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THE VOICE OF FIRE

By Kelly J Clark



PART I: SEVENTY MILES FROM PESHTIGO

Reagan Riddle was 180 miles out of Chicago when the red and blue lights flooded her rearview mirror. She was driving north along I-41 in a borrowed lime-green Bentley at nineteen miles over the speed limit. It was over 250 miles to her destination from Chicago, and though she left as soon as the sun went down, that bastard ball of fire was extra eager in the summer, which left her the better part of nine hours of true dark to work with. Not long for someone who can't survive a sunrise.

Smart Kindred stay in their domains, but despite being analytically minded by nature, tonight, Reagan was anything but careful. She had few friends in the world, and bad enough luck for one of them to be Nathaniel Nimh. Nate was the best occult detective in Chicago and a trouble magnet. He was also her sire.

And he was missing.

The last time they spoke was in her loft. Nate's habit of showing up suddenly and without warning wasn't one of his most endearing qualities. He also had difficulty with telephones and computers that Reagan always assumed was a side effect of his constant exposure to mystical ephemera. Ironic, given her and his own sire's shared proclivities for technology.

When he arrived that night without notice, Reagan was sprawled across her couch, investigating the troubled history of one of the city's aldermen and his connection to the porn industry. Nate was an eclectic, fey man, perpetually in the awkward phase of early manhood. He was a bit shorter than average, whip thin, pale even by vampire standards, and constantly moving. Reagan, by contrast, was just shy of six feet, with deep brown skin that had turned somewhat ashy in death. Her face was long and framed by a carefree, cloudy afro. He wore long coats and swooping scarves that echoed the goth scene of the early 2000s, while she, a lifetime programmer, wore comfortable hoodies and yoga pants. They both preferred black. Together, they looked like two parts of a mismatched indie band.

Reagan was used to Nate's sudden visits, but never like this. The moment she opened the door, he burst into the space, wide-eyed and frantic. Words tumbled out of his mouth, making less sense by the minute.

Years before her Embrace, Nate and his coterie found something beneath Chicago, down in the scarred depths left by the Great Fire of 1871. Other Kindred said it left him a bit touched, but Reagan suspected he'd always been like this. He was never able (or willing) to explain what it was they saw, and he avoided the subject unless he needed her to Google something she assumed was related. This night was different.

"This is it," he said. "Or at least, I'm afraid it might be."

Reagan scrunched her eyebrows. "Which means what, exactly?"

Nate paused, tilting his head to the side in his peculiar way, as if listening to a distant sound. Suddenly, he snapped back to attention and pulled a worn keyring from his pocket.

"It means feed my cat. Until I get back."

Before she could ask from where, he nodded, as if to punctuate his statement, and left as fast as he'd entered. That was exactly a month ago tonight. It was strange not hearing from him,

but not unheard of. She had her own Requiem to tend to, and so she proceeded as normal, with the sole addition of feeding a cat that disliked her to the core of its tiny, black heart.

That is, of course, until the dream. Reagan rarely dreamed since she died, but two nights ago, a nightmare woke her in the middle of the day. In it, she walked across a sea of starlight. The sky was a mass of thick, ropy, red clouds that filled the horizon and pressed down with the grip of a vice. They shuddered and undulated like bowels and oozed drops of crimson that coagulated into a pathway across the void. At the end of the path, she saw Nate, bent over as if in prayer. His entire body was drenched with the same bloody rain. Reagan ran to him and found the world struggled against her. She felt leaden, submerged, and weighed down by invisible pressures, but she pushed on. After what felt like hours of struggle, she reached him and grabbed him by the shoulder with a trembling hand. She wished she hadn't.

As his body turned, she saw that his face was gone. The flesh had melted away like pale candlewax, leaving behind moldering muscle, bone, and his impossibly green eyes. He opened his lipless mouth and spoke to her, but the words came out at strange angles and she struggled to understand them. The sky shook violently as he spoke, and she dropped to her knees next to him, desperate to make sense of his voice. She pressed her ear to the pink, sticky mass that had been his cheek and strained to listen.

TWO. NIGHTS.

Then Reagan was sitting upright in bed, the weight of the sun pressing down on her even through two feet of brick and industrial-grade blackout curtains. Exhaustion flooded her bones, but her mind was electric with fear from the premonition. A flashing light to her right caught her eye. When she saw what it was, she forced air into her lungs and let out a deep, prolonged sigh. Across the room, the computer monitors on her workspace flashed the message from her nightmare:

Two nights.

So, speeding was stupid, but it was also a necessity. It took the first night to research and prepare, and that left her with even less time to find Nate and extract him. Her sire was a man who knew how to get into trouble. Out? Not so much. Luckily, that was her specialty.

As she pulled over to the side of the road, she remembered that this car didn't make her any less inconspicuous. Reagan wasn't a fan of personal property beyond her haven, her clothes, and her tech. This meant she didn't own anything as audacious as a car, let alone a Bentley. Ever since the Embrace, she had trouble putting faith in traceable things like credit cards, so renting was out. She could have hacked a rental car agency, but in her mindset, she didn't trust herself not to leave a trail. Reagan was a master of algorithmic tracking, but she knew the best way to avoid getting caught was to just not be stupid. Rule one: Don't hack angry.

Instead, she called in a favor from Littlejohn Roach, a Haunt she'd graciously supplied with blackmail — blackmail that helped him escape the scheming clutches of Scratch. Reagan knew shit about cars, but Littlejohn was well known for his love of high-quality, expensive vehicles. Honestly, she wondered why it had taken him so long to join the Invictus. He'd cooed about the car like an undersexed pigeon: a 2014 Continental GT with 572 horsepower

and 3.6 seconds to hit sixty MPH. One of three hundred units ever made! Of those, Reagan thought it was a safe bet hers was the only one that had been repainted energy-drink green.

She should have said no. Asked for something simple or indistinct like an economy car. But Littlejohn's affection for the machine was infectious. She knew she'd regret taking it the moment the keys hit her palm, but she needed the ride, and something to take her mind off the pressure of having to do all this in one night.

The vibration of the rumble strips on the highway's shoulder jolted her back to the present. She turned off the car and watched the trooper run her plates in the rearview mirror. She pulled her license from her tiny, aluminum wallet and searched the glove box for the registration. Nothing.

Not even gloves. Don't be stupid, huh?

Her options were limited, so she'd have to work with a quick half-lie: She'd just purchased the car from a friend and misplaced the registration! So sorry, officer. If push came to shove, she could find other ways around it, but always better to take the soft route first. God, what she would've given for the get-out-of-jail-free powers the other clans had. So many wonderful ways to get out of a speeding ticket, none of which she had at her disposal.

Oh well. Work with what the Blood gives you.

She checked her face in the rearview mirror, willing her Vitae to flush her cheeks from their usual dead, ashy clay to the warm brown of her breathing days. She watched the moisture flood back into her eyes, washing away the glaze and leaving only her mother's sparkling ambers.

There. A real girl again. Reagan was no beauty queen, but she did alright for herself, and with any luck, the old cliché would work. She rustled through her bag, pulled out a pink-tinted lip balm that hadn't seen the light of day since the last time she had, and ran it around her mouth.

Reagan heard the trooper's car door open and glanced down at her outfit: thick black leggings and a plum-colored hoodie over an old tank top. The closest thing to jewelry was a decaying black watch on her left wrist, the face turned inward. As she heard the officer's door shut, she grabbed the zipper of her hoodie and pulled it down to her mid-chest, just below her neckline. Every little bit helps.

As the trooper walked toward her, Reagan pushed her senses out. Suddenly, the safety of the Bentley peeled away and she was floating in the night, awash with sensations. She could feel the vibration of each passing car. A Toyota roared past, the man behind the wheel rubbernecking to get a look at who got pulled over. He was listening to NPR, a dashed joint still smoldering in his ashtray, a ketchup stain barely faded against the cherry red of his shirt. Across the highway, a lone raccoon checked the traffic warily, its empty belly screaming with enough force to drive it from its den in search of litter or roadkill.

Reagan twitched her head to the side and pushed her senses behind the car. Though thirty feet separated their vehicles, she could hear the trooper's steps issue like thunder across the divide. He wore the sour stench of a long night drinking gas station coffee, and she detected a slight wobble to his first steps, almost imperceptible, but enough to tell her that he'd been

half-asleep when she'd flown past his checkpoint. Had she not been singing along with David Bowie, she might have known that two minutes ago.

Reagan rolled down the driver's side window and reminded herself it would be fine. *All you have to do is talk your way through a ticket.* She gripped the steering wheel with both hands, driver's license in plain sight.

Then she heard the trooper's boots stop a full car-length back, the silence punctuated by the harsh snap of a holster's restraining strap.

"Step out of the car, with your hands on the roof of the vehicle."

"I think there must be—"

"Out of the car now! Keep your hands where I can see them, turn around, kneel, and cross your arms behind your back." He blared his flashlight in her face, resting his free hand on his barely holstered gun.

"I'm complying," she said. She moved her hands to the open window. In the glare of the trooper's flashlight, Reagan couldn't help but notice how dark her skin looked. She felt that old sliver of fear in her gut. She'd been dead for almost seven years. Bullets couldn't kill her; she could tear apart this man for fun. And yet.

Reagan did as she was told. Deliberately, carefully, one inch at a time, just the way her father taught her. Terrance Riddle was a smart man, one who knew you don't survive Black in Chicago without following very specific rules. As she stepped out of the Bentley, hands raised and open, Reagan Riddle realized calling in a favor from Littlejohn Roach might not have been the best idea after all.





Introduction

The best forgeries are the ones who've forgotten they aren't real.

Peter Watts, "The Things"

The Mekhet are everywhere.

Yes, even here, washed out in the blue light of your screen, hiding in the liminal space between paranoia and peripheral vision. Worse? They know. They've always known. They have photos.

Mekhet are the out-of-context vampires. Other Kindred only come in so many parasitic sizes, but a Shadow can remake herself as it suits her obsessions, sloughing off personae like snake skins. Her blood isn't quantifiable – which can be oddly disarming if you operate under the quaint assumption that ideas aren't dangerous. Just because something isn't real doesn't mean it can't hurt you: money, gossip, vampires...

Strange Shades is the definitive sourcebook for all things Mekhet in **Vampire: The Requiem Second Edition**. In addition to new Shadow fiction, bloodlines, and systems, it includes a complete update of the mechanics from their original sourcebook, **Shadows in the Dark**.

This clan book is the first in a series of updates and expansions. It's not quite **Clanbook: Mekhet Revised**, but you could call it a Shadow love letter. It's also a chance to shine a light on Mekhet material from other First Edition sources, some of which only ever appeared in one-off supplements.

Not all of the updates in this series will conform to narrative elements presented in First Edition. **Vampire: The Requiem** is (as of this writing) sixteen years old, with over fifty books in its back catalog. Some things haven't aged as well as others, and a few don't really fit with the new setting. What you'll find herein isn't a rejection of what came before, but we hope our new spin on old secrets will spark your imagination.

Theme: Ego Death

A shadow is just a projection, an afterbirth of photons that concedes to whatever blots the lamp out best. Flick a match, and it never existed at all. What does that mean for creatures who barely have a grip on identity at the best of times? The Mekhet would dearly like to know. The Requiem is hard on a vampire's sense of self, and the Shadow Requiem is hardest of all. Some

adapt, dead hands grasping the heart of their mortal lives through countless incarnations, while others lose themselves to the maw of ages, becoming ciphers rather than persons.

Mood: Plots Within Plots

Vampires like to play long games, but the Mekhet have no choice. Spycraft and blackmail only go so far without overt social control. Even a Gangrel can order around a pack of rats in a pinch; a Shadow needs ever-newer mysteries to keep her rank and file in line. Yet for all their plotting, the Mekhet are too often victims of the same tricks they play on their prey. For every Shadow building blood cults to his own blankness, another lurks behind him, stealing his stolen secrets... and then another behind her, and another, and...

A Shadowy History

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Mekhet had an odd start. Not based on a single clan from **Vampire: The Masquerade**, the Shadows were an amalgam (to varying degrees) of the Assamites, Lasombra, Malkavians, Tremere, and Setites. First Edition Mekhet were a more cosmopolitan bunch, almost default Kindred: not as glamorous as the Daeva, not as deadly as the Gangrel, not as fearsome as the Nosferatu, and not as controlling as the Ventrue. This everyman concept was easy for new players to build on without getting pigeonholed into stereotypes, but it lacked the strong archetypes of the other vampires. Even their clan weakness was just a worsening of the basic Kindred banes.

Shadows in the Dark: Mekhet was the first time the Shadows took a negative-space spotlight, arguably earning the biggest glow-up of the big five. The Mekhet became true Shadows, terrifying voyeurs to mortals and all-knowing prophets to their Kindred. The clan book series was a beautiful, bloody culmination of almost two decades of White Wolf's games of personal horror, and in many ways, it's where **Vampire: The Requiem Second Edition** really begins.

What's in This Book

Strange Shades: Mekhet is for players and Storytellers alike. Inside, you'll find all the material you'll need to round out your Shadow characters and chronicles, from bloodlines and cults to Merits and Devotions.

Throughout, you'll also take a ride with Reagan Riddle, Shadow cyber-detective extraordinaire. On a desperate road trip to save her sire, Reagan digs up more history than she — or anyone — could ever want.

Chapter One: Family Secrets revisits five classic Shadow bloodlines and introduces two new members to the occulted thing the Mekhet call a family tree. In addition, you'll find **Twists of the Blood**, mechanical Shards providing even more options for your stories.

- Masters of information technology, the **Connected** believe they're the next logical step in Kindred evolution. In a digital world, no one is safe from their prying eyes.
- After many years, the **Család** have ended their self-imposed cloister, ready to rebuild the Danse Macabre and recruit new blood for their master's grand designs.
- The **Kuufukuji** starve the Beast with bloody arts, but behind their vaunted discipline lies a ravenous secret.
- The **Leandros** are stalkers and heartbreakers who seduce the light from mortal souls to sate their own darkness.
- The Kindred don't remember the **Mnemosyne**, but they'll pay the price for their forgetfulness — literally.
- Outlaws and mutants, the **Norvegi** dirty their hands on behalf of other Kindred in return for wealth, power, and survival.
- Mothers to all who need them (and some who don't), the **Qedeshah** follow their faith toward a more compassionate All Night Society.

Chapter Two: True Faith infiltrates the Mekhet's Shadow Cults, providing several examples and updating their systems. You'll also find a complete **Vampire** conversion of the organization rules introduced in **Geist: The Sin-Eaters**.

- **The Followers of Seth** spread anarchy to maintain the cosmic balance of the universe, doing evil where good rots the veil between worlds.
- **The Inconnu** worship the living Masquerade, sacrificing their identities so all Kindred might exist in fearful anonymity.
- **The Moirai** are the Shadows' shadows, protecting their clan before its enemies can even think to strike.
- **The Moulding Room** defines surveillance and celebrity culture among the dead, and it's much too late to stop.

Chapter Three: Shadow Play uncovers the Mekhet's trade secrets. No clan book would be complete without a toolbox, and in addition to new banes, Masks, Dirges, Devotions, and Merits, we update nearly all the mechanics from **Shadows in the Dark**. You'll also find new options for the Hollow Mekhet.

Why the Mekhet?

Longtime fans will notice we're starting out of order. **Lords Over the Damned** was the first **Requiem** clan book, and the **Daeva** take alphabetical priority, but we wanted to experiment with this form before we dug deeper into the series. The **Mekhet** proved to be the best jumping-off point, as their **First Edition** book had the most mechanical content of its sister volumes, including three **Disciplines**, three **Shadow Cults**, and two **bloodlines**, not to mention numerous **Devotions** and **Merits**.

Chapter Four: Strangers in the Night presents a treasure trove of horrors the Mekhet might turn up if they look too closely at the void. Between ghoul families and other, stranger things, the **Shadows** aren't the only spooks haunting the **All Night Society**.

Mekhet Media

The **Shadows** likely represent the least common vampire archetype in fiction and film — but then, they wouldn't have earned that sobriquet if they were easy to find. Still, they are out there (watching), and the following lists a few notable Mekhet inspirations.

Vampire Media

Forever Knight, created by **Barney Cohen** and **James D. Parriott**: A supernatural procedural before that was a cliché, and cheesy in perhaps the most Canadian way possible, *Forever Knight* isn't without its charms. Protagonist Nick Knight doesn't really fit the Shadow archetype, but he has a talent for shifting his Mask when it suits his goals, and his obsession with finding occult artifacts to cure his condition is a series hallmark. The idea of a vampire detective is also about as Mekhet as it gets.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night, directed by **Ana Lily Amirpour**: This Persian-language horror/drama is the Mekhet vampire movie. The Girl has no name, but she can smell sins like a coyote tracking rodents, and her black chador flows behind her like **Bela Lugosi's** cape. When she isn't hunting the streets of **Bad City** on a skateboard, she spends her sad existence in the company of vintage record players and faded photos of movie stars, trying to reclaim some opaque piece of lost humanity.

Let the Right One In, by **John Ajvide Lindqvist**: Better known in English-speaking countries for its masterful film adaptation (adapted by the author), the original novel is more explicit about its vampire's struggle with identity, particularly her gender and inherent contradiction as a two-hundred-year-old child.

Only Lovers Left Alive, directed by Jim Jarmusch: The Mekhet Requiem in all its obsessive, occulted glory. Eve can read the age of things with a touch and recites binomial nomenclature on impulse; Adam collects obscure vintage guitars and powers his house with his own Nicola Tesla-inspired generator. Neither can stand to go barehanded among mortal “zombies,” and both dream of a coming doom that will tear their Masquerades apart.

Non-Vampire Media

The Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives in Your House, by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor: If the title doesn't scream Mekhet, nothing does. Spun off from the hit *Welcome to Night Vale* podcast, this satirical biography tells the tragic tale of its eponymous character's transformation from swashbuckling adventurer into omnipresent horror. The Faceless Old Woman is the dictionary definition of an emotional vampire, and her story is a case study of the ways a Mekhet might hollow herself out, as well as the grotesque forms revenge takes on in eternal life. It also includes hilarious and terrifying examples for creative Obfuscate users.

The Lives of Others, directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck: “You don't know me, but I know you.” Set in the last years of the German Democratic Republic, this Cold War drama depicts what happens when a secret policeman invests in his victims. Captain Wiesler stakes his humanity on the couple he watches for a corrupt member of the East German elite, making touchstones of those his superiors would tear down. Whether that makes him a hero or a johnny-come-lately to basic decency is an excellent question for any Mekhet character.

Nightcrawler, directed by Dan Gilroy: Lou Bloom isn't a vampire, but he's close enough for government work. A sleazy, amoral stringer for LA newsrooms, Lou sells footage of violence

and ruin in bulk not just for the money, but for the way it gets him off. The Los Angeles of *Nightcrawler* is a flat, neo-noir hellscape where camera-armed vultures compete to videotape the gruesome final moments of their carrion. In other words, the All Night Society at its gritty worst.

Requiem Books

The Murder of Crows, by Janet Trautvetter: Collected in the *Three Shades of Night* anthology, this novella focuses on Trey “Loki” Fischer, the signature Shadow from **Vampire: The Requiem First Edition** (he of the crop top and death wish on p. 109). *Murder* takes on the Mekhet mindset in detail, providing an intimate look at the ways its protagonist finds meaning in webs of coincidence, fate, and magic. Loki also appears as a minor character in the **Requiem** novel trilogy and serves as narrator for the opening fiction of *Circle of the Crone*. (White Wolf)

Strangeness in the Proportion, by Joshua Alan Doetsch: This bizarre and brilliant novel is about mortal monsters in the *Chronicles of Darkness*, but (spoiler) it's a Mekhet who starts things rolling, taking the role of personal shadow to the book's absinthe-addled, necrophile antihero. (White Wolf)

Thousand Years of Night updates the Hollow Mekhet to *Second Edition* and offers up a special Merit to control (or work with) the Ka. It also includes plenty of material for playing elder Shadows. (Onyx Path Publishing)

Finally, while **Shadows in the Dark: Mekhet** isn't required to use this book, you're missing out if you haven't picked it up. Apart from being an exemplar of an already exemplary series and a veritable tome of Mekhet secrets and lies, Frances Black's tragicomic journey from botched suicide to Queen of Eyes is an iconic movement in the Requiem. (White Wolf)

