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I quit White Wolf (the first time) just before we planned to do another edition of Vampire the Masquerade, and came back specifically to work on revised. I worked on that for several years, then we relaunched the World of Darkness and I worked on Requiem for a while. Then I quit again.

And then, I came back again. Vampire brought me back.

It's a powerful draw. I'm addicted to it. It's my vitae.

When I started here, I was a dewy-eyed youth, afire with my love for games and the World of Darkness in particular. Now I'm married, have a kid, and have been here for fourteen years - and I still love Vampire as much as I did almost two decades ago when my then-girlfriend introduced me to it.

It's been a wonderful experience for me, among the most gratifying things I've ever done. It's indescribably fulfilling to peek in on people's chronicles, be it at conventions, in online journals, at LARPS, or in person, to see what people have done with the world. How people feel about the World of Darkness is amazing: It's resounded with gamers in the way precious few other worlds have. I'm proud to have been a part of something that has touched people's lives so profoundly. The joy people take in the experience makes all the hard work worthwhile, death threats and anonymous Internet name-calling notwithstanding.

That part of the story where we publish a new Vampire book every month has come to a close, though. Not the game-playing part, because so long as people get together around a table or in a social group and someone has a copy of Vampire, the game can happen infinitely. It's a little bittersweet, I have to say, but looking forward means that we'll be able to take what we've done here and apply it to something new.

I hope you'll join us. Just because we're publishing in a different format doesn't mean there's not still going to be a world out there for you to make yours. I'm part of making that world, and I want to see everyone who ever had any portion of love I had for Vampire bring that same enthusiasm (or deviousness, or treachery, or subterfuge) into what happens next with Vampire. Without you, I'm just a lone weirdo clattering away at a keyboard in a room.

And if you've been any part of the ride over that almost-two decades Vampire's been out there, you'll know that the night is nothing without a few other monsters with whom to share it.

I'll be there...

Justin Achilli
INTRODUCTION

A great empire, like a great cake, is most easily diminished at the edges.

—Benjamin Franklin

The Bereavement Boogie

Welcome to The Danse Macabre. The name means dance of the dead, and speaks to the society of the Damned—these awful creatures must interact, and when they do, it is a waltz of knives, a whirl of fangs, a floor filled with pirouetting monsters. In this wretched dance, none are equal, all are separate, and nobody's following the same rhythm.

And yet, the name has other connotations, too: the dance macabre is a medieval art-form, an allegorical look at a parade of skeletons or corpses leading other dead men to their grave. What it means is that, guess what? We're all going to the same place. We're all in the great big Conga line to the crypt, baby. All things end. We're all just dancing skeletons.

Hence, the irony. The vampires think of the Danse Macabre as the endless dance of unequal monsters, and yet the term itself implies a finality and an equality. We all go to the grave. We are all equal in our passing.

In that tension, between finality and eternity, lies our game.

Okay, But What Is It Really?

All that metaphorical shit aside, this book is meant to be another, deeper look at how to get your hands bloody when tinkering with Vampire: The Requiem.

It’s not a player’s guide. We already did that.

It’s a Storyteller’s guide—er, sorry, “Chronicler’s guide.” We did that, already, too.

It’s somewhere in-between. It’s something bigger. Something weirder.

We want to tear apart the whole game of Vampire: The Requiem. We want to look at all the greasy, gore-soaked constituent parts and more importantly, we want you to look at these spare parts, too. Consider them. What happens when you put them back together? What happens when you staple this here, and duct tape that there, and then zap it with lightning and feed it a mouthful of ancient demon’s blood? What lumbering monstrosity awakens?

This book, that’s what.

This book is us saying, “But there’s so much more you can do with this game, and goddamnit, I still have the talking stick.”

You want social combat? Done. You want Vampire Noir in the Dark Metropolis? Amen. You want new systems for Devotions, for humanity, for how vampires deal with each other? We got your ass covered. We have new covenants. We have old covenants done up in a new way. We have all kinds of viscera-caked thought-meats shoved into this sausage casing (and as you surely feel in your hands, this is not a small book).

How to Use This Book
(The Bloody Parts, Arranged)

The whole of The Danse Macabre seeks to crack the breastbone with a rib-spreader and take a new look at many of the key component parts of Vampire: The Requiem. The chapters are laid out as follows:

A Season Of Secrets: Throughout this book you'll find fiction in four parts. This story—“Season of Secrets,” by Greg Stolze—returns us one final time to the vampires of Chicago who suffer an upheaval when a grotesque deviation of the Traditions occurs. Can the city survive this transgression? What do they make of the transgressor?

Intro: You're reading it. Don't get excited.

Chapter One: Life After Dark first introduces you to a whole new way of looking at and playing Vampire: The Requiem, which is the “tier system.” We break the game out into three tiers (similar to what’s done in Hunter: The Vigil) and give a host of new rules that helps you rejigger the game with whatever awesome hacks suit your game table the most. After that, it’s time to chop apart the clans and see what makes them tick. Why would you play them? What do they mean? We cut right to the heart. Finally, we give you a look into the roles vampires play, and mechanically bolster these roles (the Masquerade and the Requiem).

Chapter Two: The Bonds of Covenant rips apart what you already know about the existing five covenants in Requiem and reinvents them as gonzo, global conspiracies lording at the tippy-top of the third tier of the layer cake.
After that, it’s a deadly parade of fresh new covenants for use in your game whether as antagonists or as groups players may choose for their characters.

Chapter Three: Bloody Business is not your typical rules chapter—these rules are as wide and varied as arterial spray on the wall (each spatter its own piece of art). Social combat? Mental combat? New rules for Humanity? New ways for players to roleplay through the creation of unique Devotions? Yes, yes, yes and yes. Want new combat rules? Montages? Time compression? New Disciple-Skill marriages? All these rules (and more) seek to give you new ways to play Vampire: The Requiem at the game table.

Chapter Four: Dead, Dread Chronicles gives fresh meat to both Storytellers and players in terms of conceiving new chronicles—unexpected chronicles, even—within the mode of Requiem. Can Vampire support a noir chronicle? Hell yes, it can. What about Romeo and Juliet? What about the end-of-days apocalypse?

This Book Is No Unitasker
If you work it right, this book can earn you a lot of mileage.
In fact, this book isn’t good for just Vampire: The Requiem. No, really.
The social and mental combat play well across any of the games within the Storytelling System.
The banes could be used as an alternate Morality or derangement system for monstrous characters, be they werewolves or changelings or, who knows, heart-eating death-unicorns.
The new covenants (and new looks at old covenants) could make good enemies for, say, Hunter: The Vigil. Heck, one of the new covenants (the Children of the Thorns, p. 92) could fit right into your Changeling: The Lost game.
We’re just trying to give you more bang for your buck. These pages can go far if you use them right. This book multi-tasks quite nicely, we hope.
Sun's coming up.

I know it the same way you know it: I can smell it.

It's a thing. A palpable thing. It hangs in the nose. It's like the whiff of ozone before a lightning strike, or the scent of a big bad wolf hot on your tail. What does it smell like? It doesn't smell like any one thing—it isn't like, the bitter tang of gun oil or the sweat from behind a scared girl's ear (or from between her thighs). It's a smell of finality. Of flowers withering, of gasoline on the highway, of blood curdling on the sidewalk, of sugar cane burning and roadkilled cats and hope and possibility and promise fucked in the ass and left to bake on the desert ground.

See, humans—the mortal herd, those shitheads—they look at the sunrise as the dawn of a brand new day. Pink cheeks! Happy thoughts! Kiss to the wife, a tussle of the kid's hair. Morning coffee and eggs and toast and Sweet Jesus let me deep throat a shotgun.

To us, though? Well.

Sunrise means hot death. Big orange ball—its fat fuckin' face—rises up over the horizon, and for us, that's it. Finito, the end game, goodnight Gracie. It's like, either you sleep (which is death), or you get caught out there (which is double-death).

Sun comes up, it's a thing with teeth. Long bright teeth biting away the long shadows, chomp chomp chomp. Except, we live in these shadows. Hell, some of us are these shadows.

So, as I said, sun's coming up.

But you know what?

Fuck that shit, hombre.

I'm like a kid that don't wanna get up for school. Five more minutes, Mom, you goddamn slag.

Sun's rising. So what? This party's still going. I still have blood to drink. I still have one more song in me—hah, nah, two more songs and at least one more piss break. Not that I piss, but those club boys on MDMA damn sure do, and nothing like a tight bathroom stall to make quick work of one of those bubble-headed boy-toys (and any blood that spills flushes just fine, thanks).

Across the city, some of us are crawling back to our hovels, our mansions, our coffins.

But some of us aren't:

Some of us are still hunting for something. Down in the closed-off subway tunnels. Up in the mightiest penthouses. Here in the warehouse district. There at the docks, under the docks, around the docks. Always hunting, forever hungry.

A lot of us, we don't pale when the sun comes up. We know we're bad folks. We know that if we get caught out there and those white teeth bite off a bit of our long shadows, well, then maybe we deserved it. We deserved because we're stupid and we're selfish and maybe the combination of those two things means we're evil incarnate, I dunno.

If it happens, it happens.

Me, I'm going to give the finger to Sol Invictus, the Ol' Sun, Big-Bright-Happy Face.

You hear that, sun?

We don't give up the night that easy.
The magical fool did not observe the niceties, did not show proper respect to the Prince of Chicago, but Maxwell let it pass. He had bigger fish to fry than contorting the thoughts and feelings of some uppity white boy who'd be dead soon. Even if he lived out a man's, what, six-score and ten now? What was the 20th century average, and had it changed in the 21st? Even if he lived out a lifespan, and Maxwell had his doubts, it would still be dead soon by the reckoning of an immortal.

“And so we’re quit,” the magician or wizard or whatever said to the vampire, and didn’t bother to keep the smugness out. “Warning you about this wasn’t even that difficult, you know. Your rival sends out ripples no matter how subtle he thinks he is.”

“Mmm,” Maxwell replied, his hand stroking the black fur of the puma lying beside his desk. Probably no good, but every little bit helped.

“Now, for the next thing,” the magician began, and Maxwell turned brown, steady eyes on him. No occult power underlay his words, just the strength of authority.

“We’ve discussed the terms. I understand them. You understand them. Surely you don’t need to go over them again?”

“Because you’re a weak, frightened pussy went unsaid.

The living man was spared a reply by a knock on the door. Instead he put his hand on thick manila folder. He had been instructed not to open it and he did not.

“Enter,” Maxwell said, and in walked Norris the spymaster, flanked by two members of the Ordo Dracul. Maxwell knew one, and knew that while she wouldn’t be able to wrest control of his puma from him, or of the boa coiled above the door frame, she could certainly confuse and delay them enough to take them out of the equation. Maxwell didn’t even nod in satisfaction, but he thought, Simplify things when you have the upper hand. Norris was no fool.

“My lord,” Norris said—and like the living man, he was careless with formality, to the point of rudeness—“I have received disturbing news that I hope you can shed light upon.” His smile was a reflexive simper, but not a sincere one.

“Mm?”

Norris glanced at the human, who smirked. With an easy hand gesture, Maxwell indicated that the man could hear whatever Norris had to say. Norris assumed, as Maxwell had expected, that this meant the mortal was food and it didn’t matter what he learned. Dead soon.

“My colleague Bawdry here,” he said, indicating the stranger, “has traveled from Memphis, seeking a rogue member of the covenant.”

“And you are now presenting him to me, of course.”

“Actually, my lord, Bawdry has persuasive evidence that the fugitive is here, in your home. I told him that you would never knowingly act in poor faith against the Ordo Dracul, but he furthermore makes the extravagant claim that you are trying to learn some of the mystical secrets and... capabilities of our order...”

“Oh, we could go back and forth, couldn’t we, Norris?”

The spy runner frowned at the interruption and fiddled with his fingertips. One hand had a handsome manicure; the other, only exposed pads where the nails had been torn out during his living days. He touched one set of fingertips with the other, then switched, as if reassuring himself that nothing had changed. “My Prince?”

“I could feign ignorance, and you could investigate, and gather all who fear or hate me behind the Ordo Dracul and create a stink and a grievance while I played the wronged ruler schemed against and it could all be a big thing. Or I could just confess that, just as you’ve long suspected, I’ve aged to the point where men are no longer food. No, you—and you and you,” he said, nodding at the other Kindred, “are my meat now. This one,” jerking a thumb at the one person in the room who was breathing, “is not. In fact, from what my prisoner—no, not a guest, though she’s been made comfortable—has told me, I probably need to learn more from your order than I had originally thought.”

“So you’re converting?” Norris said, eyes alight.
“No,” said the mortal, in the impatient tones of one who wants his importance acknowledged. “He’s going to kill you. Or really, I am. These are your reports, right?” He waved the folder. “A little piece of your nastiest self. Your truest self. Are you familiar with the phrase ‘creo ignam’?”

“A willworker.” Norris’ lip curled. “And a weak one, since I don’t have a file on him. That’s the best ace you could pull out of your hole, ‘Prince’? Let’s see how it plays against Garret.”

At the name, the Prince’s right-hand man, his Seneschal, sauntered into the room and stood behind Norris. “He has dirt on me, boss,” Garret McLean drawled.

“Garret,” Maxwell began. “I understand. All I ask is that you keep out of it.”

“I know, friend,” Garret said, and with casual strength— almost like a yawn— his arm swung into the head of the woman from Norris’ order. She shrieked, and Norris blurted towards the magician, the snake dropped and the puma struck, the magician shouted living words from a dead tongue as Maxwell upended the desk and charged across his office.

Then something really unexpected happened.

Persephone Moore was out having a casual hunt and bitch session with Aurora Hatch, and she was happy being “powerful, knowing, experienced” for once. She was happy being the ancilla to Aurora’s neonate, to use the antiquated speech of the Kindred, as the two did. They had developed a joke of pronouncing it “annncilla,” very dramatically. They were contemplating crashing a bachelor party when Garret McLean strode into the club and casually shoved aside a woman who was just drunk enough to be extremely forward. Cushioned on a chorus of incredulous noises (because the drunk and horny chick had been gorgeous) he bee-lined for Persephone.

“Keep it cool,” Moore said to Hatch in a low voice— well, actually a normal speaking voice, but with the cover of music only Aurora could hear it. “Stand your ground, he’s not going to hurt us.” She’d seen Aurora twitch and stare and was mentally warming up a lecture about why Aurora should go to Elysium, so that she’d be more used to powerful Kindred, but when McLean reached their table and snarled, raising a fist as if to strike, Aurora snapped and fled towards the bathroom.

“What the hell, Gary?” Persephone stood and glared down at the vampire only she called Gary. “In stock-feet, she’d be two inches taller. With the spike heels, she towered.

“I need your bag,” he said.

“Oh, Gary, I like you but as a friend. The sarcasm was automatic and it was his slap. She blinked, then flushed.

“I am not fucking around, this is a four alarm problem. He needs you, I’ve known him since Solomon was Embraced and I’ve never seen him like this. He needs…”. For a moment, Garret looked harried, almost worried, but after nearly a hundred years of never showing fear, his face just couldn’t form the look any more. “He needs to be around people he can trust while he gets himself together. So you can do that, or I can tell your childe Aurora there that you were the one what broke her daughter’s mind. You’re smart and this is simple.”

“Lead on.”

He took her wrist and, delayed what you’ve been entrusted with?”

...
“I remember you from Persphone’s funeral,” Prince Maxwell said.
“Yeah.” Bruce Miner—‘Bruise’ to his friends— didn’t know where to look and didn’t know what to do with his hands. He was bulky, inarticulate, and his skin looked like spoiling meat.
“And you were involved with that ruckus Solomon raised in Elysium.”
“He killed my dog,” Miner replied, and something turbulent and ominous in his voice made Maxwell look at him sharply.
“You loved that dog a lot, didn’t you?” the Prince asked.
Bruise looked away and nodded. When he looked back, he was surprised to see that Maxwell had slumped and was staring at his immaculate loafers.
“It’s just one loss after another for us,” Maxwell said. “Sacrifice upon sacrifice, and it’s hard to tell which hurt more, the ones we choose or the ones we don’t get to.”
“Yeah. Hey. I’m… I’m sorry about the… this.” Bruce gestured vaguely around him.
Maxwell looked up, as if he’d noticed only for the first time that he was sitting in a dusty storage locker with no air conditioning.
“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “Your hospitality is greatly appreciated and I assure you, I will remember your generosity.”
“What? Man, don’t you, like, have some fancy brownstone?”
“That’s where everyone goes when they want to betray me,” Maxwell said. “Being unobserved is a tremendous luxury, and one I can rarely procure for myself.”
“You just need to learn the hiding mojo, right?” Bruce was confused and his voice was low.
“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?” the Prince suddenly asked, his eyes bright and his voice warm with interest. “Tell me.”
“Aw gee.” Lying, or refusing to answer— these thoughts were unthinkable, in the light of the Prince’s gaze. “Well, I killed this child molester once, but the worst thing I ever did was punch my daughter into a coma.”
“Oh.”
“Yeah.” Bruce’s voice and posture were perfect grief.
“Did she recover?”
“Someone ghouled her out of it.”
“Mon Dieu.”
Bruce shrugged.
“What’s she doing now?”
“I don’t know… I stay away from her, from my wife. Um, ex-wife, I guess. She got… remarried…”
When Bruce started to cry red, the Prince sat by him and put an arm on his shoulder.
“Fuck,” the hideous creature said. “If we could move on entirely, it wouldn’t mean anything.
“So how ‘bout you?” Bruce looked at him sharply.
“Promise not to tell?”
“If we could move on entirely, it wouldn’t mean anything.”
“Like I’d moved on.”
Then he told it, and Bruce inched away from him despite himself, despite knowing it might offend this powerful Prince, despite knowing that it would do nothing to save him if Maxwell decided to destroy him.
They were silent for a long time, and then Maxwell asked, “Where’s Persephone?”
“She went to get you something to drink.”
“C’mon, girl, live a little,” Persephone said, trying hard to keep her impatience and desperation masked because nothing would unmask a smart and successful businesswoman on coming to “a really fun house party” quicker than stalker’s desperation.

G.F. Hannigan was sharp, pretty and educated. They’d met when Persephone was still alive, and G.F. had never drawn the connection between Linda Moore the lawyer and Persphone Moore the… well, G.F. wasn’t exactly sure what Persephone did, other than go to art openings and nightclubs and the opera and charity fundraisers. It was an unexamined assumption in her mind that, somehow, Persephone’s job was to be fabulous. They’d had interesting conversations about art, music, real estate and the place of a successful businesswoman in Chicago society. They’d shopped together, with G.F. getting sensible heels and Persephone picking up platform shoes that made G.F. laugh out loud.

Persephone always had this aura of danger about her, and G.F. wasn’t sure what to do with that. Her instinct was avoidance— caution had made her a winner in the down market. On the other hand, her first name was Gladys and no matter how pretty you are, growing up
Persephone cut the effect of her words, then swore. Persephone looked away to see to be dowdy and stay home… it's really like G.F. if she doesn't decide a buck short.

"I told him you were getting him a New Orleans canal. Now the only thing that was left her dead at the bottom of a New Orleans canal. Now the only remaining member of that pack, Beth, leaned against the seat of her motorcycle and rolled her eyes.

"Why don't the two of you meet me at my place?" she asked.

"If you think that's best." Bruce sounded dubious.

"Okay, that'll be great! I think you'll really like G.F. if she doesn't decide to be dowdy and stay home…" Persephone looked away to see the effect of her words, then swore when she realized G.F. was pointing at her watch and backing rapidly towards the door.

"Yo," Baines said, knocking fists with the amused motherfucker in the parking lot. "Sup?"

"Just TCB, Earth."

"Takin' care a' bidness?"

"No, The Country's Best." He grinned. He'd been born Alphonse Largo, but these days went by 'Large.' He was six feet tall and a solid 270 pounds, but he looked petite next to Earth Baines, whose do-rag, fat gold chains and FUBU wardrobe did nothing to hide the fact that he had blonde hair, blue eyes, and hawkish Scandinavian cheekbones.

The first time they'd met, Largo and his pack of off-beat gentlemen had ripped Baines' cheek to chunks and had only spared the big vampire when they heard his name and connected it to a series of cryptic prophecies.

Baines had only heard the first of these prophecies— "The time of the shape-changer who'd be more than a human being. But as it happened, her tendency to blab had left her dead at the bottom of a New Orleans canal. Now the only remaining member of that pack, Beth, leaned against the seat of her motorcycle and rolled her eyes.

"Tight," Baines said. "Look, I'm in a thing and I was wondering if y'all could stick in a hand. I'm rollin' these days, I can suck some bank in your paw and I know you're always a buck short."

"I'm listening."

"I got this body I need to dispose of and I mean, like, reduce to nothing. Sounds like someone may be looking for it in with all kinds of spooky mystic shit, so just dumping it in the lake isn't gonna suffice, y'know what I'm sayin'?"

"What did you have in mind?" Large's prophecy had tied him to the fate of a man who was 'Neither black nor white, neither living nor dead.'

"I know you all… go places. Like, off the map, am I right?"

"If you think stowing the body somewhere… um, outside… is going to stop anyone with meaningful spiritual resources… hell, it might be easier to find…"

"Well, maybe, but what if you ate it first?"

Then came a moment of incredulous silence.

"What if I…?"

"Crap the body out wherever, spread it around, you're on the road to Philly tomorrow morning, right?"

Earth was starting to get desperate. The Kindred he knew who specialized in getting bodies converted into dog, rat, or mouse feces was a racist, had laughed right in Earth's face. His second plan had been to grind the body into mush and mix it in with concrete in some building's foundation, but the first couple blenders he'd tried had jammed in with concrete in some building's foundation, but the first couple blenders he'd tried had jammed.

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shit-encrusted sewers, he’d come up with this idea, getting his ‘lupine friends’ (who, to be more accurate, were more like ‘murderous shape-shifting acquaintances’) to haul it for him. That would make it Plan D and he was starting to wonder what E might be when Large grabbed him by his lapels and hoisted him onto the hood of the Hyundai. Earth’s head slammed back into the windshield and cracked it.

“Do you have any idea what you’re asking?” he seethed.

“Chill man, yo, chill!” Earth staggered, eyes wide as Large’s partner Becky started to circle to the front of the car, her look grim. Then Earth felt Large’s hands swelling on him, saw the changer’s face getting long and he opted for Plan D, Sub I. His hand stole into his pocket and emerged with a rather crudely fashioned three-finger ring. Its design celebrated the Cubs’ 2008 Division Championship, but that mattered much less than its solid-silver construction. Baines mustered all the strength he could (which was a lot) and slammed it into the side of Large’s head.

“AaahhrrOOOOUG!” Large howled, and Earth would later swear that it set off all the car alarms in the lot. The lycanthrope also reeled back, releasing Earth in order to clutch his head.

Earth could move fast when motivated, and he got the car between himself and the two, then put his hands up.

“Whoa, whoa!” he shouted. “My bad! Chill, get it under control!”

“You son of a bitch,” Beth gritted, circling the car. Earth couldn’t help noticing that she was wiping drool from her chin. He turned towards her and curled his hands into fists.

“Yo, y’all probably kill me but it will cost you, all right? And then the dead wizard be your problem.”

That gave Beth pause. She glanced at Large, who was struggling to keep his form and his temper controlled. “We’ll just tell them the vampires did it.”

“Think they’ll believe you? After the vampires talk at ‘em with the slave-eye turned on?”

She looked from Large to Baines again. “The prophet told me, ‘One day you will decide if Earth survives or is destroyed. Show mercy.’ Get in your car and drive, dead thing. But if you ever tempt us with man flesh again, all the silver in the world won’t save you.”

Baines scrambled behind the wheel, thinking oh shit oh shit oh shit...

Maxwell turned a critical eye on the suit coat. ‘Mmh, it really ought to be let out a bit, but it’s better than the next size up.’

“I don’t need a suit, Bruce mumbled.

“You should go home, though. Clothes make the man.”

Bruce mustered something. Maxwell heard.

“I’ve actually seen a train wreck, and your face really exists on a different sort of aesthetic plane. It’s smaller, more poignant, less grandly tragic. It’s like comparing a stadium rock concert to a jazz club performance… oh, don’t sulk. Where we’re going, people won’t care about your face. With an off-the-rack suit, you can just about make it, as long as your accessories carry more than their weight. How are those shoes?”

“They feel funny,” Bruce said, glancing down at his new Italian loafers.

“That’s called comfort,” the Prince offered as a tart reply, then smiled as Persephone came into the store. “My childe! Just in time. Do you think this palette really compliments Mr. Miner here, or is he more of an ‘autumn?’”

The sight of the suit stopped her cold.

“Bruce… this isn’t exactly his style…?”

“Inasmuch as it didn’t get peeled off a dead hobo’s back, you’re right, but I think it makes a nice change and it’ll help him blend at the Discarded Image.”

“Wait, you can’t take Bruce to the Image!”

“Can’t?” The Prince struck a contemplative pose. “Can’t… ‘can’t’… oh, you mean I ‘cannot?’ I haven’t heard that word applied to me in ages.”

Her mouth worked, but no sound came out.

“Why the Image?” she finally asked, as Maxwell flipped out an Amex Black Card with practiced ease and paid for his purchases.

“Why not the Image? It’s an open Elysium and we’re all Kindred.”

“Shouldn’t you be…?” She moved closer and whispered, “…resting?”

“I’m not tired.” His eyes glittered with manic energy, then suddenly sharpened to the shrewdness he customarily hid. “And if there’s any fallout from this evening, it’ll be bandied about there first. So this is, primus, a scouting expedition. But secundus, if I’m going to be hiding from the public, as Garret suggests, I’ll want to conceal my concealment. A well-timed appearance before the talkers and harpies gives me at least a month before any other absence becomes notable to the masses. Moreover— tertius— accompanying Mr. Miner makes him an object of interest.” He turned to Bruise and said, “Sorry, my man. It’s going to be uncomfortable, but I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I’m not sure…”
“Trust me,” the Prince said, guiding the other two out the door and into the street. “Soon, everyone will wonder what the connection is between you and me, and if you play your cards right it will catapult you to the top of the ladder.”
“I never play cards right,” Bruce replied.
“Learn. That’s what I did.”

The Discarded Image was a hyperbolic combination of style and unfriendliness. The owner had recently remodeled after some unpleasantness, and while the look of chrome and porcelain remained, the shiny-shiny metal was now subtly distorted with curves and swirls and bumps. Its touches of gleaming white and glossy black accented the warped reflections. Reminiscent of a funhouse mirror, if “fun” was replaced with “clinically induced nausea.” Plus it was full of dead people.

The first two corpses the unlikely companions spied upon entry were girls who’d died as teens. Their clothes were expensive, too mature for them, what Persephone would have described as “Business Barbie” if she’d been relaxed enough to be snide and judgmental. Each had a Campari with soda sitting untouched in front of her. One had a twist of lemon, and the other had a twist of lime. Lime had her back to the door, so she just kept on talking as the Prince walked in.

“...first thing he grabbed was a jar of grape jam—a big one, a three-pound bulk buy special—and he hit her across the back of the head. Well, you know Evangeline’s hair, it’s a big frizzy mess, and jelly with broken glass didn’t...”


The pair quieted and turned. The Prince gave no sign of recognizing them and instead went to the bar. “Double Johnny blue for me please, Persephone... Skyy and cran still? Mr. Miner?”

Bruce had been warned not to drink whatever he was given and struggled to think of something high class. “Um... whatcha got for wine?”

The barman blinked slowly. It looked mechanical. “Would sir prefer red or white?”

“How ‘bout a Cabernet? Sauvignon-whatever?”

“We have a nice 2002 ZD reserve. It’s Californian, but...”

Bruce shrugged. “I guess it’ll have to do.”

“There is an unspoken, indeed, unconsidered subtext to drink choice here,” Maxwell said to him as the dead thing went to get their beverages. “Your drink is emblematic of your identity.”

“An’ it all just gets thrown away when we leave?”

Maxwell grinned. “I’d never considered that aspect of the metaphor.”

“You’ve chosen the drink of a bold traditionalist,” Persephone said. “Red wine here is unsubtle... it says ‘I have no time to contemplate my message and whatcha’ gonna do about it?’ Very in-your-face.”

“I just didn’t want to look like a fag or a hayseed,” Bruce said, resigned.

Maxwell, in the meantime was inclining his head to eavesdrop. The Image had been laid out to inhibit such nosiness, by and large. While the myriad hard surfaces did a fine job reflecting sound waves, they got intentionally crossed and blended and the gentle clink of ice in glass seemed suddenly able to drown out whispers and low voices. Unless, of course, you knew exactly which stool at the bar was positioned before a clear spot, hovering above the counter. A minor miracle of acoustics, one who knew about it could casually lean in and hear clearly, if his ears were sharp. Maxwell’s ears were very sharp and, of course, he knew all about that special spot.

A barely perceptible shift of posture and he was spying on arch-gossip Tobias Rieff. Had he been human, the pulse of blood in his own ear canal would have drowned out the words, but for Maxwell? Not a problem.

“...spy is still closeted at the Prince’s brownstone, I don’t know what Maxwell’s doing here. It’s possible that Norris left incognito, but why? Where’s the stranger he had with him, and his Dragon muscle?”

“I couldn’t say,” drawled Tobias’ companion, a well-coifed woman in the garb of an unusually fashionable librarian. She put the stem of her spectacles between her teeth, a sexy gesture wasted in the Discarded Image. “Norris has been on thin ice since that horrid business with Justine. Perhaps the balance between he and the Prince finally shifted?”

“You mean ‘him and the Prince,’ dear.” She would have blushed if she could, but Rieff continued. “You can’t seriously mean to suggest something... permanent?”

Rieff was too good to look over at Maxwell, but the woman with him had far less composure. But by the time she looked, Maxwell was clearly turned away from them both.

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“Lohhhki,” Persephone purred as a leathered young body slouched through the doors. Loki pulled up as the Prince gave him a mild smile.

“Oh. Hey.” He blinked, then inclined his head. “My lord.”

“Let us dispense with the formalities,” the Prince replied. “Everyone else here has.” There was an edge—a slender, razor-thin edge— of bitterness underneath his genial tone, and those who caught it felt