the anteroom, the door barred, his crossbow slung over his shoulder alongside a quiver, a blade tucked into his belt. An inspection of his father revealed slumber.

He marched to the window: Arkos was within a stone's throw, hurrying to the back of the cottage. He latched the porthole shut and stood against the cool, stone wall. A sliver of light wormed its way through the window dressing,

creeping slowly from east to west. He calmed his heart with long, deliberate breaths; the sound of his brother in the other room delivered him comfort.

Within moments, darkness was upon them.

A match steadied to ignite a wick over oil. It was an unfortunate trigger as the flutter of wings brought the chitter of soaring rats. "*Nychterides*?" his father crowed, calling out the wave of reconnaissance. The roof giggled as the bats tiptoed, searching for a place to roost and mark.

The Moon, often referred to as Selene by elders, undressed, casting a sickly white glow upon the farmstead and the village of Nyx. The shadows now moved with purpose, shambling atop two, three, or four legs, beating back grass, dirt, and brush.

The groaning of the second stage was more akin to living lips; hunger and direction, tinged with anger and an eternal loss of empathy. The *nychterides* signaled to the shamblers the location of fresh flesh. "Does beast and fowl blood lie at the entrances?" His brother's shadow was still underneath the doorway. "*Arkos*?"

Screams to the west meant that Nyx had already absorbed the invasion. *Death*.

The poor bleating of the hooved; the baritone purring of the bovine. They were unwilling sacrifices. Lefkó mourned for his familiars; furious that Arkos had not followed dereliction and duty. His focus pulled towards the scraping of nails through wood. The entrance swelled; his father cursed; his brother said nary a syllable.

The hoard sniffed, their shadows trading places, ensuring the envoy was in order. Then, three knocks. Raspy, knuckle-driven; almost polite.

In a flash, the party departs. The wind whistles its exclamation down from the mountains through the Whispering Woods. There is rhythm in his heart, irregular, for his breathing leaves little room within his chest.

The silence is broken by the heavy deposit above: the

roof toils and squirts. Blood, bubbling and black, pours between the trusses of hewn wood and straw. Arkos unlatches the window dressing and pushes it out towards the rear of the property. "*Three knocks*," he mutters. Without removing his gaze, he extends his left hand and weakly performs the password.

Upon the third knock, the white glow of a watchful pair of eyes reveals itself. He retreats a step, his throat bulging, attempting to swallow dryly. The unblinking orbs calm him, allowing his hands to drop to his side. The drawboard lifts easily, the hinges protested.

Lefkó is magnetized to the rear chamber, pounding the wood, engaging the knob with no results. "*Arkos! Avert thine eyes!*" He searches his tunic for the keys, failing to grip the ringlet properly. He finally frees the lock and tumbles inward, slapping the dirt floor with much fanfare. The daze of confusion muddies his vision. Arkos' attempt to calm his brother with his hypnotized stare failed. He signaled towards the transfixed eyes and shot out his index to pinpoint his fixation. It was his final gift before a battery of bloody claws reached inward and sucked him into the night air.

Bats took his place, filling the cottage with winged skin as they circled and nipped. Lefkó rolled to his back as the anteroom exploded with wood, the shambling horde rushing inward with lust. They invaded his father's room first, with haste, their fangs embedded across his neck and extremities in a fountain of blood. There was little resistance from the patriarch, the speed unwilling to give his throat the chance to utter the prayer that might have kept them at bay.

Lefkó kicked closed the backroom entry and anchored it from his knees. The rear egress had not attracted attention yet. He reached for the knob to slam it shut, but his forearm was handcuffed.

He stared, transfixed, into the lost eyes of pestilence.

It lacked hair of any kind; its skull forming a sickly dome of black veins perched over milky eyes. A mountain peak of a nose did little to protect the gangly mouth of uneven teeth, the flat molars transformed into a jagged field of glass. Not enough room existed to properly close the mouth, filled already with blood and emitting an animalistic hiss.

Lefkó's free hand found the trigger of his crossbow, the angle just enough to puncture upward through the bottom of the jaw, the shaft visible in the rear of the vampire's mouth. The rage of pain released the stranglehold; his boot heavy enough to discharge the creature and allow him to shut the door and window and secure them.

A new arrow was conscripted, the bow dragged and secured. From his belt came a modest sword, and his tunic provided a vial of crushed garleke which dripped liberally along the blade. An unlit torch fixated his attention. His hands searched for more as his home absorbed the collective blows of the horde. Finding nothing of value to light the animal fat, he held the rags to the wall and struck with purpose his sword. The spark ricocheted off the stone and clambered up the torch, bathing the small chamber in cleansing light.

The nychterides swarmed the exterior, leaving little of the Moon's glow intact. Sensing his incarceration, Lefkó stabbed the ceiling with the torch, spreading the flames across the roof. The bats, unable to escape the blaze, wilted as their fur singed and their wings huddled their chests to mute the heat.

He overturned a barrel in the back of the room, revealing an iron cover. Looping his fingers through the filtration holes, he popped it free. The shaft was wide enough, but the depth he had forgotten, for his childish days were far behind him. He was left little time to ponder as the blaze pressured the roof. The rattling undead took the room for what it was worth and piled in, stumbling over

one another while the trusses weakened and crushed them all into the dirt. Lefkó hurried into the cistern chute and dragged the iron grate behind him.

The freefall was unexpected, the landing unwelcome. His knees absorbed most of the impact, his torch now lost in the murky water. He fumbled, in pain, the wall offering a brief respite. He heaved a calming breath as the light from the flames above extinguished, the shaft cast in a thick and unsettled darkness.

The stench is nearly unbearable; every bucket of water drawn from it in need of boiling and sanitization. Rats hustled and bustled above the surface, announcing their location and intention, hoping to avoid Lefkó.

He kept his eyes clenched, worried that the hypnotizing orbs would reappear. His fingers gingerly read the tunnel, stone turning into bone: hands; fingers; skulls; death. These were the lucky ones, truly forgotten. He paused, waiting for the water to settle the waves of his journey.

Screams above. The village of Nyx had cast out the living, it seems, and invited them to wander his property and the surrounding woods.

Onward. Ages to the river, he knew, but perhaps he could outswim them. Lose them here, for he was but one of many with blood to spare.

A splash. *Behind him.*

The nervous shiver launched him forward, his knuckles striking metal. *Armor. Armor!*

Frantic searching. A wooden shaft. *Linnen. Linnen!*

He readied his sword and struck the wall of the cistern, igniting the long-lost torch in brilliance. Lefkó laughed to himself in relief and turned towards the decaying echo, brandishing his crude cross to deflect what evil awaited.

The tunnel screeched as dozens of pale faces welcomed him with devilish glee.

The torch sighed. The void enveloped him.

A ROTTEN COVEN RISES

Confinement was not conducive to his psyche.

Smooth, layered ribbons of creamy satin cradled him as the coffin swayed steadily. Like an annoyed and hungry child, the movement calmed his heartbeat, but perspiration still broke in waves. The air grew stale and thin with every inhalation. Lefkó felt no open wounds; no festering gangrene. His face was clear of blemishes.

Next, with what little room was afforded, he thrust his arms akimbo. The pathetic distance traveled was not worth the muted sound of failure. The ground was upon him unexpectedly; the hopefully temporary prison had dropped high from shoulders to unforgiving stone. His head bounced and rattled, inducing a tingling sensation and a momentary lapse of judgment.

A fumbling metal melody was followed by the jingling of keys. *A lock, perhaps?*

Not daylight, now, but muted orange; candles held close and far from the specimen. A shrouded figure hobbled to safety, disappearing into the folds of the horde after the unceremonious liberation.

Had he escaped the cistern after all? Still surrounded, still the threat of annihilation. But they were under the spell, clothed in heavy robes, and obedient. Towering stained glass, of which time and testament were depicted, half-cowered behind curtains of crimson, absorbing an invisible echo that lengthened the stone walls to a cathedral ceiling beyond his view. Lefkó's hand gripped the edge of the coffin for balance, but the chamber responded with an explosion of a symphonic triad: *C over E over G.*

The mangled and rusted copper that spat the uneven chord had weathered centuries of neglect. Cracked shafts and moisture had curled and bent the organ's pipes into a

mangled claw ready to snatch whoever sat upon its bench. At its base sat an equally neglected and discolored presence: his ashen, bony fingers finding the keys bloated and resistant. A cape of satin protected his neck, the excess spilling about the floor, the edges frayed and stained in dust and the refuse of bats and the horde alike. A misaligned key shift pushed his shoulders nearly above his head. The solo had been ruined, and thus, he stood.

A throne of pain was his respite, adorned with malevolent faces and creatures of mythology and legend. The obsidian framework welcomed him with a creaking echo. He had taken on the appearance of his loyalists: hairless, bulging teeth unable to hide behind his lips, ancient wrinkles ruffling veins of black. His eyes, though, shimmered bright blue, reminding his victims of who he once was, before time had begun to be adequately recorded.

Lefkó rose to the balls of his feet, inflating his height. The attempt to intimidate deflated when he beheld the massive, carpeted staircase that ascended towards the throne. Dull, golden tassels lined the edges, the fabric bearing wear, shredded where servants had been forced to trek incessantly. From the coffin he exited, peering over his shoulders lest a hungry beast take advantage of his insecurity.

The first step was trying. *Why should he abdicate to this creature? Because he was allowed to live?*

"Ye approach?" The voice was meek, forced through crag and sinew, but it blared in Lefkó's ears as if embedded deep within his skull.

"W-why have thee spared someone such as me?" he returned.

"I am not merciful," croaked the ancient one.

Lefkó climbed, determined to smell the stench of the being before locking his calloused fingers around him. "Then, what are ye?"

"Tired..."

The anger was suddenly flushed, replaced with curiosity. "I beseech thee: what do they call ye? Master? Sire?"

"Count. Count Striges." The frail vampire coughed, casting his forearm in front of his mouth to steady the rhythm. "There are those who wish me dead. Are thee among them, youngling?"

"I am here, am I not?"

"Not of thine own volition."

"But, advantageous nonetheless." The gap began to close; the attending below hissed sporadically, unsure of the intentions of both. "My father, my brother. There are none left."

"Praise be to thine kin. Arkos. He loved thee most of all."

"Does that disgust thee?" Lefkó spat.

"Love is a fleeting rush of sanitization to the skull, but it begs to enact crude decisions." The Count moistened his lips and stared at his weathered, splotched palms. "Thine brother has been a loyal servant of my brood." A sigh, his eyes forced closed by exhaustion. "But every agent wears at their Master. Arkos...his time was nigh, his flesh gray and leathered."

"*Damn thee!*" Lefkó cursed. "His strength is foreign to thee!"

"In exchange for his life, he chose...*that which belongs to thee.*" Lefkó paused, his boot hovering over the next step. "To seize the reins of my throne. To carry on the tradition of the Ancient Ones."

"*I will strike thee down.*" It came between gritted teeth, his gallop bringing him as close as he would be allowed. Count Striges waved his calcified fingers, and a telekinetic wave bubbled across the air, stiffening Lefkó's muscles and freezing him in a vulnerable state.

"And doom thine *sanctuary?*" The Count rose painfully from the throne and tiptoed within arm's length. "Nyx? The planet? I am but a shepherd, culling and thinning

the herd. If I am vanquished, who will control their appetite?" He presented his minions, and a frenzy suddenly awoke in them, blood on the horizon. "Hush, my pestalant ones. Thou would have them run, brave and free? Feasting endlessly until there is nothing but ash and cloth? I suffered the same fate. I was chosen to carry this burden to decide who lives and who returns from the dead."

"Then take thine own life! Do not engage me with this barbarian puzzle." Lefkó twisted against the invisible prison.

"I am no longer allowed to sleep. I no longer eat. I am tied to my children. I hunger with them. *I howl with them.* My heart beats with their pain, but I cannot willingly abandon them. *Thou* must take my place."

Lefkó laughed incredulously. "What qualifies and constitutes my candidacy?"

"*Nothing.* There is *nothing* particularly extraordinary, only that thine brother entrusts ye."

"But he was taken! Thou spared not my father!"

"I can no longer control every movement, every breath like I once could. But thee...*might.*"

"No! I reject this! Bleed me now, send me beyond."

The patient vampires now rushed, forming an impenetrable wall at his backside.

"So be it," the Count offered. "But the others, they will fall. Then my beloved will fall. And there will be nothing. The Bleeding Fields will dry. The livestock will rot. The planet will return to what it once was, never to return."

"Certainly, there are others that thou hast cast in love?" pressed Lefkó.

"Will I be able to protect them? Will I be able to control these creatures? They exist only to feed. I cannot harm them. I can only satiate them; it is the natural order of the planet...of the Moon."

"There are others, are there not? Such as I?"

"Yes." The Count averted his gaze, staring off into

time, remembering the fateful course that had delivered him to this very moment. "But it is thee who stand before me now. Thine brother traded his life for what legacy thou hast left. I would caution the disappointment to his soul."

"*Arkos lives?*"

"As bright as the wretched sun. He will be returned safely, of course, should a contract complete its necessity."

"I have fought thine kind for nigh on decades! I shall finish what my family has started."

"And I have lorded over the mountains for millennia!" Count Striges regained his composure and devilish strength, gripping Lefkó's neck with enough force to extract his spine. Jagged teeth dripped clear hunger beneath enlarged pupils in the throes of the hunt. "Thou knowest not of the burden or the fear I carry."

"And I should carry it as well?" he squeaked under the constriction.

"I am here to caution thee; to bring balance to the world. Perhaps thine kind are no longer meant to be fed upon; perhaps there are other sources. I do not have the strength to engage with experimentation! I seek slumber. *Release me!*"

"How?" Lefkó begged. He was released, a crumpled sack of bones, his own hands to his throat to satiate the pain.

The Count turned his back on him. "I will drink of thine blood, but a taste, to infect thee with what compels us all. Then, with swiftness, thou shalt remove my head and my heart to ensure I will have no chance to escape, or my children will ensure a most painful death."

"And Arkos? He will live?"

"Once I am laid to rest, this will be thy decision."

The vampire legion wished for a sacrifice, but the Count calmed them with the wave of a hand, ordering them to retreat enough to grant Lefkó the leverage he

needed. He returned to his throne, flipping his cape skyward so as not to impede his posture.

"Ye have given me little choice," the son of a carpenter admitted.

"Time is wasted on indecision. If it shall not be thee, I am afraid it shall not be others. I have not the strength to command, nor the strength to live. Shall thee doom others because of mere indecision?"

Lefkó had already accepted the opportunity within his mind, his confidence overcoming him. He kept a malevolent secret from the lord before him as he approached. He loosened his tunic and presented his neck, kneeling before the fading vampire. "Will there be pain?"

"Only if there is regret."

With his eyes slammed shut, only the darkness could comfort him as neglected incisors punctured his flesh. The suction of sustenance was brief, the Count pulling him closer in an intimate embrace. Lefkó wondered if the euphoria had been felt by his father, or had the pain of being vivisected been too overwhelming? Before anger could cycle through his veins, he was released.

A sharpened and polished sword sprang forth from a hidden sheath, presented as if anticipating knighthood.

"Please, my son," Count Striges pleaded. "End this... madness. *End this nightmare.*"

A trembling hand paused over the hilt. Lefkó stared into the depths of the vampire's eyes, beholding thousands of years of pain and sorrow trapped within the clear blue.

The swing was proper, gliding along the neck and severing the spine. As the cleaved flesh released a raging flow of tainted, cursed blood, he swung the sword in a heavenly arc and stabbed viciously, piercing the tumbling head through the back of the mouth and straight into the Count's heart, pinning the gawking, bald skull in place.

Lefkó let the sword ring out like a bell, embedded in

the strength of the throne itself. The deceased and his soulless orbs would remain an effigy to remind the children of the night that there shall be peace in the land of Nyx once more.

He faced his legion, breathing a staccato melody of anxiety. *What was he to do now?*

They pledged their fealty immediately, brought to their knees as a painful silence bathed the chamber. He could so clearly hear his own heartbeat, his joints whispering, his blood rushing from one lane to the next in an unnerving cacophony that attempted to steal his vision. Perspiration cloaked him, the air chilled to a winter's night.

Lefkó seized into a stiffened state. Any resistance cracked his bones like brittle kindling. His muscles flooded with poison, expanding and contracting violently without his consent. Down to his knees, his eyes to the twinkling Moon as the stained glass mixed its cleansing and powerful light into a sickening rainbow.

With his head cocked, he unleashed a centuries-old growl of acceptance.

SACRIFICE OF THE BRIAR WOLVES

A familiar embrace cradled his unconsciousness. The very same satin that had momentarily confined him now posed no incarceration. The lovely melodies of songbirds were about, mating season no doubt, for they honked and tweeted with lust and vigor. Water; not rushing as the river does, but the babble of interruptive stone; then, the sloshing of boots.

His eyes felt battered and swollen as a pinhole of moonlight broke through crusted mucus. His lips had protruded slightly; his tongue ran across the cracked skin, hoping to moisten the ridges.

What was this? *A fang. Another. On the opposite end.*

Upright, with the adrenaline of a galloping steed. Before he could fully commit to his feet, he was handed a clay jug. Still was the nearly black blood that filled it to the rim. A robed assistant, their face shrouded, encouraged Lefkó to imbibe with a nod.

A sniff revealed the scent of elderberry, a note of fermentation. The smell expanded his nostrils, pumping encouragement through his veins. He sought to dive deep into the murky liquid and bathe, but he controlled himself. His gulp nearly echoed in the night air, his thirst seemingly uncontrollable. Squeezing between the suction, a single droplet dribbled down to his chin as the vessel was emptied properly.

He wiped away the viscosity and stared at his fingers. *It was precious.*

A cadre of cloaked vampires presented themselves with a bucket of water and a washcloth, instructing him to remove his clothes. He followed tepidly, wanting to appear in control, but fearing they would see through his young ruse. They took to his skin roughly, perhaps to remove the stench of the living. He rather enjoyed the attention, though he would have preferred this to have been administered by a fair maiden rather than the unimaginable hands of his pale loyalists.

An ice-cold shower from a full bucket was released over his head, and they set about his hair, brushing and pinning it back, rooting out ticks and other nuisances. Though the massage tickled his scalp, he felt a calming reassurance that had been buried since before his mother had passed. The care to which they attended him was forced, it seemed, but not mechanical, as if the brood had performed this pleasant dance before. His limbs became heavy, and his torso drifted backwards until his face was submerged, baptizing him.

The jolt from the frigid water in his nostrils lifted him upright once more, but he found only the lid of the coffin

and a bruise on his forehead. He wished the exhaustion would fade entirely instead of into uncertainty. He eased the ornate lid, free from lock and key, hoping not to find the sun's rays.

There was light, but it flickered with uneasiness. He quickly isolated himself, calculating the odds of having been double-crossed. *The blood in the clay jug, the ceremonial bathing.* It would not be a far cry to suggest that this was but another milestone in his ascension ceremony. He opened the coffin daintily to the delight of the surrounding undead. A messenger approached; the one with the dancing candle clutched in his gnarled claw.

"We shall n-need a sacrifice for the b-briar wolves." The request was forced, childlike in its crest, as if he had only begun to learn how to converse correctly.

"Thou speaketh?"

"We all speak...when we are allowed to." He suddenly withdrew a dagger and held it to his neck, betraying his milky white eyes. "Shall I bleed for ye instead, sire?"

"No! No." Lefkó lifted himself from the coffin and steadied the blade. "I do not wish to bleed thee. I simply wish to exist...*without anger.*"

The immediate wave of confusion was unexpected.

Lefkó coughed, caught off guard and embarrassed. "This will be a begrudgingly difficult process." He helped to lower the weapon and return it to its sheath. "What do the briar wolves require?"

"Count Striges b-bore a pact with the leader, Wverezith. In exchange for protection of the Bleeding Fields and the Whispering Woods, we shall present to them livestock, in abundance, and an assortment of items from the village."

"Valuables?" Lefkó wondered. "What more could a wolf require?"

"Various j-jams and fruits, m-mostly."

"But no...*true flesh?*"

"Only those that t-tiptoe illegally into the w-woods, sire."

"And where is the livestock procured from?" A strange silence of either obliviousness or obviousness. Lefkó raised his palm. "Speak not; I understand." Now, to duty and diligence. "Who procures them?"

"W-whomever is at thy d-disposal. In the d-dead of night, of c-c-course."

"I will venture to secure the non-living essentials," Lefkó announced, walking through the parting sea of loyalists as he searched for something proper to wear.

"S-sire, we are adept at this t-type of p-p-procurement. Ye must r-rest; thine t-transformation is f-far f-from complete."

Finding no wardrobe or dress, Lefkó paused and faced the liaison. "I must know who hath survived the Feast. Surely thou hast ones who have held thine heart?"

The pack lowered their heads in solemnity. "We have f-forgotten them long ago. W-we, too, shared the longevity of our beloved Count Striges. We c-c-cannot spare remorse for those who k-k-keep us alive."

"Change will come," Lefkó assured him, placing his hands lovingly on his shoulders. "What do they call ye, my child?"

"B-bheloc."

"Bheloc, dispatch thine best to secure livestock, but leave the other fleshies alone. I will gather the rest of the briar wolves' demands. I require dress; forgo the gilded or satin. A commoner...as I once was."

The Moon reared itself, the sun having set fully behind Forest Psithyros mere moments before. Lefkó had secured a tunic and hooded robe fit for a street beggar, though its stench was far worse. Upon a stolen steed, he lurked through bramble and wood, the growling of the briar wolves wafting between the stalks, but they remained steady-limbed. He knew the hour grew stale and that the

shopkeeper would be locking his wares behind iron, but curiosity became the better of him.

From an outcrop, he studied the land that his mother's father had fought so valiantly for. End to end, nearly an acre, a harvest so bountiful one summer that all of Nyx could not have consumed it. Now, it stood in near ruins: the cottage roof burned into soot; the livestock slaughtered; the sown seeds uprooted in the Feast's melee.

What was left of the entrance door suddenly crumbled under his brother's force. He carried with him a bloodied burlap sack, the contents shifting with his gait. Into an unmarked grave he tossed the refuse; a few scoops of dirt to finish it off, and a marker fashioned from what was left of the cottage's firewood. Not a word of prayer of thanks to send their father peacefully into what awaited him.

Lefkó failed to conjure emotion. It was as if the moment was removed, a mere scene in a tome of ancient stories meant to evoke morality and education. He harbored no hatred for Arkos; at least not yet. Perhaps time would allow him to resent his eternal path. Perhaps, he would someday synthesize his heart and mind and deliver a striking blow, either physically or mentally, to his cowardly brother. Or, perhaps, he would invoke a change in the customs of his new kind and bring together an age of rehabilitation and peace. Whatever form it took, he decided that Arkos would not belong, in victory or defeat, either for his stupidity or his bravery.

Into the heart of Nyx, he rode, the market of cobblestone still active, though the vendors and curio stands had begun their laborious winddown. He hitched his conveyance, hoping the owner had not noticed his absence.

A bell announced his arrival in the dimly lit shop, a forgotten element of the establishment. Before he could retreat, perhaps he would steal elsewhere, he was forced to freeze in the shadow of the exalted and joyous expression of the owner.

"*Lefkó Vrykola!*" he sang. He raised the counter hatch and bumbled his rotund frame into an embrace of great voracity. "How did thou fare? I did not doubt for a moment that ye would fall prey!"

"*Father...*" he whispered, hiding his fangs sheepishly.

"Bless the Lords, my sympathies to ye and Arkos. Come, thou must require sustenance." He returned to the counter and began plucking his wares from the shelves of towering bookcases. Preserves, freshly-picked herbs, goods baked in the morning light. He ascended a rolling ladder, gliding to and fro, filling a basket with delicacies meant for those with much coin in their purse. "I saw a great flame from the northeast," he shouted from on high. "'Twas thine estate?"

"There is little left of the cottage or the livestock."

The shopkeeper paused, the ladder swaying ever so slightly against his weight. "A curse upon this festering village," he muttered. Lefkó vocalized his inability to hear the comment. "Ah! *Here!*" Back to the preparation. "Gar-leke, to restore and expel, no?"

The mere mention of the word, the double syllables, punctured his brain with threat. His kneecaps snapped, unable to hold him steady. He gripped the counter for stability, playing off the swoon as exhaustion. Sweat rose to the surface in a coup across his whole body. A cough, a sputter, backing away to dart his eyes and recompose himself. "I have been up all night. I...*hunger.*"

The shopkeeper, who had grated his patience, was quite the meal now. He could see his vascular rivers throbbing, glowing, beckoning him to taste. Lefkó licked his lips sensually, running his tongue along the base of his fangs.

"Take these then," the owner boasted, unable to discern the time between now and his demise. He plopped a few jars of preserves, a few links of ground meat, and a hunk of cheese as large as his fist. "Make haste and give thine own time to heal. A year is a long time, but it will

be here before..."

A howl wracked the air, vibrating between the narrow, cobblestone streets of Nyx, growing in chorus as more hounds added their harmonies. The dainty, handblown windows of the shop cracked once, nearly down the center of each pane before exploding in a panicked flume. In the cloud of confusion, vampires vaulted inside, swarming the wares and the shopkeeper to his disbelief.

"No!" Lefkó pleaded, arm outstretched. "*Begone!*"

The command seemed to work. The blood-soaked expressions were transfixed, but the poor villager had already been dissected.

Lefkó screamed into the village's center square, immediately surrounded by a whirlwind of the ravenous undead. A hard palm to his shoulder shoved him to the stone. The frightened maiden who had attempted to bypass him was soon overcome, her upper half removed in a geyser of blood as the vampire feasted on the pool at her feet.

Others were not so lucky.

Those who had chosen the open air were cut down with simplicity, magnetized to the white flesh, the decaying fang, the claw-like appendages. Angst and regret drained from their eyes as the horde left nothing to chance. They were not reloading, but recharging.

Lefkó raised his hand in the maelstrom and attempted to quell the thirst. He pointed his fingers towards the closest creature, his victim's body seizing as he reapplied his fangs to the neck, opening any vein that would cooperate. Lefkó slammed his eyes shut and trusted his mind to relay the message. He trembled, as if being drained himself, hoping to expel some sort of telekinetic charge as a retort.

He peeked at the drama, finding the vampire transfixed on his signal. *He wished to be commanded.* "Begone!" Lefkó shouted, slamming his fist into the avenue.

The vampire was suddenly crushed by an invisible weight, pushing his head through his chest cavity and lay-

ering it atop the splayed remains of his legs. Bone punctured skin, emitting a disgusting stream of black.

Lefkó leapt upright, renewed, keeping his arm outstretched, his mind in deep concentration. He selected another loyalist, freezing him in place. "*Release her!*"

The vampire did as his master instructed.

Another. *Another.* Another!

The coven remained still, the night air silent.

Lefkó surveyed the mindless, unsure of how to instruct the lot. "To the Whispering Woods, you fools!" They dared not move. Perhaps he had not been forceful enough. "*Now!*"

The collective cower pulverized them into action, their graceful leaping plunging them back into the darkness of the outskirts of Nyx. Lefkó, too, tore through the nasty brush, the clinking jars of preserves and meats beating against his torso mightily. The cumbersome gift did him no favors as his concentration wandered, and a gnarled root rising above the forest floor caught his rising boot. An embankment was his destination, head over foot, bruising both his new flesh and his sense of shame in the process. The mud was much more forgiving, though its scent left him nauseous and pining for the rough embankment.

A huff of condensation wafted by his face. *He was not alone.* The fur-laden paw pressed deep into the muck, the lips above it peeling to reveal another set of weapons. Lefkó skittered back upon his rear, his hand outstretched, hoping to command the pack of briar wolves from eating their own. Their matted fur was deep as the night, streaked with silver and gray, a mane of sorts protecting their massive heads. Innocent eyes revealed the candidates of experimentation. They, too, were once like him, scorned, now, and wishing for peace. *Freedom or death?*

A bold elder stepped forth, Wverezith, he assumed, and attempted to make first contact. He did not allow his temper to escape; instead, he set the pack at ease, hoping

to make the exchange quick.

Lefkó realized he held the ransom and unslung the offering, tossing it in front of the wolf. "I-I have the items you require." Wverezith sniffed the jars and the linked meats; a lick to sample the fine wares.

The trees above drained their attention with the sound of fluttering nychterídes. Through the canopy came the beheaded lump of a cloven beast. Lefkó laughed nervously, "There, the flesh you require." More livestock joined as a cadre of vampires flew from branch to branch with haste, depositing what they could onto the forest floor. The bounty softened the briar pack, and they feasted joyously whilst pawing at each other playfully, taking turns, offering fruit and delicacies to one another.

Lefkó approached Wverezith and stroked his damp fur, from the top of his head to the nape of his neck. "Our pact remains...against my better judgment. Keep these woods free of prying eyes for now."

"S-sire?" It came from the deep thicket, a prickly bush waylaid for the stumbling Bheloc. Lefkó offered a helping hand and steadied his liaison.

"Pray, are thee all right?" he asked of the nervous vampire.

"I am n-not as sp-spry as I once wa-was."

"Are these wolves ancient ones as well?"

"No," Bheloc huffed, out of breath. "P-poor souls ravaged by m-ma-magick. In the d-days of yore, our L-lord attempted to c-cure us of what ails us, b-but the results were l-less than d-desirable. As y-ye can see."

"Can they be turned once more?" Lefkó wondered, massaging Wverezith's hide, to the delight of the beast.

"This is t-their c-curse and b-burden."

"I will require one in my presence at all times. Is that amenable?"

"We shall m-make it s-so."

"This one should do just fine. Come," he encouraged,

“there is much to discuss.”

FEAST OF THE ANCIENT ONES

Time crept slowly. As go the seasons, so goes the sun, leaving little time within the night hours to accomplish that which keeps a coven rejuvenated and sharp. A single year had passed since the throne had been gifted, a year since the most recent Feast of the Ancient Ones. In that time, the shame of transition had been thwarted, the power of the undead drawing Lefkó into a lucid fantasy of progress and pleasure.

Adorned with a cape of luxurious black satin, he adjusted the hem of his vest until it sat without constriction. He cocked his boot, assuring the buckles had been fastened tightly. By his side, Wverezith the briar wolf lay, content to fulfill his duties of simply observing without acting. A yawn escaped his lips, producing a smile upon Lefkó's. “Come! To the sanctuary!”

Vampires of old and new clogged the halls of the castle, as pale and sickly as they had ever looked, trapped in the endless cycle of feeding and fearing the sun. Lefkó parted the army with his presence, though they kept their bustle.

Bheloc hurried from an adjacent hallway, waving a series of scrolls in his possession. “S-sire!” He wheezed as he kept pace with his master's strut. “I have t-the l-lists for your r-review.”

“I have not the time. Thou hast surveyed them with me for nigh on a year. They should suffice.”

“Y-yes, s-sire.”

“The livestock is to remain untouched. Those who are confined to the stocks or who are condemned to death shall be prioritized.” They rounded a corner, pausing briefly to allow a group ferrying a coffin to pass. “Those who enslave the innocent, those who bribe and cheat, those who poison

and fell on purpose. They shall be first, and, if necessary, the only."

"H-have y-you decided from w-which to p-perch?"

"I will command from the village square, and I will use the full force of my abilities to prevent unnecessary harm." A sharp turn through the kitchen where vials of blood were being bottled, corked, and tagged before they were deposited into chests of ice. "I expect perfection. I expect those who are worthy to be spared." He stopped and pressed his finger into Bheloc's chest. "We must sow a balance."

"I-I understand, s-sire. I-I w-will..."

A howl wracked the air, vibrating between the narrow corridors, growing in chorus as more hounds added their harmonies.

Quickly, to the nearest window, his sleeve wiping away condensation and dust. In the distance, through the canopy of the Whispering Woods came the terrible glow of a cluster of torches. The red and orange menace weaved its way through the well-worn path, suddenly bursting from the treeline in a fury of steeds, carriages, and a hostile army on foot.

"Swarm them," Lefkó commanded. "Prevent them from reaching the steps."

Across the Bleeding Fields, dozens of foot soldiers swung swords of steel and iron, their bows thwacking with arrows laden with animal fat and flame, exploding on impact and neutralizing a wave of advancing vampires. Daggers coated in garleke released streams of ink as they found ripe hearts and minds. Their four-legged conveyances stomped and kicked, mutilating anything in and under their path. Blood spilled liberally into the attacking forces' boots, coating the wagon wheels until they slipped against the dirt road. To the ascending stone steps they battled, raging in epithets and flame, the vampires picking off the most vulnerable in exchange for being set ablaze.

As exhaustion wallowed and the swing of heavy blades failed to pierce through the white, undead flesh in a single blow, Lefkó appeared before them, backed by the bright gaze of the full Moon, his abode stretching into the air; jagged towers inviting those within its shadow to turn and flee before tragedy truly struck.

"Enough!" The instruction buckled the vampires, pausing their counterattack. The hunters found their heels more inviting, a wind of change tapping them gently to relieve the built-up pressure.

A spokesman found his voice, thrusting his sword towards Lefkó as he perched on the steps above, Wverezith at his side, his satin cape fluttering like a ghostly appendage. "We have come to end thy savage reign!" A roar erupted in appreciation.

"And who am I?" Lefkó asked.

A single question collapsed their efforts. The villagers swallowed with perplexity. "What does it matter!?" came a retort from the back.

Lefkó raised his hand, as if to command these simple folk. "I am..." *That rider.* He...? "Arkos?" he mouthed.

Despite his brother's attempts at disguise, he could see his square jaw beneath the oversized rider's cap. The burly shoulders, previously straight, slouched. A swollen hand through his curled, exposed, dry locks. He sat perched on a riding bench, commanding a pack of four steeds, the carriage beneath his legs stuffed full of crossbow bearers.

Tears welled in Lefkó's eyes as he fought for composure. "I am Count Vrykola. Lord of this manor, and lord of the children of the night."

"Lord of my arse!" came another witty response.

"Vrykola?" one asked, his face smeared with dirt, his teeth yellow and uncared for. "Son of Távros?" A melody of muttering as they turned about one another, unsure of who had addressed the observance, but they all seemed to understand that Arkos would need to weigh in.

The orphan felt the heat of his embarrassment tattooing his cheeks. A glimpse of his older brother meant acceptance, and, perhaps, vengeance. He did as he was apt: "I never met this bastard in my life. Tryin' to use the lineage of my father against me! I say thou shalt hang!" He tossed a hemp line into the crowd, hoping to force the boiling rage to overflow.

The betrayal of his brother, who had traded his freedom for an eternity of sin, overwhelmed Lefkó, a boy of only a few decades. "*I am son of no creature, then,*" he whispered, choking on the hopelessness and devastation of the moment. "I am the Lord of Shadows! I alone maintain the balance of my brethren."

"By taking our children!?"

"*By bleeding us dry?*"

"It is the balance of the planet, yes?" Lefkó offered.

"What if we were to wipe thine creatures from it? We have no use for ye!"

Lefkó had no answer. Why support balance when tragedy is the result? "Because," he started, "we must equalize those who are undeserving of living. Those who ache cannot bear to end the misery. To punish those who deserve it. Thou hast proven that ye cannot handle it. My ancestors did not have the foresight that I possess. *We are evolving!*"

"Thou art murderers! Filthy, ungodly creatures who must be eradicated."

"No! Thou does not understand, these are thine loved ones!" Lefkó dared to descend the steps. "These are the citizens of Nyx, caught in the pathway of demonic, soulless hunger. This is no longer their purpose. We can remain united! We can purge the countryside of death. My family was torn apart by this vile horde, and I intend to balance our existence. I am not here to challenge thee, I am here to work alongside thee."

For a brief moment, there was a truce. Why risk death

when there were alternatives? Several blades lowered; the twine of bows eased. But the masses needed consensus, and the loudest voice would always prevail: "There can be no negotiation between my sword and thine eternal slumber!"

The hunt resumed, blades ripping through vampire flesh, severing limbs from torso and skulls from necks. Blood flooded the steps, staggering the melee's ascent temporarily as the villagers vaulted over the lifeless bodies of the undead.

Lefkó, at first, retreated, caught between ending the lifecycle and appeasing the denizens of Nyx and preserving the minds of those who had already been turned. Wverezith took to the pit of violence, his surviving army of briar wolves charging through the outskirts of the Whispering Woods, teeth first. Ripping and tearing, they pulled archers from their posts and ravaged their necks, finding the spine easy to separate.

An errant arrow was discharged from a crossbow as the owner was tackled by vampires as punishment. The iron point pierced through Lefkó's shoulder, knocking him to the steps, his elbows breaking his fall. He panicked, a year's worth of planning now torn to shreds before the Feast could even commence. He eyed his brother snapping the reins of his steeds, urging them to retreat as he maneuvered the carriage.

Blood lust took control of the Count, the shaft of the arrow consumed by his hand and removed. Forward he charged, screaming with the devilish echo of the Ancient Ones. His arm swung purposefully, his nails ripping through the throat of the nearest villager, decapitating him swiftly. His next victim stumbled back from the horrid image, enveloped by the vampire's hunger. His blood was feasted upon with speed and finesse.

Arkos continued his futile attempt to save his steeds, whipping them into a frenzy. Realizing their opportunity,

the undead took to the hoofed, splaying their bellies open as they suckled at the waterfall of innards and vitality.

The Count leapt, gripping the front of a swordbearer's head and slamming it into the ground. His boot finished what was left, cracking the skull until he felt the earth below. From his left, he dispatched a charging effort, chewing through his clothing and flesh until he drained him, leaving but an empty cavity. He lurched towards Arkos, who had abandoned his conveyances, and so, too, the archers within the carriage. Nychterides surrounded anyone who sought refuge in the Bleeding Fields, slowing them enough for the briar wolves to finish them off.

With haste, he rose into the air, the sanctuary of the Moon's light guiding him swiftly. Arkos fell underneath the weight of the Count, forced to confront the monster he had created. "I am Count Vrykola! No longer thine brother; no longer thine kin. I have seen what evil the children of the night can enact, but it cannot compare to the evil that ye hath spawned."

"I did not mean for this, brother!" Arkos pleaded.

"*Lies!*"

"Do not harm me, I beg ye!"

"I would have spared thee. Until tonight...until thou cast aside my meaning for thine stupidity!"

"No, Lefkó! I was only trying to..." He allowed a moment for his brother to find the prayer that would grant him immunity. "To...*save myself.*"

The Count pulled Arkos closer and rested his lips upon his ear. "*I am Lord of the Shadows. I will not rest until I have satisfied my hunger and have rid the countryside of thine kind. I have prepared mercy. I have prepared for unity. But thine divisive, consuming species cannot comprehend what it means to be a parasite upon this planet. I have done nothing but protect ye since mother's passing, yet thine selfishness shall be your undoing!*"

His fangs burst forth into the vile night, clamping Ar-

kos within his deadly embrace. His intention was not to turn him, but to leave him a husk, to end his lineage with one fatal kiss. His brother jerked under the stress of the feeding, and a dizzying serenity soon followed. His skin deflated, clinging tightly to the wide bones beneath; he was weightless now, overcome by darkness.

The Count pushed Arkos free from their bond, the curled effigy now barely resembling the brother he had come to love and protect, suffer for, and mourn with.

The rhythm of conflict was fading, too, and the convoy from Nyx had been fully turned aside and asunder. His children feasted on what was left, so, too, did the briar wolves.

"They do not understand us," he lamented to the undead. "They will never understand us." He approached the steps to his domain, reassembling his army. "If they will not allow us to bend our knee in forgiveness, then I shall take what is necessary." Towards the castle, they climbed. "Devour them! Leave only enough to repopulate. I will not sacrifice those who did not choose this life for the anserine former species."

Bheloc cowered at the uncharacteristically malevolent visage as it strode past. The Lord of Shadows paused, the Moon now granting him life eternal. He turned to face the Bleeding Fields, the village of Nyx in the distance, dotted with candles of those praying for news of victory.

"Fly, my children. Coat the night in blood and spread the gospel of the reign of Count Vrykola!"

A BLOOD RITUAL FOR
FULL MOONS
VI

Blood is the seat of quickness. Where it flows, life abides. Should ye find yerself on a cold winter's evening or a studded summer night, where the Moon shall lie full and bloated, take heed of the ritual set about by generations past to counter the hunger of vampires young and old.

Spill the blood of lawful beasts bearing cloven feet at the threshold of any doorway or institution of value. Portions that are burned or portions shared in communion shall have no lasting effect. Blood is a signal, a punctuation that we are thus joined with the natural order, that our debt has been remitted. Thus, we stand clean. This is the simplicity of the offer; however, some dismiss its claims and are ceremoniously swallowed by those aforementioned creatures of the night.

Blood once opened the ear of the underworld as incense opened the nostrils of heavenly delight. At the coming of the Full Moon, bless your fortress with the divine blood; do not forgo this process in the heat of preparation. Pray that your offer will settle all affairs until the next Feast of the Ancient Ones.



THE FALL OF
COUNT VRYKOLA
VII

THROUGH THE BLEEDING FIELDS

A ghoulish laughter reverberated betwixt the trunks; branches with delicate fingers lurched to snag clothing, hair. Whipping shoulders produced enough force to knock the famished trees aside, the heels of their boots snapping the roots underneath to prevent future generations. The quartet raced into the heart of the Whispering Woods, forsaking the nagging need to peer over their shoulders, lest the undead suspect their weaknesses.

In the year of our Lords, sixty-four hundred and eighty-six, it was so marked as an uncharacteristically warm summer. The uneven sun dared not be tamed by mortal means; the prayers went unanswered for shade and solitude. It was here, in the village of Nyx, south of Koiláda by several nights, that only events of considerable consequence occurred; at least, according to the historians who had remained.

Friends and acquaintances by chance and, perhaps, default, they had witnessed the unspoken: a funeral held for a local was nothing more than a mere ruse. The coffin had been filled with the hunger of a vampire, its slumber awakening into a frenzied bloodbath upon the pallbearers. The strain of the slaughter muscled the four to escape Nyx, past the abandoned farms on the outskirts of the village, and into the Whispering Woods, not knowing what awaited them within. This could only be attributed to the fear with which young eyes interpret traumatic incidents of violence and wanton destruction.

Whatever emotion had overcome them moments be-

fore, it was now buried by adrenaline. Noodles, their unelected commander, tore the sleeve of his tweed overcoat on an overreaching branch, the pressurized material releasing like a spray of white clouds. From the canopy came a leaping threat: an equally pale creature, arms and cracked fingernails akimbo. He sidestepped the vampire, vanquishing him into the unforgiving trunk at his back. Rather than end the undead, he continued north, hurdling over a fallen tree to safety.

The warbling cue of a baritone lute was an unwelcome note struck in the darkness, but it came at the expense of an unconscious briar wolf. Its owner, Dex, cradled the broken neck of the instrument above the forest dweller, praying it would not awaken anytime soon.

A yelp now backed the melody of the lute: a frantic cry from the incorrigible Kyv as he was tackled to the ground by a pair of fangs and a heaping mouthful of salivation. He pressed his palms to the bottom of the vampire's chin, beating back the inevitable strike. It arrived from the jagged end of Dex's instrument, however, piercing the rotting heart through the back and exiting past the ribcage, splattering onto Kyv's once white vest.

"Brothers! It is I who claims fire!" The brilliance of a torch soaked in animal fat bit the darkness, expelling fear momentarily. The flame-bearer was Giallo, his jaundiced flesh possessing the potential for a mistake in the vampiric process, but it was merely a birth defect. His sudden bravery was waylaid, the winged chittering of nychterides choking the forest and imploring the foursome to the dirt.

"Burn the bastards!" Noodles swore, swatting with a free hand.

Giallo raised the light and caught the swooping rats, the pain rolling them into explosive projectiles as the animal fat transferred to the dry brush. The tornado of bats parted to avoid their leaping brethren, a pair of vampires who pinned Noodles and Dex easily. Giallo was upon them

in a flash, swinging the torch and bludgeoning the first, exposing a spray of viscous black. Kyv thrust his boot into the other toothy grin, following the stun with a double-fisted slam from above, driving the fangs into a log of considerable girth, locking the vampire in place.

From the treeline, hope sprang: *sunrise*.

"Let's get the fuck out of here!" Kyv crowed, embracing the coming cleansing.

Behind them, the coven multiplied, hoping to reach the victims before flesh became ash and bone whispered into the air. But the ultraviolet rays proved unstoppable, their faces tattooed with streaks of cooking muscle and burst vessels. Their momentum required finesse to slow their gallop, but the paralyzing effect of the sun meant their motor skills would stall, their necks severed easily by the branches as they collapsed in a withering cloud, their haunting shrieks swallowed.

"At it, boys!" Noodles encouraged, clocking the mist behind them for confirmation. "To the Bleeding Fields!"

They bobbed and weaved, preparing their knees to jump over the last remaining giants. Freedom welcomed them, the embankment below, though, a bit too steep. Crashing down, cradling their heads, they rolled into a gulley, the result of an ancient, heavy rain. Pain and suffering burst from their lips as palms rubbed sore limbs.

"Fuck, aye!" Kyv moaned. "I thought mud was supposed to be soft."

"You twit," Giallo scolded, slapping his friend across the back of the head. "This shite is as dry as my arse."

"What are we supposed to do now?" Dex wondered. His arching back cracked, releasing pent-up air.

"Back to Nyx, then?" Kyv laughed.

"What is left of it, anyway?" Noodles wondered. "Not after what we saw..."

"Could be the last ones, eh?"

"Judging," Dex huffed. "Not a single soul was wont to

help.”

“You reckon we have time?”

Noodles ignored Giallo’s question, instead reaching for a root protruding from the gulley’s wall and hoisting himself over the rim. “*Fhuckin’ hell...*” he squeaked.

The remaining trio exchanged a glance of excitement and fear and quickly joined their commander, grabbing hold of the root.

The field yawned into the distance, the entire valley protruding with bumps and bruises where the earth had risen in protest. Nearly every inch was consumed by death: heroes in armor, peasants in sackcloth, livestock both for sustenance and conveyance; bloated, decaying, skeletal. They had all marched through the landscape, hoping to find fortune or vengeance, but had been cut down by the murderous nature of the reigning vampires. Twisted, curling death masks haunted the foggy air, the last moments capturing fear and pain, or, for the lucky ones, peace. A musty stench lay low over the terrain, the sickening stew of decay and carrion, exposing what had not already been feasted upon. Hundreds of years of revolution had built a bubbling oil of blood, pus, and unsavory bodily fluids, the ground sticky and unforgiving.

“The Bleeding Fields,” Dex whispered. “I...my mother spun nonsense tales. *Never shall you become poor enough to endure The Bleeding Fields,*” in her nagging tone.

“Easy for you,” Kyv nudged. “The purse groweth heavy, eh?”

“We will cross it together,” said Noodles. The others were slow to agree. “Or would you rather engage with those toothy bastards?”

“To where?” Giallo asked.

“Forward and far enough.”

A grunt propelled him into the murky sewage, where the inky tar immediately smeared across his wool pant leg, releasing the stench from his hand. He offered help

to the next in line, situating them above the gulley with enough height to survey their next heading. On all sides, the Bleeding Fields stretched, offering no hope of reengaging the forest or finding a pathway to guide them towards the river, let alone abject safety.

Using the skeletal remains as a crutch, they trekked into the unknown, leaning on whatever organic material had survived to avoid sinking. Behind them, the vampires who had fought off the sunrise now felt the overwhelming stain of the full morning sun, their cries reaching a crescendo and then abruptly falling into obscurity. Silence, save for the errant squawk of a feathered beast, became the calming melody behind the suctioned footsteps of the quartet. Bloated bodies hissed as they stepped upon their distended bellies. Weapons forged by master artisans were solidified in the ground, unable to escape and regain utility.

"What's that, then?" Kyv signaled, noticing a monument within range.

"A road!" Giallo declared, hiking his boots high to increase his speed.

The flat causeway had survived as a result of ingenious planning, though its progenitors were most unlucky. They had barricaded themselves behind sharpened logs, temporarily preventing the undead from entering. Though once they had figured out how to bypass it, the innocent had been dragged beyond the safety of the minimalist fort and sacrificed upon the Bleeding Fields. Impaled marauders and vampires alike adorned the stakes of the encampment, warnings to all that *none escaped*.

The party weaved through the wet logs, their backs to the enforcements. Some found the path a delightful place to sit.

A few ripped tents of canvas flapped dully in the wind, the contents strewn and ravaged. An overturned carriage had been of some royalty. Once gilded, ivory, and lus-

trous, the intricate details of kings and queens, marriage, and tradition had been ripped, splintered, stripped of elegance and purpose. The jagged remains of the footplate were nowhere to be found, the door itself propped open with rusted hinges. Lying limply over the threshold was a withered hand still clutching its final plea: a scroll.

"Careful!" Giallo cautioned, pausing Noodles' attempt to fetch the document.

His curiosity allowed him to peek into the carriage, the elegant blue robe of the messenger adorned with sun, moon, and stars alike. A gray beard of waist length adorned his pale chin, his eyes sunken, staring into the ends of the universe with no light remaining. Noodles snatched the scroll and sat upon the upturned wagon wheel as he unfurled the last testament. A moment passed as he absorbed the contents.

"Bastard can't even read," Kyv teased.

"To those who recover this," Noodles announced, "know that our party was left no choice in the matter. In the year of our Lords, sixty-four hundred and eighty-one, we lingered in the mountains, beyond the river, through the crystal caves into the frozen layers beneath, to retrieve the elixir."

"Ah, shite, another busted myth."

"The undead have risen to the south, the village of Nyx in the shadow of Castle Ifaisteio. My loyal brothers and I have raised the Elixir of Divinity and coated it upon our instruments to vanquish these creatures with melodies of holy invocation. The wraiths within the bowels of the Diábolos Mountains, while crowing with breath of icy damnation, were dispatched quickly with the elixir, for it imbued us with the spirit of harmony."

"Upon the undead, 'vampires' by a local gesture, our music permeated their very souls, tearing limb from the base, and igniting a flame within their skull. Light and telekinesis wavered the air, morphing the atmosphere to

our will, while leaving the work of the Lords relatively unscathed. My loyal brothers did sacrifice themselves for peace in the hour of Nyx's need, but only droplets of the elixir remain, and we are far from the proper ingredients needed to restraining our mighty vengeance.

"To those who recover this, I have set about the method of divination. It is within the old world language, but even the most thick-minded can follow a recipe."

Dex nudged Kyv. "That about you?" He did not appreciate the tease.

Noodles continued. *"Make haste, for the scourge of the territory is at work, the estimate coming into the tens of thousands of dead at his hands. Beware the Lord of Shadows, Count Vrykola, who resides in the towers of Castle Ifaisteio. Take heed to our warning, one must coat their sword and sorcery in the Elixir of Divinity, or his reign will only recycle."*

"The vampires have closed in upon us, and day is far from our reach. We will fall together, I only pray that..." Noodles trailed off. He raised his gaze, finding only two of his party listening to the tale. "Dex?"

"Dex!?" they all shouted in unison.

A tone deaf wail burst from behind the carriage, knocking Noodles from his perch. They rushed to the rear and found their fourth at the foot of a velvet traveling trunk. Dex had selected a baritone lute and strummed it, finding each string vastly out of tune.

"Guess they tweren't spinning an oddity," Giallo admitted, kneeling and burying himself in the trove of nearly pristine musical instruments. A belted snare drum looped around his shoulder, a blood red drumstick into his pocket, a second one into his right hand as he fell into a syncopated beat.

A gilded, air-powered harpsichord the length of his arm caught Kyv's fleeting attention. The neck-like bellows fit into his left hand, his fingers pumping a gust into

the body while his fingers fluttered across the keys, exposing a synthetic, haunting melody. "Old girl's still got some life in her, eh?"

"What do we do, Noodles?" Giallo asked, spinning his drumstick between his index and middle fingers delightfully.

"These ain't for occupying no king," said Kyv, marveling over the construction and delicate details carved into the ebony and ivory.

"No...they certainly aren't." Noodles was transfixed upon an unknown instrument, beckoning him to the lip of the case, the nymph-like body seductively gyrating and luring him towards its lacquered beauty. It was not simply a lute, but a hybrid of clavichord and harp, the keys striking a taut string before evoking a vibrant tone that felt neither plucked nor struck.

"An orphica," marveled Dex. "I have read about them only in text, though historic, not contemporary."

"Rare?" Noodles asked.

"Extinct."

"Shall we return to Nyx, then?" Giallo piped.

The mist, which had carried the stench of the Bleeding Fields, began to lift with a guttural whistle. A cold front had descended, a strong wind blowing with purpose. To the northeast, they beheld the jagged towers of Castle Ifaisteio. Even at this distance, it lumbered over them as it sat upon the mountaintop, emitting a signal of demonic origin. Black stone surrounded its base as the mammoth rose into the heavens, the peaks and parapets serrated from time and siege. A single intact tower glinted, wrapped in stained glass of colors both terrifying and pleasing. Its drawbridge, perched at the mouth of the beast, gave way to a steep and precarious staircase, itself twisting and turning across the face of the mountain straight into the heart of the Bleeding Fields.

"My father warned me of such a place," Noodles re-

ported, wrapping the embroidered strap of his weapon over his shoulder, affixing it to his back. "We cannot return to Nyx; we must go forward."

"We are four useless idiots, Noodles!" Kyv rapped his knuckles against his bandmate's temple. "Did they suck out what little is left in there?"

"These warriors were able to make it here; perhaps they did not know what we know?"

"Yes, of course. These folk are brave, we are *children*!"

"The Feast of the Ancient Ones means nothing," Dex chimed. "Tradition is dead. My mother told me that the Feast came but once a year, not within a fortnight. Something has changed."

"Perhaps they have weakened over time," said Noodles, tiptoeing closer to the distant fortress. "What did they call the beast?"

"Vrykola," Dex whispered. "*Count Vrykola*."

"Fhuckin' book up his arse, this one," Kyv joked. Giallo giggled in secret.

"How many more have to die to ensure that we are worthy of life to these bastards?"

"Apparently, everyone! We did not exactly escape a harvest celebration, Noodles. Nyx is our home; we can do more good from behind the safety of our own kind."

"What if there's nothing left?"

"Don't you bloody imply..." Kyv trailed, caught off guard by his own sudden melancholia. Tears dotted the corners of his eyes. "That's all I have," he croaked.

Dex exploded in a rare fit of rage. "That's all any of us have, you fhuckin' twit! You're not the only one who watched your kin dragged off into the middle of the night!"

"I meant nothin' by it." Kyv turned away from the group, smearing his sadness.

"You are not the only one who is afraid," Noodles assured them all. "Shall we wait to become blood and bone

for the undead? Or shall we follow in the footsteps of these proud warriors? Fellows of Pipe and String?" He clutched the scroll in his fist, hoping his positivity would flow outward in an embrace of brotherhood.

"This elixir is bollocks, innit?" Giallo asked.

There was only one way to find out. They fanned out with purpose, instruments in hand, digging through rucksacks and tunics, spreading what little of the earth may have been allowed to flourish in search of flora and vegetative growth.

"How do we go about in gathering these ingredients?"

"We cannot risk the Whispering Woods once more."

"The wolves of the briar certainly will lay claim to whatever is still left."

"These are nature's bounties. We will forage here," Noodles instructed as he pored over the elixir's instructions. "In the Bleeding Fields, and beyond. The deciduous crop to the east may harbor what we need. The terrain should be free of wolves at this hour."

"What if this works?" Kyv muttered, glass-eyed, transfixed on the crumbling towers of Count Vrykola's throne.

"Then we will become warriors of sonic anger; of sonic righteousness. This is not a holy mission. It is a mission of survival. For your mother, Dex? For the Sisters, Giallo? Are we not born of the strength of Nyx?"

"But the Moon? Will they be out tonight?" Giallo shuddered.

"It is the New Moon," Dex reported. "They do not hunt in the New Moon."

"Garleke, honie, wine. We have not a moment to spare."

ARMORY OF BONE

The vessel shall be a fair bason of latten or a cop-

per-lined pot; a clay jar with a close lid; clean linnen for straining; a spoon of coarse wood; a ring of coals or banked embers for gentle heat.

Bruised garleke and leeks were procured from the base of a dead tree. Sage, vervain, and rose from an outcrop and the rucksack of a maiden, perhaps an apprentice. Cynamon, ginger, fennel, and clove from a shipment of supplies raided by vampires but tossed aside in disgust, the crystals collecting in the center of the shards of the vials that once held them. The barricaded encampment provided an iron cauldron, fit for stew and other hearty meals, as well as aged wine.

Honie and beeswax remained, but that would require tenacity. Kyv squinted his eyes as his hands slowly encroached upon the hive, hoping this would protect him from the penalty of theft. Dex's grip upon his wrist paused him. A bowl of forest trimmings and a kiss from their torch invoked a blaze of smoke. The mist calmed the sensitive bees long enough to rip a chunk of sweet, drooling honie and malleable wax for their recipe.

Upon the Full Moon, bruise garleke and leek together with sage, vervain, rose, honie, and the Divine Spices. Cast all into the latten bason. Pour thereupon the wine and stir till the honie be well dissolved.

"What does the Moon matter, eh?" Kyv asked, watching dutifully as the sun began its descent.

"Perhaps nothing, but we haven't the time to find out. Dump in the wine."

Giallo handled the task, taking a bitter sip for himself. "Not bad."

Cover the bason and set to digest with a ring of coals about the botom, so that it simmers not, but only sends a little breath. Lacking a hearth, bury the pot to the neck in a warm dung-back or compost, which keepeth kindly heat. Let it stand for a single night, stirring at dawn and evensong.

Their search turned up neither coal nor compost. Instead, they gathered kindling and made use of a steel breastplate from a fallen knight. They turned it upside down and filled it, using brush and errant leaves to kick-start the flames. They haphazardly set the cauldron upon the heat.

"I will take the first watch," Noodles volunteered.

"You and what army, eh?" Giallo asked.

"At the first sign of distress, you will know and come to my aid, will you not?"

The New Moon passed without incident, save for a pained howl from the Whispering Woods, a briar wolf still clinging to life. Nychterides fluttered overhead, soaring to and fro, using the castle as a roost when they had grown tired of hunting for insects or other morsels.

"Messengers," Dex reported with sleep still in his eyes.

"Surely they will find us?" Giallo said, hugging his drum tightly.

"Then we shall be prepared."

Upon the second night, bring the elixir to a gentle steam, till the third part be wasted, the savour groweth thick and hearty. Do this with patience; boile not, lest the virtue flee. Begin the application of sage and fennel seed to penetrate the brew.

They took equally tedious turns staring at the cauldron, stirring with a branch, removing kindling and adding it back when the winds decided to strengthen. They played fanciful melodies on their instruments, each contributing a measure but lacking in unity, selfishly keeping their ideas to themselves. Sage and fennel seed were added at sundown, the stirring continuing on into the second night.

Strain through clean linnen into an earthen pot. While the liquor is yet warm, shave in the virgin wax, stirring always till it shines like a saint's lamp and falleth from the spoon in a solid ribbon.

A fresh tunic from a wardrobe split easily with a few tugs and lay flat in a borrowed bowl meant for sharing around a roaring campfire. Together, with the heat of the cauldron's handles uncomfortably rising, they poured the unsavory liquid into the vessel, using the clothing to catch any unevaporated solids. They ripped chunks of beeswax and tossed them in, watching as it melted like confectionery, spreading and mixing in a glittering ripple.

The brew, which had grown purple and black from its savory contents, had suddenly converted to a brilliant shine. They stirred the beeswax further, encouraging a white, twinkling glow across the surface. With their faces illuminated, they understood that they had just crossed a bridge into divinity. The nonsense of childhood tales was not only true, but they had taken it upon themselves to become a myth without any prior experience.

The quartet backed away from the potion and turned toward the compass paths, each reflecting the gravity of sacrifice. They studied their weapons, sonic and delicate. If the words of the traveling warriors came to pass, would they, too, end up drained of their vitality?

Stop the pot and set it where Selene waneth, that her pale eye may draw out malignity whilst the coat taketh body. Rest one evening, and it shall be deemed potent.

They allowed the elixir to cool for the night. Unwilling to take a shift alone, they stared at destiny while a sliver of the Moon made itself known.

"How much more time can we allow it to rest?" Dex asked.

Noodles reread the instructions, finding little regarding how to understand its current potency. He grabbed a spherical vessel and submerged it, the glugging suction forcing it to pool within.

"What if this doesn't work?" Kyv cautioned.

"Then we're all flucked," Noodles admitted with a half smile. He held the full vial to his eyes, studying the

infinitesimal universe. Stars and planets swirled, competing for supremacy and light. A gentle heat radiated from the center, a calming embrace in the bitter night.

In the waning light of Selene, when shadows grow weary and the nychterides makes counsel with the dusk, whisper softly: "As wine draweth the virtue of herb, so let our melody draw the breath from the unholy." Invoke the Sign of Harmonic, thumb to middle thrice, and begin the ritual of application.

Noodles exhaled. "As wine draweth the virtue of herb, so let our melody draw the breath from the unholy."

Together, the quartet snapped thumb to middle three times, finding unity and perfection.

"You first," Dex said.

Noodles unslung his orphica and tipped it gently towards the flames of their bonfire, warming it until his hands had had enough. The vial drunkenly tilted, allowing a droplet to escape. It unceremoniously slid down one of the strings, at first thick and viscous, but gravity separated the ingredients, now oil-like as it deposited itself deep into the wood grain. Noodles cursed. "The linnen, I—"

The veins of the instrument ignited in a phosphorous white, the forest around them illuminated in a blinding flash. The haze steadied, leaving a heavenly glow in its place around the perimeter of the orphica, just enough to reveal the lingering fangs of a vampire as he perched over Noodles' shoulder.

Giallo yelped, brought down to his rear with fear. Noodles turned instinctively, his fingers squeezing the keys of his instrument while his free hand released the elixir to the ground. The strings of the orphica vibrated against the pluck of the key, and a wave of sonic heat pulsated from the center. The vampire surrounded his ears with his palms, unable to shut out the note. His skull began to melt, first the flesh at the peak, then his milky eyes, popping in a confetti of blood and pus. The jaw snapped,

the top tearing to the left, while the bottom ejected in the opposite direction.

As quickly as the tone had ignited the decay, the undead ghoul was collapsing into himself, ash and bone scattering across the forest floor.

"I thought they didn't hunt this early in the cycle?" Kyv peered above the treeline at the waxing crescent.

"They hunger," Dex said, stepping into the night, the distant castle enthralling him. "If a single vampire has forsaken the Moon to hunt, then there are others."

Noodles scooped up the vial of the Elixir of Divination, rescuing what little had not spilled from the vessel due to his clumsiness.

"They would not venture here without the help of..." Dex peered into the night: a black cloud was plummeting towards them. "*Bats!*"

The quartet scattered across the encampment, taking to the safety of the deciduous. Noodles quickly reapplied a splash of the elixir and tossed it to Kyv. "A mere drop," he cautioned. The treatment caused the air-powered harpsichord to sigh, a rush of free air jingling the keys happily. Kyv smiled devilishly and corked the vial, tossing it to Giallo.

From atop the overturned carriage leapt the first wave: bloodthirsty undead galloping with abandon. Kyv met them head-on, igniting a three-note chord while his left hand forced air into the internal chambers. Glowing vibrations knocked back a grouping, nearly halving the carriage and wedging them within its construction. Splinters rocketed into the night, piercing those in the blast radius and waylaying their sprint.

"Take that, you fhuckin' vermin!" Kyv shouted with glee, his head cocked towards his bandmates. But the next batch had already arrived, replacing the fallen. Giallo, sensing Kyv's cocky attitude would not possess the proper time to turn and strike once more, tapped a steady rhythm

against the taut skin of his drum, warping the very earth beneath him. Like a riptide wave, it tripped the charging vampires, bringing them face-first into the ground.

Dex, having applied the elixir to his baritone lute, corked the vial and shoved it into his back pocket. A heavy twang of an open string brought with it a density; the air around the undead had become heavy and restrictive. He plucked the string again; their shoulders suddenly faltered, their spines driven into their pelvis as they collapsed internally, leaving little room for their organs to maneuver, instead squirting through their bellies, vomiting a stream of black and crimson.

The downfall of their brothers and sisters did not fool the next charge, a steady stream of hunters vaulting over the barricades and amassing an impenetrable circle. The quartet played on, striking a melody of individual delicacy but failing to harmonize in unity. Radial blasts of light and song beat back each attempt of swiping claws and hissing fangs. Kyv forced more air into his harpsichord but was greeted with only a flat note. "I-I'm out!"

Dex flipped the vial to his bandmate. "A mere drop!" he called out, echoing Noodles' instructions. "Seems the Full Moon might have been useful after all."

Giallo pounded his drum, providing a cover for Kyv to reignite his instrument. With a howl, he sent a fresh telekinetic blast that guided a vampire into the waiting impalement of a tree, the force pinning him against the trunk itself, a river of black coating the entirety of the branch.

From a distance, the night air twinkled with sonic retribution, but the onslaught was stagnant. They could not repel the invasion on their own.

"We have to play together!" Dex shouted over the competing notes.

Giallo struck an uptempo beat, the earth shivering underneath his boots. Dex joined him, finding the downbeat

and thumping the air with his lute to establish a foundation. Kyv provided a rhythm melody, a chord progression that struck in a medium key, utilizing his old friend, C major. Noodles joined together with his bandmates, forming an impenetrable line as his fingers rattled a haunting arpeggio. The hypnotic beat synchronized their music and unleashed a torrent of cleansing light. It struck like a swinging blade, decapitating line after line of the undead, those caught mid-air severed at the torso, those on the ground swept upwards and deposited far across the Bleeding Fields.

The band, too, felt the blowback; their song paused as they collected themselves in wonder.

"What the fuck?" Kyv mouthed, stunned at the thunderstorm of blood that rained upon the encampment.

A few limping creatures attempted to recover their composure, but the quartet had already locked eyes, a smile rippling across their lips. Not content to concede the high ground, they raced for the crumbling staircase at the foot of Castle Ifaísteio. Down the uneven steps raged more creatures of the night. Without a railing on either side of the ascent, the band was free to play, knocking vampires into the depths. A splash or two in the night meant that water flowed underneath them, but the distance was uncertain.

Giallo tripped as blood began to coat the stone. The incessant waves grew in size and voracity, the castle taunting more to come. The band's fingers strained under the weight of maintaining a consistent melody. Noodles, sensing exhaustion spreading across the ascent, updated his contribution. He placed the orphica on a bent knee and continued playing the arpeggio with his right hand, while his left pounded out matching chords. The effect was a blistering concentration of mind-melting and vivisectioning. The chords seemed to split the vampire's vertically as they sank within themselves, while Kyv's rhythm chords

rollicked them into the air. Noodles reslung his weapon and continued to hike his boots into the next landing, driving back the horde with each measure and repetition.

A crumbling archway yawned at the summit, revealing a drawbridge within its mouth and the entrance to the base of the castle. From the Bleeding Fields came a rallying cry: briar wolves and vampires alike, advancing across the bloated and dead, towards the steps.

The pincer closed in as they played on, stomping thunderously across the uneven bridge. A trio made it across, leaving only Giallo, an idea pausing his steadiness.

"Giallo, come!" they screamed, their arms fluttering and gesturing. As the briar wolves galloped to the top, he raised both drumsticks ceremoniously into the air and slammed them in unison upon the leather surface. The arched gateway gave way to his sonic boom, and what little stone remained collapsed with exhaustion onto the bridge, severing rope and iron. Now, caught in the center of the suspension, Giallo made haste as the beams beneath his feet tumbled into the chasm. He leapt and was faithfully caught in the embrace of his brothers, who chastised him immediately for his improvidence.

He raised his solitary middle finger in defiance while the undead attempted to cross the ravine, falling to their second death from lack of speed and strength. The briar wolves howled in disgust and struck their claws against soil and stone.

Noodles dusted himself off and adjusted his orphica across his back. He met a towering doorway, the blood-red panels and levered drawboard that had once protected the abode from sieging armies lay splintered and unhinged. Several warriors in chainmail and steed lay upon the foundation steps, unable to enter before death swallowed them. This close to the heart of darkness, the band lifted their eyes to the skies, beholding the towering inferno of which they would be encouraged to climb. The desolate, black

stone mocked them, proving them fools for venturing this far with no plan for escape and descent.

Now, a cold fury whipped across the range despite the summer boil, the elevation thinning the air considerably. The village of Nyx was a mere firefly waiting to be captured and imprisoned, and the band stood alone. Together they hesitated. Each grip upon their instruments tightened. To turn and run was futile, lest they fancied suicide.

Into the mouth of madness; synchronized.

Little light was afforded the great anteroom, but a few torches burned steadily, enough to reveal a gaping hole that prevented further advancement. The floor had collapsed under the pressure of the dislodged cathedral ceiling, revealing a web of ledges and footholds that led deep into a murky cistern. The opposite side had survived: a royal seal and chamber hidden behind a barricaded door smeared with blood. To go around, they would need to go under.

The putrid water that flowed beneath Castle Ifaisteio shimmered with the help of a distant source, electrifying the water in the darkness. Dex lowered himself first, testing each ledge and brace under his weight, bouncing childlike to prove that the pathway could be counted on. Slumbering bats flapped their wings weakly while dreams wracked their minds, unaware of the intruders.

It was not until they were submerged up to their waists that they could finally inhale the stench. With one hand to their nose and mouth and the other maintaining distance between their instruments and drowning, they sloshed towards the pinhole light at the rear of the waterway. Despite the agony of the decay, they kept their pace to a minimum, hoping the reverberations did not reveal their position to spies above.

Dex cocked his head, momentarily losing his balance. "What?" he whispered.

The others looked at him with disdain. "I didn't say

anything," they each reported. *Not I.*

"*Here...*"

Their frantic gyrating echoed across the stone walls, masking the cry for help.

"Here, ye fools."

What little reflection and glint from the surface remained helped to illuminate the creature's eyes, tucked into a recess in the wall, a remnant, surely, from before the corridors were flooded. The bat lay with one wing curled inward, the other mangled and loosely splayed open.

"*Thukin' winged piece 'o garbage,*" Kyv spat. "*Smash it!*"

"No!" Giallo intervened with passion.

"Please...*listen,*" the bat pleaded.

"You are sentient?" Dex asked.

The bat nodded, her eyelids weighted with pain. "Have ye come to free us from our nightmare?"

A concerned glance between them; Noodles was the de facto liaison. "We have come for Count Vrykola."

"Yes..." she exhaled, with joy, opening her healthy wing as a sign of acceptance. "Many years have passed since I was condemned to this body. I found peace with my abilities and my limitations, but I long for the life of old. Of warm nights. Of love..."

"Was it the Count who turned you?"

"For those who do not commit fealty, then there are two punishments..."

"You chose this over death," Dex confirmed.

The bat nodded. "To save my children, I am confined until it takes me, or takes him. Pray, have ye truly come to finish his reign?"

"Yes," Noodles responded, "but we know nothing of him."

"I hide," she squeaked, "in hopes that I shall be restored to my former glory. If he dies, they shall all die,

and those of us who have accepted this punishment will become whole once more. His weaknesses are well known, and he protects himself with vigor. He wished for peace many centuries ago, but was betrayed. Beware his emotions, for they drive him mad, away from logic. His hatred of our kind cannot go unnoticed."

"Where can we find him now?"

"At the end of the channel, ye shall find a staircase into the armory. Beyond that, a great many corridors shall ye seek, but they all lead to his sanctuary. He is waiting for thee, I can feel him, pulsing, inside of me."

"He knows we are here," Giallo whispered.

The bat nodded. "Fly, ye fools, before we are all condemned to suffer."

Renewed now, filled with fear and bravery, they trudged deeper into the bowels of the castle until a beam of invitational light appeared, just as the bat had described. They shook free as much water as their wool garments would allow before scaling the spiral with uncertainty. A copper handrail appeared on the outer wall, helping to maintain balance as they spun 'round and 'round, finding no hope of exit. The source of the light that had pierced the cistern was merely ancient, oil-fueled candles lining the walls, but a dutiful assistant had forgotten to replenish them all. They were slowly blanketed in a mere kiss of flame, again using the frigid, damp walls for direction.

To a landing, but now with hesitation. Dex fumbled for the elixir, spilling it across the silky strings of his baritone lute. The armory that the bat had prophesied had not been entirely truthful. Yes, the ages of warfare were represented here: halberds and axes, claymores and daggers, shields of iron and steel, chainmail of gold and silver. Weapons of destruction and conquering, of protection and peace. Gilded hilts were hidden in locked cases of glass and stained wood. Suits of blood red armor rode atop stuffed, cloven steeds, themselves wrapped in the colors

of family and lineage.

It was the construction of the room and its garnishments that gave the foursome a great pause. From the millennia of raging wars had come many dead, and with them, their bones. Skulls became the foundation; ghastly expressions squeezed together in neat rows. Climbing higher, humeruses, radiuses, and ulnas tiptoed up the walls, forming massive arches against the ceiling, once again fortified with the screaming, skinless faces of the dead. Tables with legs made of sacrificial feet, chairs adorned with teeth, and silverware held steady with fingers and toes. A chandelier of calcium cast a din, elongating the shadows, the empty eye sockets piercing the band's weak constitutions, the gaping mouths laughing manically.

"Fhucken hell," Kyv breathed. "Our Count's been busy, ain't he?"

"Give me more of that muck," Giallo pleaded, swiping it from Dex.

A heeled boot against the stone floor rippled up the walls. The depths of the room had not been properly calculated; the expected exit proved to be yet more monuments to the dead. A match hissed and found an oily wick, illuminating a ghastly red bubble.

Within the perimeter of heat, cloaked figures in black approached, their heels clacking.

Giallo tossed the elixir to Noodles. "Reckon these bastards can pick a fight?"

"Don't let them separate you."

"Start 'em fresh, eh?" Kyv began the festivities with a minor chord, a shivering wave forcing the silverware and decorations to ride the crest. But the hooded figures simply let it pass between them. "Suppose they don't appreciate a bit of the old classic sound."

To the walls the vampires sprang, selecting weapons of skirmishes past before bounding atop tables and display cases, ready to swing.

"Giallo, now!"

A two-handed flam up turned a row of skeletal chairs, tossing them into the sprinting vampires. They dodged them with ease, sliding to the backs of their thighs and popping up without losing pace. Giallo played faster, inciting a ferocious paradiddle that blasted the air with sonic pulses. Dex invoked a chord progression of twanging, four-string bass, pressuring the embedded skulls above to jettison from the ceiling and crash down like wayward droplets in a thunderstorm. The hooded braced their heads with shields, deflecting the calcium projectiles.

Noodles and Kyv traded melodies, switching between rhythm and lead, sending signals in all directions, hoping to pause the assault. The vampires cared not for their asinine beats as they swung axe and sword at the quartet's heads. The music stopped momentarily while they crouched to avoid death, stumbling into the murky darkness of the armory as they were separated.

"They ain't buyin' it!" Kyv screamed.

"Their robes, they just absorb the sound," Dex observed.

"Little help!" Noodles called. A pair of swords blistered through a table of bone in front of him, splintering the white.

Giallo glanced around the cavernous armory, hoping for a saint to provide relief. Kyv flung a tooth-ringed plate into the face of a charging vampire, stunning it temporarily and knocking its hood free. The pale creature was nearly indistinguishable from the cadre who had assaulted the village of Nyx for millennia. But Kyv was drawn to the horrific visage, the jagged, almost intertwining teeth, the milk-infused eyes, the rich, obsidian veins that seemed to pulse with each breath. It was the smoothness of the skull that perplexed him. *Perfectly round, it seemed.*

"Their ears!" he cried out with bluster. "They ain't got no ears!"

Removed entirely by blade and tooth, the cavities had been filled with white wax to prevent sound from entering.

"Deaf as a cloven-footed!" Dex agreed.

Giallo bashed in the glass partition of a display case with his drumstick and stole a ruby-studded dagger, smirking quietly at its beauty. He targeted a vampire closing in on him quickly; a most fine volunteer. He tossed the weapon into the air and readied himself. As it tumbled, he smashed the taut leather and unleashed an invisible wave that flung the dagger straight into the neck of the deaf creature. Blood erupted from its mouth, its hood forced off, revealing terror behind the pus-filled eyes.

The trio gasped at the simplicity of the experiment and its brute effectiveness. Giddy, they swarmed the nearest weapons and began tossing them in front of one another, encouraging the free-handed to provide the vampires with a touching solo of twirling axes and spinning maces. Noodles wailed across the keyboard as Dex tossed a handful of jagged leg bones in front of him. The calcium arrows plunged deep into a single vampiric shield of flesh, unfortunately taking the brunt of the impact on behalf of his brethren, until it had nearly dissected him.

Kyv wailed with anxiety, "No! Off, you bastard!" The undead were upon him, tackling him to the ground.

"Oi! *Arshole!*" Giallo shouted.

"They can't hear ya, ya twit!" Kyv reprimanded as his fist bashed in the jaw of the deaf.

"Fhuck it!" Giallo flung an axe towards Dex, and he jammed downward across his lute, sending it spinning horizontally.

Kyv pushed the vampire's head upward, releasing it just as the blade crossed beneath the nose and above the lips, emptying a river of viscous black across his own face.

The others mobbed the last remaining figure, tossing him into a stuffed diorama of a knight upon a valiant steed. The display rocked violently, collapsing atop the

undead in a cacophony of steel and leather, impaling him before the weight flattened him.

A helping hand put Kyv back on his heels. "Please tell me I smell worse than I look."

From the far end of the room came a wailing ringlet, a haunting moan of iron. Light sterilized the room. A final, hooded figure, a snuffed lantern in his hand, had opened a towering, arched door. The shrouded coward squealed as he traversed the endless hallway beyond, nearly tripping over his own haste, before disappearing from view and leaving their exit ensured.

Before the foursome stood an echoing corridor of crimson, satin carpet, the walls lined with decorative sconces of flora and fauna, demarcating dozens of private quarters, each shackled with an iron chain and padlock.

From behind the thick, blackwood doors oozed the curdling screams of innocents.

THE MELODY OF DEATH & SLEEP

A stiff heel against the doors of imprisonment fared poorly; they had been secured tightly and with the expectation of privacy. Flustered, Kyv gripped his hair and groaned under the weight of the wailing of the damned.

"What they goin' on about, then!?" he shouted.

"It could be a trap," Dex cautioned them.

"Well, pick a door," said Noodles. They gathered around a particularly active one, the chains vibrating from the internal and futile knocking. "Stand away from the door, ma'am!" he instructed.

"Ooooh, polite, are we?" Kyv teased.

"Shut up and play."

The rattling and anxious lamentations subsided; a positive sign. Each member took great pains to settle into the note, opting to disengage rather than obliterate. They

took a silent, courtesy four-count before their instruments sang.

The heavenly melody shoved the chain inward, through the door itself, unlocking the seal and pushing the entire frame backwards and onto the floor with a resounding coda. From the resulting dust storm, they could make out the shuffling of shadows; their fingers and hands ready to release fury, if need be.

A frail, violent cough wafted towards them, followed by a delicate palm waving through the haze. An imprisoned maiden stumbled out, her other hand cupping her nude, protruding belly. Her eyes rolled back into her head, pure white, and consciousness escaped her. Dex leaned and offered his arms as she collapsed deep into his chest. There were others, equally as sickly, equally with child, and forced to remain free of clothing. The quartet investigated the room with caution as they left the corridor behind them.

The unluckiest had been chained to a cluster of small, feculent beds, while others, in the early stages of growth, were given more free range.

"Fhucken' hell," Kyv breathed.

"I-I know you," Noodles whispered as he laid eyes on a youngling with once-golden blonde locks. Her flesh was fading in color, her abdomen swollen, but her limbs gaunt, sucking upon the bone. "Athenae, yes?" She nodded meekly. He knelt and holstered his weapon. "I was told you were taken...*dead*." She shook her head vehemently. "How many of you are there?"

"Thousands," was the report from another.

"Come again?" Kyv spat incredulously.

"*Thousands, sir.*"

Each chain that was disabled and every quarter freed invited a compounding quotient of evil. The most fertile of the village of Nyx had been stolen and forced into a cycle of continuous life. But they had not been treated with

an ounce of respect. Starved, beaten, and nearly forgotten, all for-

This room was devoid of life, but the chilling breath that escaped as they bashed the door in cast upon them the thought that perhaps they were better off keeping it from beyond prying eyes. Blocks of ice were stacked to the peaked roof in haphazard rows, layered behind open-backed cabinets of white marble and gold. Neatly arranged upon each shelf were thousands of crystal decanters, filled to their brims with vitality.

Lining the ceiling were reinforced meat hooks meant for livestock, instead speared through the backs of those who had worn out their usefulness. They had been slashed at the neck, the blood coursing across their bosoms and bellies to their feet until it dripped into basins far below. Each eerie plop failed to echo against the frigid air.

Giallo allowed his eyes to moisten, then to flood. He recognized one of the victims above him, a familiar face that had been hidden underneath a habit, but who had cared for him for nearly two decades. She looked rotten now, unholy. Her husk twisted delicately in whatever mountain wind had snuck through the crumbling castle walls.

At his own insistence, he raised his drumsticks, prepared to dismantle the factory. The others pawed at his elbows, hoping to at least escape the chamber before they were swept into a tornado of glass and ice. The wood never found the leather, but of his own volition. A column of ice crashed to the floor, pushing the band towards the corridor with haste. From above the doorway, a vampire hissed, preventing total escape.

To work within the harsh conditions, he had been adorned in an overcoat of animal fur, his eyes protected by constrictive goggles of black glass to prevent light from entering his eyes. He dropped to the stone and swiped; Noodles backpedaled into the rest of the quartet and

deeper into the stockroom. More columns of ice collapsed; those who had been condemned to store and care for the blood had now amassed in a group of five.

"Don't play a fhuckin' note," Noodles warned.

"Then what do we do?" Giallo whispered, his drumstick held outward like a mighty, magic-imbued blade.

Dex was quick to the marble shelves, a vial now in his hands, and presented it to the vampires. Their heads synchronized, cocked and curious. Dex swung the crystal vessel in a wide arc, studying their hypnotization. He grunted and tossed the blood into the air.

"Now!" He pushed the others forward as the vampires panicked and leapt onto the shelving, propelling themselves skyward to rescue the precious potion.

Over blocks of slippery ice, the band crawled, making it safely to the exit. As the vampires secured the vial with nary a celebration, they were overcome by a sonic infusion. Drum, baritone, harpsichord, and orphica chimed, releasing a pulsated beam of light that spread tectonic vibrations through the frozen building blocks and the crystal bottles. Delicate seams widened until the stockroom disengaged, each vessel splintering into an inferno that was magnetized towards the center of the room, row by row.

The vampires had been trapped in a criss-crossing enfilade, the embers tumbling through their flesh from bald dome to booted heel. The blood they shed mixed with the rising tide until they had been swallowed completely, leaving no discernible evidence of what belonged to whom.

Spit out into the hallway, the door returned, Giallo leaned his back against the frigid wood, huffing and sobbing. Three hands found his shoulders, accompanied by warm looks of sympathy. They found a unified embrace and held the moment for several seconds.

A scream of abject terror broke the tender moment, the freed slaves rushing past them as vampires streamed from

the armory, renewed with the weaponry of the castle's past. Dex thumbed his lute, hammering the charge with enough force to tear the ceiling from its hold. The falling beams plastered the undead, causing a brief stoppage.

Noodles and Kyv waved the imprisoned past them, pointing at the end of the opposite side of the hall. Those too far along were tackled and drained by groups of four, injecting renewed strength into their veins and coating every new bound in delicious adrenaline.

Giallo rolled his drumsticks rapidly across his instrument, keeping a steady rhythm that built an invisible wall of sound and prevented the onslaught from encroaching further. Kyv joined him whilst banging out a chord progression that stretched his fingers wide. Each blast shoved the creatures wildly into the swords and axes held by those stationed at their backside.

Noodles ensured that Athenae safely made it through the maelstrom before taking up arms. He readied his fingers and slid them with a heavy purposefulness across the keys of the orphica.

There was no need to continue, however. A pipe organ had intervened with a furious aria, pausing the vampires' hunger and opening an arched doorway at the furthest reaches of the corridor. Light streamed thusly and into the shielded eyes of the escaping villagers, much to their horror. It was not natural light, but flickering wicks in the hundreds. The melody shivered across the walls, releasing centuries of dust behind the retreating horde of the undead, lost now to the night. The band wound down their efforts and inched over the threshold.

Into the throne room they were beckoned, where the music abruptly stopped, leaving little to fade gracefully.

"Enter, you sonic altruists!"

Leaving the villagers with assured expressions that they would remain safe, the quartet softly entered. The doors, activated remotely, creaked behind them. The slaves were

left in near darkness with the distant, glowing eyes of an army of vampires waiting for the signal to unleash hell.

The shadows enacted by the dripping, blood-red candles were no match for the renewed solo that haunted them from above. Each chord brought haunting images of ravenous teeth and claws, leaping wolves and creatures of the night. The band dismissed it as playful, almost, as they stood unharmed.

Towering stained glass, of which time and testament were depicted, half-cowered behind curtains of crimson, absorbing an invisible echo that lengthened the stone walls to a cathedral ceiling beyond their view. The chamber responded with an explosion of a symphonic triad: *C over E over G*.

The mangled and rusted copper that spat the uneven chord had weathered centuries of neglect. Cracked shafts and moisture had curled and bent the organ's pipes into a mangled claw ready to snatch whoever sat upon its bench. At its base sat an equally neglected and discolored presence, his ashen, bony fingers finding the keys bloated and resistant. A cape of satin protected his neck, the excess spilling about the floor and splitting like a raging river, traveling up the surrounding columns of smooth stone. It twisted through embedded gold-plated ringlets and cascaded from the ceiling downward on either side of an obsidian throne, bearing inverted crosses embroidered in red stitching.

The creature at the foot of the organ had taken on the appearance of his loyalists: hairless, bulging teeth unable to hide behind his lips, ancient wrinkles ruffling veins of black. His eyes, though, shimmered bright blue, reminding his victims of who he once was, before time had begun to be adequately recorded.

The band paused at the base of a massive, carpeted staircase that ascended towards the throne. A few dull, golden tassels lined the edges, the fabric bearing excessive

wear, shredded and torn where servants had been forced to trek incessantly.

"For over a century, I have been preparing for my inevitable end." The voice was meek, forced through crag and sinew, but it blared in Noodles' ears as if embedded deep within his skull. "Ye see, I was conscripted into this... life." The solo ended with a triumphant chord and the creak of his bones. He rose from the organ's bench and adjusted his cape. "I attempted to bring civility and order to the cycle of nature, but thine kind could not accept my solution." Count Vrykola walked to the center of the staircase and addressed them directly. "They wanted eradication. I wanted peace."

"Oh, clam it, ya maggot!" Kyv shouted, his voice resonating in the chamber with purpose.

"You've been hunting us since before I was born; you enslaved our people!" Giallo reminded him.

"That was not my intent. But it was the result. I did not want this for you...for us! Am I not one of you?"

"Are you?" Noodles wondered.

"I was chosen; I was not born. I want only peace, but I certainly cannot trust my own. They only see the endless fields of dead. They only see the pained faces of those in the throes of death. They see only...futility."

"Then get back in your fhuckin' coffin and give us back our home," Kyv demanded.

"But they are thine creatures, too. They are sons and daughters, mothers and fathers. They are corrupted, but their hearts still beat; their memories still wrench their stomachs for what they have lost."

Noodles felt light-headed, caught in a swirling confusion backed by nausea. His vision was flooded with a cream-colored liquid that blocked his sight and clouded his mind. Count Vrykola was approaching, carefully, his eyes widening, filled with the same white blockage. His exposed fangs seemed to be leading his steady gait.

"Perhaps we let him prevail," Noodles reported in a monotone drone. "Perhaps we have been hasty?"

"Noodles?" Dex shook his shoulder, sensing malevolence. "*Noodles!?*"

"Arkos!?" Kyv slapped the back of his head, referring to him by his birth name.

The haunting memory deactivated the hypnosis. Count Vrykola stared intently at the youngling as color returned to his cheeks and his vision was restored. Noodles shook off the spell and rubbed his temple. "What the fhuck was that?" he whispered.

"Arkos?" Count Vrykola repeated. "They call you Arkos among the village?"

"Arkos Georgios; what the fhuck is it to you?" Kyv threatened.

"*Heraphina...*" the Count muttered.

"H-how do you know her name?" Noodles asked.

"Your mother is of no concern to me," he assumed. "It is your ancestor. A lover of my former kin. Her maiden name was...*Georgios*."

"Then what does that make us?"

Count Vrykola had been disarmed, and a clear glaze coated his expression. Anger replaced it as his fingers were thrust forward, capturing Noodles' attention with hypnosis.

"The son of Markos Georgios," the band leader delivered in monotone. "Begot by Demetrius, begat by Evander, begat by Alexander, begat by Agapitos, begat by Omiros, begat by Marinos, begat by Arkos."

Count Vrykola clasped his hand into a fist, tightening his invisible grip as he came upon his victim, his teeth reared with intent, his elongated cape pulling slack from its train behind his throne, up the ceiling, and back through the golden ringlets. "*Begot by Arkos Vrykola*," the Count repeated. "Bastard child of a diseased line!" His stranglehold on Noodles could not compete with his anger.

Dex sprang forward and pounded his baritone lute, launching the Count up the staircase and to his knees, breaking the connection, and trapping him in the criss-crossing lines of his expansive cape. "I am the Lord of Shadows!" he spat. "I have allowed ye and thine kind to repent, but I see that my anger still has not been misplaced these centuries. I will devour what is left, and I will plunge this world into a darkness from which it will never recover!"

A FUNERAL FOR A VAMPIRE

Noodle's sight and mind had returned, but his composure needed a moment to reengage the connection between head and fingers. Kyv took the lead, releasing an arpeggio pattern that rippled up the crimson carpet. The Count slid sideways, as if shoved, dragging his tangled cape in the process. With one hand, he sliced through the satin, the other ensnared Giallo in his mesmerizing control.

The trio thumped out a backing melody, slamming the Count into the nearest column and pinning him, his palms forced to his ears to stop the pitch from devouring him internally. With Giallo unencumbered, he pounded his drum, spinning the sticks between index and middle fingers between each beat. The Count muscled his way past the sonic booms and scaled the stone. To and through the trusses he sprang, his organ's pipes strong enough to support his weight as he slid down the shaft to the instrument's landing, his fingers quickly bashing the keys into a lullaby.

The force of his ancient hymn stunned the group into silence, their instruments suddenly heavy with exhaustion. Their chins slid down to their chests, slumber threatening to bring them to their knees. As Giallo's hands fluttered

toward his side, the bulbous head of his drumstick nicked the taut leather and emitted a single note.

It was enough to rattle the pipes and bend the lullaby. Noodles awoke and instinctively threatened a chord progression, sliding up and down the keyboard of his orphica. The Count was caught in the brain worm and stumbled from the bench into his seat of power. He released a guttural call into the night air, beckoning his army for assistance. The stained glass erupted in a syncopated rhythm as vampires graced the throne room, using the curtains to ferry themselves to the staircase.

The Elixir of Divinity was passed between the four, each reloading their instrument, tuning pegs twisted for maximum clarity. They could easily dispatch these minions, severing their necks from their heads, limbs from torsos, and minds from skulls. The Count watched in amazement as the sonic warriors coated the chamber in blood, his sons and daughters sacrificed for his protection, with no chance to replenish their dwindling numbers.

Their mixing melodies allowed them to slowly advance, cutting down the distance between them and the organ. The copper pipes vibrated, unable to hold what little was left supporting them. The walls surrounding it vomited dust, the metal twisting, rattling uncontrollably.

The decrepit instrument exploded in a shower of whining, humming tubes, backed by twisting chunks of black and white. The inertia of the detonation was enough to slam the Count onto his face, the debris forcing Noodles and company to do the same, finding the carpeted stairway lacking in support or comfort. Dex fumbled for the elixir, but it had slipped from his care, rolling playfully into the darkness.

In the subsiding drone, Count Vrykola found his balance. "Ye are my lineage; but ye will be cast up the Bleeding Fields as another corpse, head upon pike, a warning to those who wish to end my reign and spoil my bloodline."

Dex scurried towards the vial, but a vampire scooped him up and pinned him atop shards of colored glass. He fought back with fist and fury, hoping to release himself without assistance. Giallo rolled to freedom, stumbling down the steps, but he, too, was waylaid, his drumstick acting as a dull spear in search of the creature's heart.

Noodles limped down the stairs, eyeing the elixir, Kyv at his side.

From the void, teeth appeared. Kyv raised his forearm to protect his bandmate and welcomed the plunging caress of a briar wolf. Wverezith wrestled him to the staircase, whining under the punishing blows of Kyv's free hand.

The distraction allowed Noodles to grab the glass container, but its weight suddenly dragged him flat. His calf burned most curiously. A glowing cross-section of the organ's piping had punctured his leg, blood leaking down the shaft and trailing behind him.

Count Vrykola rose, first flat-footed, then he kissed the stone in flight, slowly rising into the mountain air that whipped through the destroyed stained glass. "*I am the Lord of Shadows!*" he echoed, his voice stained with generations of vampires who were forced to endure similar legacies. His arms spread before him, his torn cape flapped like a greedy bat.

He disregarded the struggling bandmates preoccupied with his minions. Instead, he hovered above Noodles, the orphica on his back bleating harmlessly as he writhed in pain.

"I shall devour you first," Count Vrykola commanded. "My brother was entrusted to my care, and he betrayed my love. Foolish, I was, to believe he would love me, too. That he would protect me in my own hour of need!"

Noodles rolled over, cocking his head upward at the floating vampire, but the rainbow cast over his chest stymied his attention. He followed the sliver of light across the carpet and up the wall. The curtains surrounding the

shattered windows had cheated against the arm pole that held them in place. From the great plains came the hope of dawn, the rays captured by the colorful depictions of holy rites and blessed bounties.

"My brother's seed shall wither! You, Arkos Georgios, shall be the sacrifice to expunge what hath damned our lineage for eternity. "

"My name..." he huffed. "Is *Noodles!*" He thrust the elixir's bottle into the cleansing beam of light. A thousand points of divinity struck the room, blinding the Count in agony. His tattered cape shielded him from harm, but his flight was interrupted, brought crashing down unevenly. Shattered bone was forced through the flesh of his legs, unable to support his downfall.

His minions, no longer caring for sustenance, released the quartet and flew to their Master's aid.

"S-Sire!" Beloch hobbled out from behind the safety of the Count's throne, using a gnarled, wooden staff as a crutch.

"The curtains!" Noodles screamed. "Bring 'em down!"

Dex tugged at the dusty and moist material, showering a section of the chamber in white, ruby red, and sapphire blue. The direct light was not enough to obliterate the horde, but it delayed their prompt exit. Kyv and Giallo wrestled the curtains in front of them, shocking those vampires who had not been made wise to their plot. The cleansing beams seared their flesh from the outside in, peeling back dermis to muscle to bone. Their veins clogged with arid heat, groaning malevolently before deconstructing into ash. The undead collapsed within what little clothing hid their true nature, while black soot was disbursed across the floor.

Beloch instructed those loyalists remaining to ferry the Count up the staircase. "H-hurry!" he begged, obscuring his face in the rear of his burlap hood.

Noodles hobbled to his feet and joined his brothers in

exposing the chamber to the morning, chasing the retreating party through the mangled corpse of the organ, nipping at their heels. Wverezith followed closely, cocking his head back angrily as the last line of defense.

Giallo bounded over a copper pipe and kept pace. Behind the Count's throne, a hidden passageway had appeared, the tail end of a torch lighting the way as panicked shouting revealed the vampires' position. Down the tunnel, the band hurried, their instruments clicking as they clapped against their shoulders.

A crypt of unknown origin and age accepted them. Coffins of flat stone housed the bodies of kings and elders alike, inscribed with words of wisdom and of love. But they had been forgotten, spiderwebs allowed to envelope them, rats leaving their droppings across their Lords-given names. At the far end, past millennia of rulers, Giallo watched the vampires deposit Count Vrykola into a coffin of coal black and brilliant gold accents atop a marble pedestal. They sealed him within and wrestled the chamber door shut. "P-protect h-him!" Bheloc shouted. "At al-all c-costs!"

They assembled in front of the Count's final resting place and passed what little elixir remained in the bottle. "Giallo," Noodles instructed. "If you would be so kind."

"With fhuckin' pleasure." A resounding flam tore the planks from the crossbeams, creating twirling, jagged arrows that struck down the Count's guardians. Bheloc cowered in the corner of the room, Wverezith using his hide as a shield, though he escaped the rain of debris.

They filed into the mausoleum and surrounded the coffin with purpose, their righteous weapons raised and primed. From within his prison, they bore witness to Lefkó Vrykola's final plea:

"Forgive me, Lords. I have been forced to reckon with my own greed. Spare me in this moment, to lead peace once again. I beg of you! It is not too late to turn the

tide of these despicable creatures and release us from this curse."

The band readied their fingers, unfazed by the prayer.

"I am but a child! Forgive me for my unholy ways and the ways of my children of the night!"

Giallo began the funeral procession, furiously banging his drum. Dex crackled with interlocking bass chords. Kyv pushed air through the harpsichord and steadied with an elongated minor key. The coffin shook violently under their collective harmonization. Noodles unleashed a magnificent aria, twiddling his fingers across the keys as if a heavenly being had taken hold.

"I am but a child!" Count Vrykola repeated, the strain of the sonic cloud stretching the coffin to its material limit. The edges cracked, the paint oozed, the satin curdled. *"I am but a child! Forgive my unholy ways before it is too late!"*

His reign, which had begun over a century prior, finally collapsed. The coffin rose treacherously, just a few feet off its perch, before it was pierced through the center by a beam of heavenly light. It dug laboriously through the peaks of the castle, past stone, iron, and wood, deep into the crypt.

They played on as the blinding white devoured Count Vrykola, evaporating the coffin and his flesh, his agonizing death knell synthesized into a note of its own as any last evidence of his rule disappeared, and, so with it, the light.

Reverberations trembled throughout the castle in the aftermath, shaking the foundation. Those who had been his slaves huddled together for warmth as the hallway buckled, the vampires who had been left behind to watch over them suddenly finding escape a much tastier meal. But the entrance to the throne room could not withstand the Count's death and opened eagerly, disseminating the morning light. The creatures of the night were vaporized by the rays of the day, leaving but a trace of smoke in

their wake.

Noodles concluded his melody, and the others waned at his behest.

They were left with the somber whimpering of Wverezith and the guttural sobbing of Bheloc.

"S-Sire..." he whispered. But, suddenly, a realization. "I-I...I live?"

Noodles knelt before the great briar wolf and rubbed its fur lovingly. "You are free."

The young boy lifted his head, no longer pale and disfigured, but youthful and fair-haired. He scuttled back and examined his hands with curiosity. Fingers where claws had been. Plumpness where once gaunt. Tears flooded his cheeks, and an embrace nearly brought Noodles to his rear.

"T-t-thank you, s-sire! P-praise b-be unto y-ye!"

To the precarious edge of the remaining tower strode the foursome, backed by Bheloc, Wverezith, and the imprisoned maidens, finding comfort in the former robes of the undead. They gazed upon the Bleeding Fields, the desecrated mountain sides, the Whispering Woods, and the plucky shine of the village of Nyx.

"Are they gone for good?" Kyv asked, the cold air whipping through the shards of the once mighty Castle Ifaisteio.

Dex did not answer, though he knew the answer.

There was no movement in the depths that surrounded the fortress; what had been was no more. Bheloc clung to the belly of an elder and watched the sunrise for the first time in millennia. He smiled and accepted its warmth with gusto. To the east, the crystal Kátharsi River raged as it ferried water into the great seas. To the north, the Diávolos Mountains shone brilliantly, the snow-topped summits casting shadows across the valley towards Koiláda.

The brilliance of the horizon and the gravity of the moment were selfishly stolen: from the colorful crag rose

a black-winged menace, scaled from its bladed tail to its massive, yawning jaws. Bloodied eyes initiated vengeance, translated into a rallying cry of demonic origin and tone. It soared towards the castle with fury, bending back the landscape under its mighty bluster.

Dex tuned his lute, initiating a similar preparation in the quartet. Noodles shook the last droplets of the Elixir of Divinity, hopelessly collecting the small beads into something meaningful. He passed it around nonetheless, encouraging each to recoat their instruments.

"Take the others back to Nyx," he instructed Bheloc. "Summon the briar wolves for protection and prepare for war."

The boy nodded and guided the maidens down the spiral staircase into the castle proper.

"That's it," Kyv complained, shaking the last remnants of the potion into the air chamber of his harpsichord.

"Not enough time to make more," Dex admitted.

They stood at the ready, a collective melody rippling between their creative synergy. The creature drew nigh, claws akimbo.

Their funeral for a vampire was but an overture. The symphony of eternal pain was about to begin.

A WORD OF CAUTION
AND WARNING
VIII

The text of this Codex is but a chronicle. The odyssey of the undead is far from over. The demise of Count Vrykola at the hands of the Warriors of Sonic Altruism reverberates across the village of Nyx and the lands beyond as a weapon and a warning. Their victory is short-lived; though the visibility of their journey does end here. For the members four, thine prayers shall carry them forth past the Bleeding Fields and the grounds of Castle If-aísteio, into the unknown edges of crystal and bone.

Listen...and decide for thineself between the two paths: good and evil. It is beyond simple, but woe to those who cannot distinguish between either.

Fear the night. Embrace the day. If we shall meet before the end times, it shall be a shining moment full of joy, while fear lurks, once more, just beyond our view.



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