

Billy Came – a short vampire story

Part One – The Making of a Vampire

One: He came like the thief in the night

It was strange that he should choose this night of all to call. 'The Longest Day'. A day that would prove to be my eternal night.

Thinking back, only a few hours but even yet it seems a lifetime hence, I think he chose last night on a purpose. According to folklore, June 21st should have afforded Billy the least time in the year to carry out his damned courtship and wooing of my immortal soul. Yes, immortal – it is now, or at least I am of the impression that that's how these things work.

He abides by no law, Billy. Natural or ethereal, written or whispered in the midst of dark nights through the ages that have borne legend.

Do not have me wrong, in all the time I have awaited his coming (oh, yes, I know now that I have been aware of his [and their] very real existence, beyond the pale of sanity and reasoning, for all of my life), he has not yet spoken a solitary word. Not in the common sense. And yet through his eyes and his teeth and his soul and his mind (for the confusion of cognisance that that is) he has conveyed more communiqué than any written or audible language could ever hope to express.

And yet I have learned more from Billy in such a short space of time than in all of my days' sum total of pointless systematic education and learning on this corporeal marble upon which roll, mere mortals living out an oh, so futile being.

And so it was he found me, laid flat on my back atop the bed linen, the night muggy and trembling with anticipation, as was I. Restless in the bed across the room in the attic, my brother churned, restless. I turned to see what on Earth the cause of his consternation was. I never saw.

Instead, over me stooped Billy. And in completely different guise to how he had appeared unto me in prior encounters. Were those in dreams or in waking hours? I knew not, only that I had seen him before countless times; he had made sure I had known of his presence all of those times, yet without uttering a word in my direction. But never like this.

From memory, in the encounters that had gone prior to this midnight meet he had come unto me as a chunky Asian fellow, all dark olive-skinned (in fact, it could have been a Mediterranean countenance that had adorned those now gruesome features). Now I know why.

Though his face was made up like some deranged clown with a fierce fascination for

symmetry, his bulging forehead was crowned with a red and white diagonal, like an orienteering flag, which he was possessed of from birth. Do not ask me how I know, yet; we will come to that passage when I build up the nerve.

His eyes were bright blue-green opaque puddles of hatred, rimmed deep purple, that did little to disguise the madness beyond and shone as coloured contact lenses do on darker pupils beneath. Those silent, stormy eyes conveyed one message: fight this and die.

And yet, I was not scared. Wracked with nerves of the unknowing, yes. But my trust in him was implicit.

In previous encounters I had been repulsed by this fellow, yet yearned to be in his company. I had even considered that he had uncovered within me some latent homosexuality, which I found both repugnant and overwhelmingly drawn to, all wrapped up in the self-same emotion. And so it was now.

I knew now the real purpose of his attention and intentions. He yearned to take me with him into the other side. If he could not have me in his world, I had no doubt that he would not leave me here for others in this. Yes, it felt like love, but not in the way mere mortals feel their heartstrings tugged. Much, much deeper than that.

And so it passed, as meek as a lamb and without resistance, I offered my virgin self to him. Needless to say, he was in need of no second invitation...

Two: a Rite of Passage

I closed my eyes, but not before I saw the crinkled lines of Billy's eyelids closed over his own. In his hands he held my left wrist and raised it to meet his descending lips. At first, I thought he had merely kissed me. But then the whirlwind rode my very veins.

Shooting through my bloodstream like the pre-coital fuzz of aggravated, anticipative nerve-endings my forearm tingled. Whatever the vampiric equivalent of orgasm is, I felt Billy have it as his knees buckled. A sweet smile kissed the corners of his closed eyes...and he drank.

A pleasant numbness froze my elbow and shoulders, before spreading across my whole, damp frame. If it was his choice to take my soul there and then and leave my carcass a withered husk, then so be it. I neither had the power nor the will to stop him.

And then he broke free. In the same way that I never felt the puncture wound of his fangs into my limp wrist, neither did I feel their exit.

My head was all full of Anne Rice. I was still alive, which meant Billy did not mean to kill me. So now, I guessed it was my turn. I should drink from him, as Louis had done from

his maker, Lestat. But no. One look told me "No!" and I closed my gaping mouth. The tip of my tongue ran over my canines; the only difference therein was a tiny bristle that protruded from otherwise flattened points, as they had always been. I was confused.

We left my brother behind, still restless (he would have more to worry about later than he could ever imagine as he lay there in disturbed half-sleep) and descending the attic ladder. Billy held his powerful arm across my chest as my step-mother, strangely translucent and glowing white as mortals would paint a ghost in their fairy stories, carried a washing basket into the bath room at the top of the stairs. The large bare bricks of the house, of ancient construction, shone through the latter-day plaster and paint and wallpaper that hid their raw beauty. My world was still there but lost against an altogether more Victorian backdrop.

And so it was as we stepped out onto the street. What greeted us stunned me.

The time was most definitely midnight in the room we had just left, but the world into which we stepped, me for the first time into what would now be mine forever, was either dusk or dawn, I could not decipher which. And the streets were thronged with all manner of being. Mostly human to behold, but you would never have guessed without the benefit of the knowledge with which Billy had recently endowed me.

Before us, a vermin-faced urchin, reminding me of both Peter Faulk and Moe Szyslak in the same instant, turned in our direction. He smiled. Directly at me. Rather than be repulsed - which was the reaction I even anticipated myself - I smiled back a huge, genuinely warm grin. He flicked a one-fingered salute off his temple as if to say "Welcome, brother!" And that's exactly what I felt. Welcomed into this world. This was my old, glossed-over world, only now I could see the bare brick of it all, as if my new eyesight stripped away all of the fancy trimmings, showing people and places as they truly were.

I looked up at Billy, eyes full of questions: Was this all there was to it? Was I now part of this scruffy, beautiful world?

His head dipped toward my wrist and I knew that it was not. Not yet.

What Billy had given to me in return for my blood, blood for which he had waited for such a long time, year after year as I remembered now the encounters in our past, was a Rite of Passage. That I could walk these streets with fear of neither reprisal nor attack was his gift. I had not let him down when his time had come to take what he had subconsciously promised he would, but my real test, the qualificant into this existence, lay ahead.

I took one last look and then the street disappeared - I know not to where - but I next came to in an altogether more eerie place, far removed from whence last I held consciousness. Columns that looked to be made of charcoal we passed as the setting sun - yes, I now guessed that we had walked in twilight and not the sunrise - cast their long shadows into the darkness ahead. Was that where we were headed? Of course it was.

My test – and destiny – lay ahead. Do or die. Even then, I knew not which I had the stomach for. I was very soon to find out.

Three: a Test of Nerve

Ahead, a kaleidoscope of light danced on the edge of the darkness. Had I not had Billy's gift, I would have sworn the swarm of colour swam way off in the distance, but we were close. The smell of ancient, musty air pervaded every orifice, every pore and stuck to the body like some virulent, bacterial secondary skin. I had no sensation of the cold, yet knew that it was. Within minutes we, Billy, I and more of his (our) kind, were in a cavern beyond the charcoal columns and darkness. The bleached, uneven walls, which appeared like ice, but were in fact formed of some rugged white crystal formed over millennia, glowed with the greens and pinks of the torches that the anticipant crowd held aloft as they chanted and danced.

These forms were not human but from some distant point back along the evolutionary chain thousands of years hence, long before the upright being came into existence, somehow outliving the ice ages that these fellows must surely have endured. Crouched, half-ape, half-boy, they hopped and skipped in unison, misshapen skulls bowing and rising, bowing and rising. In a carved out trough in the 'ice' around which they circled lay a writhing body, turned on its side with a fawn-coloured Hessian sack covering its head, tied coarsely beneath the chin.

This was what we had come here for.

Beneath that sack I instinctively knew struggled my sister. I could tell her outline anywhere, even the very way she writhed in defiance in this alien place was as good as her signature. For a second, I was horrified. But not for what was about to happen – I had little doubt about the outcome, though still didn't know what Draconian method these ancients would apply to their end – but my fear was that my sister should me so in this state. So sheepishly weak, yet hungering for a life that would wring more from existence than I could ever hope to achieve as a mortal. Then it dawned upon me that she could not see me and probably never would again.

Billy walked me to the edge of the trough, ensuring that I understood. I didn't even need to visually acknowledge this undertaking – he knew. Knew that I knew that before us lay my sister, seconds away from certain death. If I moved to stop this sacrifice, I would surely join her beyond the grave. But I neither felt moved to nor that I should. That she should give her life unwillingly that I could move up the evolutionary chain myself seemed an acceptable pay-off in my clouded mind.

The test had begun.

The long, thin canes of bamboo that the Neanderthals had shunted in their chanting were inserted, one by one, into the rope that secured the bag around my sister's head. Each was twisted, once inside the noose, to eventually make an upside down tee-pee frame, the tips below the rope fashioned an almost African collar around my sisters nape, neck and décolletage. In silence, as if by some inaudible command, the cave dwellers twisted the canes as one until the collar and the rope became tighter. The tee-pee frame drew in with each turn of their hairy, sinewy forearms, making a flute from the canes.

The writhing stopped, at last; the head beneath the sack was crushed beyond recognition, all but the nose protruding between two canes identifying the object within as something that was once human and that had possessed such brilliant wisdom. The sticks twisted yet even more tightly together and finally popped that head from the neck that had once held it secure between her delicate shoulders. Now I knew why they had placed a bag over her head and not just inserted the canes into a bare noose. The dancing stopped, the whole cave was suddenly hanging upon my reaction.

Should I have succumbed to madness then, like any normal human being would have done in the circumstance, my fate would have been sealed. But what happened surprised even me. I nodded with a satisfied grunt and at once the dancing and chanting and circling of the trough recommenced. The canes were slipped out of the noose and the bag removed.

To my utter surprise, my sister awoke, drowsy, rubbing at her throat, but other than that, in tact. What sorcery had been used I know not, but I was only yards away from that terrible passage of events designed to test my mettle. I had been convinced that my sister had been beheaded in some ancient ritual designed by a god who had come, conquered and thankfully disappeared from all existence a long time ago. I have to admit, a tremor of relief rumbled through my heart that she had survived. She was trying to tell anyone that would listen, not that they would understand, that she had nearly choked. Shock prevented her from realising that all of those around her were of a different breed. And still she ranted and they still chanted.

What became of her, I think that part of the story is yet to unfold. I know that she is not dead. Do not ask how. I just know. But Billy was already leading me away from the furor - I was glad of that - and those others who had walked with us through the charcoal columns from the streets to this cave that time had not touched were finding my sister safe haven, of that I am certain. Yet know not why.

Then, it was just Billy and I, walking further into the crystal chamber. The floor looked like boa-feathers, but the ridges were hard, like upturned clam-shells making a tidal carpet of glistening calcium, refracting all the colours of the spectrum and thousands in-between. The cave abruptly came to an end, like the inside of a nose cone in a World War II fighter jet. Billy thrust me down into its tiny corner.

For the first time since being given the Rite of Passage, I felt physical pain. The crystalline ridges, as sharp as the edges of the clam shells they purported to be, cut into my thighs and

naked calves. From a sheath on his thigh, Billy raised a small Mohawk axe, more like a Gil Hibben throwing axe, but wrought from some ancient iron, its blade sharpened a thousand times over countless centuries, its keen edge glinting, glistening of the pearlescence surroundings. Had my sliver of passion for my sister's survival betrayed me?

For the first time that night I resisted Billy's advances. The grimace stretched his clown-mouth across the entirety of his white-painted face, making The Joker's make up look almost understated; his tombstone teeth, webbed and dripping with blood and drool, clenched together forcing that insane grin wider still.

As the axe came crashing down towards my skull, cutting the stagnant air with a whistle, I raised my arm instinctively to shield the blow and then...

Four: a Taste of Things to Come

...the throwing axe cut into my forearm, but only enough to puncture the skin and vein that traversed its length and no more. What supernatural instinct did Billy possess to execute such strength and precision I was yet to comprehend. But that ignorance was soon to be satiated.

As he had done when giving me the [Rite of Passage](#), Billy closed his eyes, sank to his knees beside me and placed his mouth around the trickling wound. If I thought that previous exchange had been powerful then this next encounter not only stole what little remained of my mortal soul, but my consciousness, too. I saw Billy quiver, felt a million memories of his gush through my veins.

Horrors that drove me to the edge of madness were counteracted by visions of such beauty that they brought me back from the precipice, sent my soul soaring, out of my body, beyond the ceiling of the clouds. The world glittered below in its nakedness, with all of the synthetic shenanigans stripped clean.

Without warning my mind reached capacity, it physically could not handle any more troughs and peaks that plunged madness deeper than the ocean's unexplored canyons and found ecstasy on the very edge of the ionosphere.

Before my consciousness left me, I saw Billy fighting with himself - but the moment he withdrew his fangs, I started to fade. In slipping into oblivion, I was comforted by the sobbing and sighing of my sister as she sung her soft soliloquy. Whatever madness she had encountered, she had survived. I believed her part in this drama to be over and she would be delivered home to her children safe and sound, before they awoke, never knowing the part their mommy had played in their uncle's demise. Mayhap, neither would she, if there was a God after all.

I regained consciousness on the twilight of the evening after, June 22nd. At first, I thought

it all to be a very bad dream, but the aching in my arm and the single feeler-bristles protruding from each canine told me differently. Behind me there was a muffled commotion. I turned to see the doings and once again Billy was there. But this time, in the half-light when day lays the path for glorious night to overshadow man's misdemeanours against nature, I could see past Billy to the shufflings, beyond.

Two of his cohorts propped up my brother, hands beneath his armpits as he simply stood there, unconscious and motionless, aside from the convulsing. Was it some memory drug or had Billy tried too to bring my brother with us into my new family. Either way, it seemed that, for once, my might was stronger than that of my eldest sibling. He did not look well and his fate would be whatever Billy decided it would be.

Billy bade me lie back and accept this natural course of events. It was my soul Billy had courted; I, for whatever reason, was the important link in the chain. It was time to complete the third and final ingratiating into the Brotherhood of the Night. Without a word, Billy rolled back the sleeve to expose the wound from the previous evening that was already well on the way to preternatural recovery. He sighed.

Unsheathing the throwing axe, he flung back that powerful arm, his great coat flapping backwards like some leather stage curtain draping closed after the final act and the blade came down once again. To the naked eye, the new wound was in the self-same place as its predecessor from in the crystal chamber the previous evening. No such pleasure, this time; he gave and he took - eternal life for my mortal soul, the oldest bargain in the world. There was no going back, now.

Five: a Time for Goodbyes

It was almost as if Billy did not want to give me the time to reason - it was do or die. Refuse the third infusion, I would have felt the real power of that throwing axe, as I am sure many have done in the past. Accept the gift and live a life eternal, bound by night and the love of the vampire.

To put the record straight, I would have done his bidding, had he given me the option. In fact, if he had not visited upon me this evening to complete the task, my transformation, I would have gone out onto the streets in search of the powerful buffoon, who still made my flesh crawl, but the yearning for what he could give to me - the horrific glimpses and tastes he had already imparted - became the overriding factor of my waking conscious thoughts, as few as they were.

We were alone in the room, now. I had neither seen nor heard his followers lead my brother away. The only logical route was past the bed in which I lay, over which Billy stooped, and down the attic stairwell. A breeze from the open skylight provided the answer, as if bade to do so: they had gone over the rooftops to do whatever it was they had been instructed by my

fearful master. *Que sera, sera.*

I felt my mortal self die. There was no glory, no pomp. It was a matter of fact occurrence. I was alive. And then dead. No wracking pain, no uplifting light to head towards. It was as if my life had been controlled by a dimmer switch and it had been turned to off; from full power to extinct in a matter of moments.

I arose to look out of the window. The night had turned Indian ink black already. Perhaps the ceremony had lasted longer than I recalled. Although Billy was ushering me to take flight through the window, the call of others of my kind had me on the move already. His mind spoke to mine: "Not so fast."

I had things to learn. There were creatures waiting to teach me about my new life. And one in particular who was awaiting my arrival above all others. For the first time I had the sense that not only had I been doing Billy's bidding, but he was the ambassador for yet a greater master. He picked up his axe; for a fleeting second, I thought to even the score. Had I guessed some truth and offended him?

But no. Upon the tip of his axe a sliver of my flesh glistened in the moonlight. That second cut, although deeper than the first, had not been in exactly the same place. A thin shaving of my flesh slipped into his gaping jaw. He swallowed, gulped and then sucked his lips repeatedly in the clichéd "fava beans and a nice chianti" the-the-the-the-the-the-the salvo.

I should have felt revolt, but was instead filled with the pride of a victor. With stunning athleticism for one of such a huge frame, he joined me on the sill of the rooftop window, smelling the air. It was clean and rife with expectancy and anticipation. Something in his mannerisms told me this was his farewell, to me at least. All of those years of intangible connection for the sake of an acquaintance that lasted little more than twenty-four hours.

But now was not the time to be doting on a lifetime that 'could have been', lived out in Regretsville. The eternal night that stretched ahead promised so, so much. Billy would take me to where I would become a pupil, for a while. And something else. Something he had managed to disguise during my transformation and our sensory exchange.

Or perhaps he had been offered some special power to lock the true purpose of his courtship of my soul away from me for the one whose bidding he really carried out. I would not have to wait long to find out. Without so much as a bye-your-leave, we leapt into the night and into the hurricane that would be my new, eternal life.

Six: the Human Ostrich Syndrome

And so, my first venture into the night as a fully-fledged fledgling [vampire](#) had begun. With Billy at my back, scooting the rooftops seemed like child's play. No leap too high, no avenue too wide. The spring in my heels delivered no thrust a mortal was ever

bound to realise.

The only thing missing was a racing heart. Mine was dead.

Yet this did not discourage me in the slightest. A trail of lovers had stomped upon my heart before Billy had metamorphosed from a creature that haunted my nightmares into this archaic alchemist who had given me new life. The result: a reincarnated being that transcended those historic, hurtful, corporeal emotions now inhabited the body that those before had sought to scorn. Revenge was never a motive for accepting Billy's gift so willingly. But neither was it now ruled out as a universe of possibilities opened up beyond the inkiness of the very night sky itself.

1. Felt. Invincible.

Before I could get too carried away with this new-found lightheartedness, Billy raced on ahead of me, as if to divert me away from the path that I had chosen. I could smell the ozone exploding off the crashing waves many, many miles from here. If Billy had not stopped me in my tracks right there, I should have carried on until I felt the broken pebbles on the balls of my feet and the soft sand compress between my toes and would have simply stood, gazing in awe at the jet-black sea, guardian of so many secrets, crashing around my fancy-free feet, the gentle hush of its breakers-on-pebbles soothing my storming mind.

There was plenty of time for that. Billy had delivered unto me this life, as I had bade him, as his master in turn had instructed him likewise. It was time to meet that master. I could only assume it was some fearful wretch that, throughout history, had proceeded to build up a colony of vampires. Though not so many as to both rouse and confirm the suspicions of mortal man, but enough to ensure the longevity of the breed.

This feared breed. Depicted in legend immemorial. Shape shifters, bloodsuckers, the [night stalker](#), the creature that scoffs at the grave, yet seeks solace within its very earth, day after day after torturous day. Garlic-haters, crucifixionalists, virgin-seeking soul-takers. Disheartened Catholics, selling their soul in frustration at The Church in whose teachings they were raised, taunting its priests by their very existence, thus disproving the theories upon which The Vatican City itself has built its very foundations upon centuries of crushing those who stood in its way.

Lore has so many interpretations of and names for the vampire, wampir, vampyr – it even hung a garland around Vlad's once-spliced neck and christened him Drakool. Yet people prefer to not see that we exist (I can say 'we' now that I am in the fold, officially). Which is fine. Have it your way. But never say that you have not been warned.

Remember, just beyond that shadow, you know what you thought you saw *is* real. But your brain, fearing that it could not accept it so, without condensing to a mush of madness, blocks that which your instinct screams at you to be true. Not hiding, merely invisible. Unless, as I say, you know where to look.

Seven: Time to Meet My Maker

Last night, as I fulfilled my dream, gravity could take no effect. Yet I saw its drag upon the world for those who knew not how to command it, rather, let it command them. And even then, I was on the threshold of meeting someone who would open up this world to me yet even more. I had seen but a glimpse through these eyes that still held dear their mortal concepts and limitations, but were capable of seeing so much more if only they knew which way to look.

And so it came to pass, Billy and I descended to terra firma. Again, no heroics, no scattering of petrified mortals to greet our landing. We dropped beside a quayside factory in almost silence, but for the fluttering of our clothes arguing against gravity. We proceeded in yet more silence to the foot of an ancient bridge that spanned a small waterway.

At its crest, a small gang of creatures adorned in black were held in court by a slip of a thing, sat, legs crossed and showing to the thigh, on the decrepit wall of said old bridge. As we got closer, it was apparent that this fragile figure was little more than a young adult, not yet blossomed into full womanhood; accepting that her state was as ours, she was never likely to. But a creature of eye-searing beauty and lusting desire, nonetheless.

In the pale arc-sodium light cast by the street lamps, all sense of true colour was obliterated. It was only when we drew closer that I suspected this beautiful woman, so young yet exuding experience that orbited her like some mystical, tangible aura, was of Asian origin. We approached and the court that she held parted, backed away and bowed down on one knee. Billy did the same as he arrived within their midst. It was odd seeing this powerful creature prostrate, but somehow fitting and conveyed such loyalty that it was fearful to behold.

Confused, I wondered if I should do the same but this girl-on-the-wall's hazel eyes bore a path into my very soul, engaging my gaze, not meaning to let go. In the instant the connection was made, memories of my childhood, reminiscence that I myself could not possibly have conjured as I was the object of those visions, flooded my brain. My blonde hair appeared, cut in a wedge and bouncing after the football. I stopped before these eyes, this camera, abandoning the chase and whispered unexpected words of kindness as the playground carried on its childish mayhem beyond my very own, very young face.

This replay had me frozen stiff in awe, in fear and in supplication. The message I conveyed back then had become garbled now, worn with time. But it was the intent, so sincere, loving even, and so obviously not forgotten by the host that held the import, here. Through her eyes I was staring into my own, bright blue and open to everything, a time when I knew not what innocence was to behold, yet possessed it in abundance.

It was Perveen. In recognition, the transmission broke instantly and off the crumbling wall she skipped, taking my hand. It was as if she had been sat there for decades, but that could not be so. She had grown, and how, since that memory was made. But she had been brought into this other world a lot sooner than I.

She was the master? I could not conceive it. But aghast grumbling from the down-turned heads surrounding us confirmed that it was so.

She smiled with her lips, beamed with her eyes. Looking after me was her duty. I somehow knew that. But it was a task she would relish, had awaited all these years to take me under her wings as I had so obviously soothed her all of those years ago in the playground. Her rough palm held my cheek and pulled my face to look down into hers in a replay of the way our eyes had met when we were but children. For one solitary instant, I thought I would drown in the love I saw staring back up at me. I broke the gaze, gasping. Her look was all tenderness and understanding, but demanding that I look again, all the same. I was powerless to do otherwise.

We strolled down the opposite side of the small hump-backed bridge from whence Billy and I had approached, leaving the others behind as they began to stand now that their Lady had dismissed the court. She was all mine. Or, rather, I was all hers. Well, the little I thought I had left to give to her, anyway, she could have willingly. But Perveen was about to show me how much more there was to this [undead](#) life to give and in exactly what manner it should be imparted. And received. And in ways only a madman would ever conceive.

Eight: Alone with my Vampire Queen

The murmurings of Perveen's court faded into silence as we walked, still hand in hand and swinging like adolescent boy- and girlfriend, alongside the towpath of the canal. Nary a stray dog howled nor Tom cat cried; the slow, stagnant stirring of the sedentary waterway was the solitary sound in the impossibly still night. It was as if all of nature was cowering at Perveen's approach.

The atmospheric tension was tangible; my mind, already opened wide to possibilities incalculable since my [making](#), was exploding with questions.

However, it seemed that this new intellect with which I'd been bestowed answered each question as soon as the subject was broached. Was this knowledge inherent in my new being or was Perveen somehow pre-empting this logical FAQ session and implanting the answers as soon as my inquisitive mind raised the query?

I looked down at her, fearful of another glimpse of that gagging love that I had felt in her eyes moments earlier choking me once more, but she was simply staring at the pebbled path before each imminent footstep, as if examining her shoes with every pace.

She sensed my attention and turned to greet it, the love-rays that had beamed from her eyes

with such overwhelming iridescence were reigned in. For now.

"Why?" I asked. Her smile would have melted the Polar ice cap, had we been in its territory.

"Come with me," she began, quickening her pace, never letting my hand go, indeed, gripping all the more tightly; I was duty bound to follow. Although, wild horses would not have stopped me tracing her steps at any rate as she continued, "to a place where we can be alone." She nodded to the next bridge, our next destination distant in the darkness.

The acceleration came without warning and with an impossible speed, as if our feet did not even scrape the ground, the cool night air chafing our faces as the landscape blurred past in strafing streaks and strips of light.

We arrived at the foot of the bridge in the popping of a corn, strangely, the sound of which our journey was not unlike as we came to an abrupt halt, the rest of the world seemingly carrying on a yard or two before it too was able to apply the brakes.

Her grip tightened yet further and the assurance that I was not going to topple into the water came to me through the very palm of her hands. I phewed. She howled, bent almost double, clutching her stomach with her free forearm and for all the world enjoying every lingering moment of my uncertain equilibrium, then slowly raised that hand as if in apology. I returned the smile, although not quite sure whether I fancied being so fully at her mercy.

Of a sudden, she stood upright, simultaneously serious. As if wiping an invisible window, Perveen waved her hand. What happened next was magical.

Nine: An Introduction of Fire and Ice

The very water that was flowing idly beneath the bridge began to crackle and freeze upon Perveen's hand motion; almost at her behest, a plateau of ice began streaking across its surface in tortuous lightning patterns and with similar quicksilver speed. The grasses and trees and brickwork grew frost that was forming before my awe-struck eyes; like the sped-up VT footage of ivy clambering upwards on an invisible frame, columns of crackling, twisting ice reached upwards as if seeking some supernatural support.

In the very air about us, sparkling crystals began to fall to the ground, the moisture literally turning to snow as the blackness of night turned in an instant into a landscape of the fresh whiteness that only virgin snow can portray.

Our feet were back on the ground and our footfall crunched the frost beneath our steps as we ascended to the apex of the bridge. Without will of my own, I swept Perveen up with my hands into a similar position on the wall as when I had first set eyes on her only minutes ago, but which already felt like a lifetime hence.

Drawing me in, wrapping her knees around my waist, she lured me in for our first kiss, the kiss of the vampire. Every fibre of my being stood to attention. She had found what now

passed as a heart and kick-started it after years of impartiality – from idleness to idolatry at the flick of a switch. Her razor-sharp nails dug into the back of my hair and her thighs squeezed me in tighter still, the heels of her shoes digging deep into my hamstrings.

Her frantic fangs drew blood from my tongue, which sent her into convulsive raptures, even more exaggerated than when Billy had first tasted my life force a little more than a day previous. My sensory input was again at melting point as the horrors and the beauty of her experiences as a vampire flooded my marvelling mind.

She broke the spell, but still clutched me tight. Our lips broke; I was drained to the point of weakness. No doubt I had passed a version of my life back to her at the same time as she had exchanged hers with me, although I had no cognitive recollection of returning that favour.

The look on her face was 'hunger'. An appetite insatiable in my fledgling state. The surrounding air was literally snowing now, all moisture being sapped from the trees and waterside plants and grasses as they grew evermore brittle and limp to satisfy and support this encounter.

"You are not yet strong enough to know why," she said, a tinge of disappointment underpinning the tone, but moreover accepting that it was so. "But you will be. That is our task at hand, primarily."

This was hard for me. I thirsted to know everything about the undead lifestyle and my potential queen, but also knew that attempting to take in any more until I had the capacity to do so would send me to a brink of madness too far away to ever be brought back from. But more than that, I wanted Perveen, almost as much as her desire was to know me completely.

"Rest a while," she coaxed, holding my head to her shoulder, stroking the hair she had gripped furiously just now. "We are outside of time itself, no one can find us here, as long as we are able to support it."

That made a strange type of sense. With my cheek on her shoulder, I dozed, still standing, her legs, grip laxed somewhat, ensuring I remained upright. I dreamt of home, of new lands, of time itself but, most of all, of my new queen.

Was I to join her on that throne? I sensed that this is what she wanted more than anything, but also that I would have to prove my worthiness if I was ever to be her king. My trial was about to begin.

End of Part One

Part Two – SubTerranea: Vampire Central

Ten – Billy came calling

By the time I awoke fully from my transfer-induced doze on the winter bridge in Perveen's arms, I found myself in what can only be described as some grey-stoned, Medieval-looking castle. Not only had she brought us somewhere out of sight, but my initial sensation was that we were also outside time itself. Where my queen was now, I had no idea.

It was not only the look of this bedroom, which I viewed from inside a gigantic four-poster bed, with heavy Jacquard quilt covers and curtains of the same filigree ivory base trimmed with scarlet red borders and thick golden rope, but the atmosphere, too, felt...umm, tilted, as if its fulcrum had been shifted and everything was unsuccessfully attempting to regain composure and a sense of equilibrium. For the first time in this vampire life, I was starting to feel unsteady, very much the state I sensed the world in which I'd awoken to be.

Shadows danced and jumped against walls from banks of candles. Hundreds of them, of many heights and thicknesses and all of the same sickly yellow, bone-coloured ivory hue, portended the smell of fresh-cut roses subtly on their flickering flames to impart an air of the outside. It was pleasant enough, but did little to dispel the sense of claustrophobia I had begun to feel both here and similarly at the mercy of Perveen earlier, as I was in this fledgling vampire state.

I was still weak from the kiss of the vampire but had regained enough strength to swiftly stave off the bout of giddiness threatening to topple me as I slid to my feet from the exceptionally high four-poster. It was not cold (or at least, the only chill I felt could have been attributed to some phobia or another), but instinct led me to the nearest stand of candles to light the fire that stood prepared directly in front of the grandiose bed. I guess there was still a part of the human in me that refused to let go of the creature comforts of an earthly home.

I crouched, simultaneously recalling the stealth and agility in my limbs that my own transformation into this vampire state had endowed me with. Before the flame of the candle got within a foot of the kindling, I imagined the fire roaring – to my amazement, the first tongues of fire started licking the lower logs without so much as a touch of the alighted wick in my hand, now melting wax down onto my thumb. I recoiled, almost toppling backwards into the foot of the bed, but stabilised in time and found its edge, watching the fire spring to life in the hearth, a gaping hole of ancient stone that would have easily swallowed a grown man.

With mesmeric attention fixed on the burgeoning bonfire, I failed to hear the heavy bedroom door open. A breeze from the corridor outside stirred the fanfare of flames, casting shadow hither and thither, misty shapes playing out battle scenes around the chimney breast and

walls, disappearing into the deepening darkness of the furthest corner of the room, where I could make out what looked like yet another door in the murk. The door closed behind me, the shadows stopped dancing and plunged that opposite corner once more into blackness – I couldn't say whether I'd made out a door jamb over there or not, but my attention was now diverted to the party that had entered the room. It was Billy and his, by now, familiar, trusted cohorts.

in his fashion, Billy spoke no words, but it was clear I was to go with them as his two wingmen parted for me to lead on between them. The corridor ahead, alighted with infrequent torches along its length, stretched out before us to a tiny head of light, some way off in the distance.

I fancied I heard the clamour of a busying crowd coming from the pin-prick of light's direction. It sang of industry, much like the clatter of the school kitchen heard from a nearby classroom as staff prepare for lunchtime. But surely that was not it.

I turned to seek some reassurance from Billy, but he had gone, only his trustees stood at either shoulder behind me in the corridor, which stretched out just as far the other way, if not further. They nodded in unison in the original direction, towards the ghostly sound of a workhouse kitchen that undulated on the breezes that wafted past us in the semi-darkness, feeling disappointed that they did not bring with them the odour of goulash or mint custard.

A prod in my back broke the day dream. I don't know what I'd done to upset these two fellows, but their hostility was almost palpable; I must admit, neither did I much care for them.

Eleven – The Bridal Party

Perveen sat, restless in anticipation, in her bed chamber opposing the ancient mirror, fissures streaking in charcoal-grey lightning veins behind glass that had seen neither a duster nor dishcloth in a century or more. At each of her shoulders stood a bridesmaid, the twins Amelia and Marie, stroking hairbrushes through either side of the vampire queen's sleek, ebony mane. The maids' soft, peachy cheeks suggested that they had been brought to this other side of the grave at an even earlier age than my bride-to-be.

Sparks crackled into the expectant air from her polished locks with every pass of the pearl-handled grooming brushes, they'd been being stroked for so long. In the mirror, two ghostly brushes were reflected gliding through the air, parting equidistantly from an invisible apex as they reached the long, downward tail of their descent.

The sadness of Perveen's smile underlined the fact that she could not reflect upon her own beauty. Neither could the twins, yet they continued as they were bade, unquestioningly.

Their white lace togas covered only one half of their milky midriffs, draping diagonally from one shoulder, where they were secured with a ringlet of gold, down to the opposing hip like the curtains on the queen's identical four poster bed to mine. Gilt laurel crowns were embedded deep into their golden curls and similar sparkling glitter twinkled in the naked candle light on their bare peaches of cheeks, streamlined shoulders and the solitary exposed breast, peeping over the hem of the flowing lace.

The queen looked at one twin and then the other, her eyes blackening, storm clouds brewing beyond them somewhere in another realm but reaching this parallel existence across some supernatural plain that only the blessed were allowed to traverse.

Without warning, the candle-flames started to dance in a hectic, voodoo rhythm to some far-off inaudible, drum beat, echoing across the plain, heralding the thunderheads, building, billowing beyond Perveen's jet-black pupils. The maids flinched, uncertain of their footing for a moment as colour rose in Perveen's cheeks. The queen's head lurched, craned backwards, throat visibly pulsating, gulping down large pockets of the musty, wax-laden air of which her long dead organs could make no use.

A howl ululated deep from within the vampire queen's being, or maybe originated from the same source as those threatening storm clouds. It was the unearthly wail of the banshee, amplified against the resonant walls of her throat, the candle-flame picking up on the screech that rocked the very airwaves. The brushes dropped from their hands as the maids tried in vain to protect their eardrums from the air-splitting cry.

The blood that had begun to trickle from Amelia's ear as she had stood at Perveen's right shoulder secreted its metallic aroma into the bouncing atmosphere. In a flash, the queen was up off her seat, behind the bridesmaid and had her mouth clamped around that very ear, tongue wrenching open the tiny orifice until Amelia was screaming in pain, the blood flowing ever faster yet unable to slake the vampire's thirst. Marie's teeth, sharp and pearly-white, bore with a hiss that belied her shocked immobility. She couldn't decide whether to attempt to aid her fast-ailing twin or bolt for the door.

That decision was about to be made for her.

Twelve – the Storm Abates

The sickening crack of Amelia's neck broke the spell of Marie's stunned fascination with her sister's demise at the hands of the vampire queen. Realising that she could do nothing to help her twin, that she was beyond even the sanctuary afforded the undead, she bolted for the door. With impossible speed and palpable anger at having to leave her feast, Perveen detached her fangs from Amelia's blood-flow and stood before Marie, blocking her exit, even, before Amelia's limp body had hit the floor.

When it eventually landed, it did so with a sharp, hollow slap on the cold, marble tiles. Suddenly, it was as if someone had ripped out Marie's spine as her shoulders slunk in

acceptance of her fate. She looked at her queen, her own fangs now withdrawn in surrender to this superior creature and simpered simply, "Why?"

The question, or rather, the dawning of the answer, was akin to a slap around the queen's own chops, a triumphant grin rapidly replacing the visible hatred that had masked her features not a second before.

"I cannot see my beauty, Marie, on this, to be my wedding night," she started, "yet you can remind yourself of how precious you were every time you look into your sister's face. She is the very image of you. For that moment, I could not bear it.

"The only time I glimpse myself is as others see me when I invade their mind. At the point of their death, I am nothing other than an object of fear, their nightmares embodied and twisted into a reality their minds cannot hope to grasp. You know this as well as I.

"Sebastian, however, sees me how I wish to be remembered. I am as perfect in his eyes as when we were but adolescent, before this undead existence, which makes us these monsters to mortal men. It is that beauty I crave daily, more than this very afterlife itself; with him, I shall have it for all time. Tonight, he will become my king, not that he knows it yet. Together we will rule this castle, this coven, this brood. Forever."

With no hint of an apology for slaying her sister, the queen asserted herself, her innocent face now as placid as the surface of an underwater lake. She turned and left Marie in the room with her sibling. A single speck of blood on Perveen's wedding gown was the only trace of her sudden, fatal outburst.

Marie turned to her sister's body, lying askew on the cold, sterile floor. As she approached, one of Amelia's eyes forced itself open. Unable to speak, her throat torn asunder, Marie saw the pleading in those still-sparkling blue eyes and in Amelia's vampire tear, blood crawling down the ashen cheek, skin that only moments hence had been plump and ripe even in its undead state.

Marie nodded acquiescence. Closing her eyes, her hand plunged between her sister's breasts, both now exposed as her body lay flat and at an unnatural angle to her broken neck. The sternum cracked as Marie's hand disappeared to the wrist and exited the cavity just as swiftly, blood oozing from her twin's still-pumping heart that she held aloft, sleek in the reflection of the candlelight.

Amelia almost managed a smile as her eyes closed for the final time, her last vision her twin eating her heart, which had for so many years beat in tandem with the vampire's, who now gorged on its last trembling beat. For Amelia, it was the end; for Marie, only the beginning.

Thirteen - Going Deeper Underground

The walk along the claustrophobic corridor from my bedchamber to an as yet unknown destination seemed to take forever. The ghostly clamour from the unbeknown gathering

some way off and out of sight in the distance, came at us in waves, voices from a different time all wrapped up in cacophonous whirlwinds that berated our advance, the exit's rectangle of light eventually growing larger as at last we seemed to be making headway. For all I knew, this was a trudge to the executioner's blade, but Perveen had shown me too much already to truly believe that was so.

The closer we got to the vibrant light - I could not wait to get out of this dingy place, more like an underground tunnel than a castle corridor - I could feel tension depart my shoulders like a heavy velvet cape slowly slipping to the floor. Billy's hooded henchmen still paced directly at my rear, one at each shoulder. There was a mutual mistrust between us, yet one of the duo seemed somehow familiar.

True, I'd seen their hooded forms at my sister's mock execution, the [test of nerve](#) Billy had set as part of the trial to assess my worthiness. A rite I believed I had attained simply to be accepted into the vampire world. However, events had taken turns that led me to start thinking that my place on this side of life was not to be a simple slave of the night.

And I had seen them yet again, ushering my brother's unconscious, convulsing body from the bedroom on the light side of the grave before Billy bestowed upon me the tertiary stage of my transformation [from human to supernatural being](#). Although their faces were impossibly shaded by some vortex as black as night beneath the hoods, the form, the mannerisms, the way that the one of them walked seemed off-kilter, as if I knew it from a distant life but it did not fit here.

It was perhaps all a part of this feeling of universal tilt, a state that I'd sensed and that had not passed since my awakening here and my mind had grown accustomed to these superficial surroundings. That's exactly how it seemed, that everything had purveyed since my passing over: although all was taken down to the bare brick, it was somehow nothing more than a theatrical backdrop, hiding something a lot less substantial beyond the thin cloth of its fragile reality.

As if transported on some magical conveyor belt, we were in an instant on the threshold of the light - it had been distant, and now we were there, with no sense of acceleration on our part. It was as if the very world had sensed my doubting in its substance and come to greet us to throw my mind of track. It worked.

Stepping into the light, I was momentarily blinded, so bright was the source's countenance. What I saw wiped all previous thoughts from my mind and left me dumbfounded as we stood at the head of an impossibly steep spiralling staircase. Its banister the colour and texture of polished ivory swirled down before us into some sort a cloud-like mist, above which hung this blistering ball of light.

The cavernous ceiling stretched so, so far above us, but the light, about which we were gathered slightly above (how it hung there must have been down to some sorcery I was yet to learn, if ever) was bright enough to determine that we were indeed underground. Rugged grey rock

took over where the ornate ceiling decoration stopped. From the bottom of this staircase, beneath this ethereal source of light, that oversight would have been out of sight, further enhancing my conviction that all was not as it seemed.

The vampires had created their own sun, one that would not shrivel their skin like parchment, boil their borrowed blood to steam nor blaze their bones to ash, were they to bask in its glory as the real one would have done. The mists parted as if for my sole (soul?) benefit, so as to offer me a view of the source of the excitement that had blasted us in chattering chatter as we'd trudged the corridor's never-ending length. I gauged approximately 150 feet below, it could have been more or less in the light's bright distortion, a whole community was darting to and fro about an ancient Grecian courtyard, suddenly bathed in light as the mists parted. The shadows raced from the scene, banished by the makeshift sun's rays.

They halted as one, pale faces all looking up towards their 'sky' in unison. I guessed that was my cue; if I needed confirmation, a hefty shove on the back of each shoulder by the henchmen left me in no doubt we were going down the ivory staircase and even deeper underground.

Fourteen – A Loony Vista

We commenced our descent of the surreal spiral staircase into the turbulent mist, billowing as if somehow cognitive, yet being restrained by an even greater will. They, the 'clouds', were so cold my immediate thought was that they had to be concocted from a water and nitrogen mixture to form a dry ice, emanating from some hidden source. Yet, as the droplets settled on the skin the sensation sent shivers through my spine. The very mist seemed furtive, furthermore burrowed beneath this leathery vampire coating that would have passed as epidermis on humans, yet offered (us) a much more durable outer layer of skin.

Thankfully, the clouds were neither thickly-layered nor dense and we were out of the malleable mist before too long. The further we broke from the veil and twisted downwards, the more of the vampire world came into view to greet us – if any scientist from the mortal world above had set eyes upon this technological marvel, they would have happily died here. As I was to discover later, there were many that had done just that, or at least sacrificed what passed as human life, to wile away eternity in this happy play-den.

A commotion kick-started below as we approached the halfway point. It was as if a hypnotist had clicked their fingers to break the awe-inspired stupor that had beset the community below when the clouds had parted to announce our arrival at the head of the stairs some minutes hence.

The light grew (thankfully) weaker the further we meandered downwards, forever downwards, affording a better view of what I could only assume was to be my new home. Or at least base camp. The clouds above us had reformed, filtering the glare to luminosity that

one would associate with a common-or-garden 100-watt bulb and for the first time I truly beheld the ingenuity, glimpsed this Eden and the potential it unwittingly proffered, stretching for mile upon impossible mile in every direction beneath the earth.

The 360° rotunda of our downward advance afforded me mesmerising vistas of the whole breath-taking world that these creatures had created or inherited or taken by force from a far more technologically advanced, or at one with nature, species than they. For whatever reason, I assumed the latter to ring truest. And I had my reasons.

The vampire community, for all I'd read of them in lore (and that was volumes), were not communal beasts, rather lone predators whose arrogance and self-import leant itself to a life of isolation and seclusion. Although sects and covens did exist and, in all instances, the strongest individual became the figurehead, the deity, of the brood.

As yet, I was still at a loss if that was or wasn't Perveen in this instance.. If yes, then how had she achieved such prominence in the relatively short space of time that she had walked the night? As all had bowed in her path whom we'd encountered thus far I had no reason to doubt otherwise; if there was another greater, I was yet to meet them. There would surely be a leader if the scripts I placed so much unproven faith in were at least a half accurate.

I needn't have worried; I would be the troubled scholar not much longer, now.

Fifteen – A Penny For Them

In my time, I had read many volumes of the ancient tales and transcripts from the less documented histories of the vampire; from Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, even documents smuggled from within the very walls of The Vatican City itself. The hastily scribbled parchments that The Knights Templar had sent back from their unenviable quests into The Holy Land, detailing the possible existence of these (us) [Undead](#) Night Stalkers, which kings and Popes refused to accept, points to a race that lived on the other side of a dawn as old as the Egyptian Empire, at least.

As human ancestors of 2,000 years hence had surmised, without some scientific artifact to point to a true origin of the race or to raise a viable argument against kings' scholars without smacking of treachery, it is possible that ancient etchings uncovered in The Crusades, suggesting the existence of the vampire breed, were dismissed as fanciful creations, and only created to appease one lord or another.

But was there anything I had ever read that suggested these creatures were capable of recreating Genesis?

Certainly not, but if they had found it here, the possibility of immortality was no longer restricted to legend, as was The Holy Grail for which the aforementioned Knights had hunted

for centuries in the name of God, His Holiness the Pope(s) and the Catholic Church.

As a Christian crusader himself, defending Wallachia from the Ottoman Muslims, it was perhaps even now more conceivable, reliving my own scholarly learning, that he, Prince Vlad III Dracul, may have been the very defender of The Grail, drank from its chalice, all the while corroborating with other Christian elements to keep the Turks at bay under some pretence. The promise of a sip from The Chalice from Vlad Țepeș offering life eternal (and, I suppose, not wanting to end their days rectum-first skewered atop a fifteen foot spike, left to die in agony with their organs burst beneath the scalding sun as an example to would-be traitors) enough of a bribe for the Knights to write to Rome and France and say that their quest had been fruitless.

Was the 'Son of The Dragon', celebrated hero of Christianity, kings and Pope Pius alike, one of a long line of vampires, or been made so, in order to bring or even retain The Grail within the possession of the vampire kingdom to ensure their longevity?

I didn't notice myself, distracted as I was with my thoughts, but for a fleeting moment the sun dimmed noticeably, the clouds contracted yet denser still, casting argumentative shadows upon the ground as they billowed in on themselves, imploding, gamboling over and over in a frenzy. I dismissed my chain of reasoning as madness or folly or coincidence or all three broiled into one and the sun came out once more.

On the horizon, a storm started to stir.

Sixteen – the River of Black Roses

Whether the henchmen were not as familiar with this raw awesomeness as their manner purported, I knew not. But as I had slowed to a stop, there had been levity in their attitude, too, and they had not given me the expected prod when I stopped as the rumble of thunder drew me across to one edge. Like a tourist truly taking in the vastness of an ocean along a seafront promenade, I propped one foot upon a baluster and both hands shoulder-width apart on the ivory railing of the balustrade.

To the west, there were rolling plains running parallel to what seemed like miles of the mist above, which darkened visibly the further it stretched from this courtyard, from the synthetic sun, until they turned to angry, black storm clouds on a horizon far, far in the distance. Were my eyes deceiving me or were there shadowy hills bordering the plains, peaking beneath the thunderheads where perfect perspectives met in absolute collusion? If there were, they were being treated to a pyrotechnic display of lightening unlike anything I'd ever witnessed above ground. The constant clap of thunder buffeted the very air in visible shock waves, but the sound petered out before it reached this safe haven, kissed by light not afforded to those far reaches of this underground land.

A gentle reminder, a hand at each elbow this time, worked to break my own slippage into the will of the hypnotist and we continued our descent. There had been a path of black rose petals laid out, covering the last few steps of the ivory staircase, a stunning contrast, which continued on the York-stone flagstones of the courtyard. A gnashing of teeth and cursing escaped the countenances of those carefully placing the last few delicate petals as one of the thunderclaps from the distant storm actually reached us, displacing the trail of homage and roaring discontent as it exploded about us.

To a vampire, they descended to one knee, initially I assumed to deflect any effect of the thunderclap. But at the other end of the row of petals across the yard, ascending a much smaller flight of stairs, the type you would expect to see leading from the patio of some great country house somewhere in rural England onto its well-manicured gardens, stood Perveen, my queen. Beside me, the henchmen dropped like stones to their knees also, burying their already covered faces into the crux of the elbow propped upon the upright genuflected knee.

Uncertain of my role in all of this, I went to do the same, but the henchmen's powerful grips on my elbows, even from their respectful kneeling, prevented me from doing so. They ushered me on, to complete the descent without them, as my queen began her descent into the petals and down her lesser staircase. Again, as if some rift in time bent to her will, I was, of a sudden, stood upon the last step as she, dressed in finery no earthly hand could have neither conceived nor created, stood on hers.

The black petals sprung to life, becoming molten, dancing like a turgid stream. Without effecting a move of my own, the black 'waters' took my feet, as they did those of my queen-to-be. We met in the centre of the courtyard stream of black, fluid rose petals. Its entirety swirled up in a whoosh around us, configured like a whirlpool and, without warning, we were dragged beneath the very surface of this new world I had hardly had time to appraise.

Unseen, above us, the petals settled to become simply rose petals once more. Thunder roared its disapproval from afar at the passing of events, breaching the yard vehemently, casting the dead, still stream hither and thither.

But too late, the river of roses had served its purpose, whatever that was. I would find out soon enough.

Seventeen – Falling, falling, falling

To my knowledge, I was already two levels below ground before being dragged down yet further by the cyclone of black rose petals. Judging by the height of the cavern above the synthetic sun and the ceiling of living cloud that stretched to the edge of the subterranean plains, we were probably a lot further down than my conservative estimate. How far this descent beneath the courtyard would take us, I had no idea.

Perveen had her arms wrapped around my back and waist, left hand



wrapped firmly around the nape of my neck; her cheek was nuzzled into the indent between my collarbone and breast whilst her own breasts squashed into my torso and diaphragm, belly pressed flat against my pelvis and her own pubis rested on top of my thigh, adjacent to my groin; both of her legs wrapped around my right thigh. Tightly. The contours of her body married to mine in sleek perfection, the immediate thought being [Yin and Yang](#).

My secondary thought, no doubt brought about by this unprecedented level of physical connection, was altogether more sexual; it involved a 6 and a 9, but I'm not sure how that worked in this afterlife. I wanted it (and my mid-section alerted me that it was primed and ready for action), but from what I'd learned as a human scholar of such things, intimacy between two [Undead](#) beings took effect on a totally different plain: either during the infusion of blood and/or in the expansive corridors of the mind, opened up beyond the grave in a manner humans would only find comparable if they had taken, at one time or another, a tab of [LSD](#).

Rather than my abject disappointment at this realisation make my body despondent, it only served to strengthen my ardour. Perveen, with our closeness obviously aware of this fact, looked up at me with a smile that was hard to read. It neither confirmed nor refuted my speculation. I closed my eyes to will this sudden rise in passion away, but only found myself jiggling to make myself more comfortable. Which only compounded the issue.

Our descent was slowing noticeably, so I reasoned that we were almost at journey's end. I could now make out the cylindrical walls of this tunnel that had otherwise zipped past in a blur, at first glance how I imagined the inside of a well to appear. What I actually saw horrified me.

Reaching to grab us was layer upon layer of hands, clawing at the air at our passing. They were caked, blackened, muddy, and rotten; some even possessed skeletal fingers, protruding from the very earth from just beneath the knuckle of the wrist. One just knew that the Undead bodies they belonged to were attached to the other ends of those writhing appendages, compacted in the earth for centuries, all orifices stuffed and suffocated with cloying earth, claustrophobia thankfully robbing sanity decades hence. How did I pray that they remained that way and suddenly did not find the strength to break free of their vice-like grave? It's no wonder Perveen had held onto me in such a rapt way, gripping me as not to endanger myself at the hands of the protrusive hands, her eyes tucked into my chest so that she did not have to look at the horrors.

The wall's circumference seemed to draw in more tightly as our pace slowed and the cracked, split fingernails gouged my ankles, hips and elbows, but we were still travelling too swiftly for them to gain any real purchase. Perveen suddenly let go, her flight stalled as if she had just opened a parachute. I continued to plummet on my own, panic and instinct taking over from logical and reasoned thought. Fortunately, I petrified perfectly vertically, like a fledgling vampire javelin, with arms pinned to my sides, toes pointing immediately down, head looking skywards to see my queen following me directly above.

Centrifugal force kept us as far away from the grasping hands as possible, equidistant from the wall; without warning, the tunnel opened wide again, like the bell of a tuba. Perveen swirled in a mist around me like a worm-dragon constricting its victim, wrapped her arms around me, this time tucking my cheek into her breast. Immediately, I felt safe and warm and wanted to cry, no longer caring if I lived or died...

...End of Part Two

Part Three – The Son of The Dragon

Eighteen – A Time for Choices

Our descent slowed as if someone had pulled the breaks on an invisible elevator before hitting the ground with a soft flu-dump. An underground cavern that glowed as if lit by the flame of a soft, warm, hidden candle opened up around us, almost transferring the feeling of welcoming through the wax-laden, musty air.

The horrors of our plunging descent down the Well of All Times, the name of the treacherous drop we'd a moment ago exited as conveyed to me by Perveen through image-transference between minds rather than in dialogue, were thankfully now well above us. I half expected to see undead hands following the ceiling around from the aperture, but they did not even make it into the gramophone-speaker shaped exit. Assuming that we were to leave this sepia rock-hewn place at some point, which gave the impression of being inside a jacket potato and wouldn't have looked at all out of place in *The Flintstones*, I truly hoped that there was a way out other than the way we'd made our entrance.

Perveen took my hand and started dragging me towards three exits sat next to each other in the far wall – they may as well have had *a, b & c* over the top of them as it felt like having to choose labyrinthian doorways on a cheap TV game show. I could tell she was hesitant as we approached the first doorway, her usual confidence momentarily undermined as she deliberated. I had an awful feeling that the jackpot lay behind one of these doorways and treachery beyond the other two. And we're not just talking a dusty bin or coming out covered in slime.

"Have you been here before?" I asked in a whisper. She pursed my lips together, making a duck-bill from a thumb and index-finger to do so. She gestured for all communication to be transferred mentally. I had received images from her and had been both recipient and giver in transfusions of blood with both my queen and my maker, Billy, but I was uncertain about being able to wilfully transmit my thoughts.

Before I could stop myself, my brain latched onto some of the most recent images, those of me looking directly up at Perveen after she'd let me go in *The Well of All Time* and being able to see all of her modesty when her gown had belled out; also, my friend the brain recalled the image of us wrapped together in oral sex, conjured a little earlier in our descent as our bodies had contoured quite magically together.

She feigned a playful scowl, bore her fangs and nipped at my neck, transferring her own images of what lay in store for us, lingering long enough to give me a glimpse but yanking back before revealing too much. I juddered and wondered if and what she had shown me was even possible. It certainly dispelled the myth about vampires not being able to consummate

their relationships in the flesh.

"That is our pre-nuptial courtship", she fired across at me, "We have the chance to indulge only once in the physical act before we are joined in our souls and minds forever, where our existence and our love-making will transcend everything you have learnt about how two can become one."

I was excited about the prospect, obviously, but disappointed that we would have to wait until our wedding day (she had not even asked me, yet!) for these events to unfold.

"How will I know what to do?" I asked, "There was so much happening in what you showed me; I want to be sure that I am worthy," I paused, then added "I take it, then, that we are to be wed?"

"Yes. Do you not want that?"

I had little choice, being this far below how many levels of the earth I dares not conceive, and did not want to end my days in torment like one of those undead souls attached to the 'hands' in The Well.

"Of course it is what I want, Perveen. As you have pointed out, it is perhaps all I have ever wanted, as have you, but how can we make it so if I am yet so much lesser than you?"

"I can tell you more later, but now we must make the right choice here, otherwise all is lost," she said, fathoming out which door was the right path.

"Have you been here before?" I asked, given her uncertainty.

"Yes, but only in the state you are now, fledgling vampire, no capacity for retaining true knowledge, not even a pair of fangs, yet. Now Ssh. Let me think," she said, wracking her brain to the time that she had been here before. Seeing - or hearing - my head, so full of turmoil and uncertainty, she said, "There will be time for questions along the way."

I ran my tongue over the bristles I had assumed to be my canines sprouting. With will, I could elongate them a little, now, but they were still pliable when I did. I thought about dipping them into a blood orange, about all they were capable of piercing, and sniggered to myself.

Perveen had decided, the vampire couple-to-be had chosen *door c*; she took my hand, hers so tiny yet full of might, and we left the potato chamber behind. Question Time was about to begin.

Nineteen - Interviewing a Vampire, 1

Holding hands, we might have been any young couple partaking in a stroll along a tunnel off an underground cavern in a realm of [vampires](#). But I could tell that even Perveen was nervous; I knew not how to break the ice, even though my brain was a turmoil of questions, especially as I now knew for certain that we were to married, putting a whole new spin on the

vows that conclude 'so long as ye both shall live'.

vampire wedding Night (Wikipedia)



Thankfully, it was my new fiancée who broke the silence. Although, the fact that the entire conversation occurred entirely on the plain of telekinetic communication could hardly be said to have been ear-splitting. And I was still not altogether settled with the idea that Perveen had ways to block off parts of her mind, as if she had been taught the power of [Occlumency](#) by Severus Snape, yet my mind was still but an open book to her Legilimens capacity. But still, we pottered along, Perveen instigating this open floor session.

"Your head is so full of questions, Sebastian" she said, stating the blindingly obvious, "With which would you like to begin?"

I pondered, wondering how much time we had on this journey and, should it be short, which questions mattered to me the most. Strangely, the ones concerning sex on a totally different plain, which Perveen had hinted at in her vampire kiss, did not figure at all.

"You were obviously young when you were made. How did that come about?" I asked.

She shuddered, stopped, looked at me with a 'why that one?' type of frown, then resigned herself to the fact that she was probably best off unburdening everything into the open before we were joined in unholy matrimony.

"Promise you won't think ill of me?" she asked, swinging my hand in a nervous, exaggerated arc, and started walking with an almost schoolgirl skip to her step. I nodded to say that I was prepared, even though she could no doubt tell telepathically that I was most certainly not sure.

"Okay. Back in the mortal world, things were not great at home. My mom had found out that she couldn't have any more children; I was the only child. My dad, Indian as he was, was bitter and resentful about never rearing a son. He almost felt shamed. That fact came out about halfway through my 'A' levels."

She looked at me for reassurance, to check that I had grasped the gravity of what that meant to a Muslim family and that I was not just paying her lip service (or mind service) by looking thoughtfully into the ground as she communicated. I nodded, she continued.

"Things at home got worse, tears every night at tea-time, my parents never being seen socially out together, my father coming to hate the both of us. It was horrid and my studies suffered terribly as a result. But my mom was too wrapped up in her own guilt and my dad in his bitterness that no one seemed to notice, even when I started losing weight and blood-letting to try to oust some of the guilt that I was unwarranted for harbouring. But back then, I thought I was as much to blame as my mom, so dominant was my dad's role as master of the house."

"But surely the fact that your mom could not bear him a son was no fault of yours?" I asked, feeling hatred build for her father, even though I'd never met the man. And would never do, if the rest of the conversation was accurate.

"No, but he made me feel guilty about being a daughter when it was blatant that it was a son he wanted," she said. My anger for this man grew tenfold, to which she said, "Don't be, it's just the way he was, that many Indian and Chinese men are."

"And anyway, things moved at a pace after my exam results came back, all failed."

I looked at her incredulously – she was almost as bright as I at school and the thought of her failing her exams seemed even more implausible than her, both us, becoming two vampires shortly to be joined for all eternity in wedlock.

"I know," she said, "but worse things happen at sea. My dad went back to India, my mom disappeared inside herself and I was inconsolable. Billy, as you know, has an Asian persona for when he travels in the mortal world. He befriended my mom, on the pretence that he was from the mosque and they had been missing her attendance. She invited him in."

Cher-ching – folklore rules again – a vampire will never gain entrance to your dwelling as long as you do not invite him across the threshold.

Perveen simply nodded, then continued, "Billy showed my mom, I'm not sure how, but by some sorcery – he is a master when it comes to the black arts [didn't I know it] – how everything that had happened had affected me; if she was miserable before, she was suicidal now, no doubt what Billy set out to achieve. Almost to the point where she would do anything to rectify the harm done to her daughter."

"And that was that. As Billy courted you, it was me he was after back then for the very purpose we walk this underground chamber, it has been fated so long hence; but my mom and dad, they offered him access on a plate."

"Hang on," she said, "let me get my breath – I have never told this next part of the tale of my making to anyone. Still promise you won't hate me?" she asked.

I nodded, although I feared the worst.

Twenty – Interviewing a Vampire, 2

It was with gravitas that Perveen imparted the next sorry chapter in the tale of her attaining the status of the powerful vampire she had become in so short a space and time. Before she started to 'speak' to me, she physically cleared all of her other thoughts, to give me a clear passage to those she was about to let me in on.

"Billy offered my mother a way out of our hopeless situation: a father and husband ashamed of us; a mother and daughter on opposing brinks of sanity. So she accepted, not just for

herself, but for me, too. That exit door Billy had primed was nothing more than a gateway into this life.

"All he wanted in return was to share with her in this afterlife what I have shown you will be in store for us, soon. But it all went disastrously wrong. You will wonder why I tell you some of this, at times. It is vulgar and against a nature you have only recently left behind. I tell you only because I want us to have a chance. Understand?"

She composed herself, I held my tongue, but agreed all the same.

"We came here, to this very place, having been indoctrinated with similar rites of passage that you endured with Billy and his henchmen," she said, looking up into my face to see if her meaning was clear. It was.

She continued, "The three of us walked along this very tunnel - at least I hope it was this one - in the expectation that Billy and my mother would rubber-stamp their allegiance and bring me across into the fold at the same time. I guess I was to be the token bridesmaid at my mother's marriage to a vampire. Needless to say, there were no bouquets.

"All I can remember is that it was a long walk, my mother fretting over my well-being and Billy telling us both not to worry about a thing - everything was planned to put a seal on our mortal life so that we could begin our new one down here. Later, we would have the chance to return to the mortal world if we so chose, where we would be night stalkers and, largely, invisible and invincible. Like you, my dear Sebastian, I wasn't entirely sure that that's what I wanted, but what choice was there now that we had come this far? My mother had decided and he had saved us from ourselves on the other side of the grave, after all."

I wanted to argue that I was sure, that I had never been more certain of anything, but she raised her hand to placate me. She had access to my entire mind; there was no way my lip-service or motorised actions could convince her that I had no misgivings.

She proceeded, "At the end of this tunnel, we will come to a chamber. The day Billy brought us down here, there was someone a lot more powerful than he awaiting to perform the ceremony. Just leave it at that, for the moment," she said, pre-empting my next question.

"In the centre of an antechamber," she went on, "was a stone altar, a High Priest with a hood covering his features stood hunched over it, awaiting his tiny congregation, the bride, the groom and the vampire bridesmaid - quite a hand. Upon the cold slab, a body lay beneath a crisp, white sheet. There were more corridors leading back past the altar itself, from whence emanated ghostly hymns, obscene in their tempo, haunting in their tone. Even with what I'd seen in this life so far, the whole set up had my nerves on edge."

"What was a body doing beneath the sheet?" I asked, morbid curiosity gaining the upper hand over common sense.

"I'm coming to that," she answered, no playful jape in her timbre now, "so if you'll let me get

on with it?"

I nodded acquiescence; I should have bid her keep her silence, instead.

Twenty-one – A Father on the altar

"Billy and I stood to the left of the body on the altar, the 'foot' end, my mother towards the head end," Perveen explained, flitting pictures between unspoken telepathy to convey the wedding scene of her mother and Billy. "There was no fanfare, no wedding march (save the unnerving hymnal from the depths of the cavern, beyond) and we cut straight to the marriage ceremony. It was all conducted in Latin, but I somehow grasped every word. No doubt you will too, Sebastian, when our time comes." She said, issuing a command rather than seeing whether I doubted her word.

"The gist of it was that, upon completing the sacrifice to the Dweller of the Deep, the body on the altar being said sacrificial vessel, Billy and mother would be wed; they would go on to consummate their marriage in the sacristy of the temple, beyond and the High Priest would bring me over into the flock in a separate ceremony. It was a case of all in favour say 'Aye' and, with no other option no matter what I thought about being left alone with the High Priest, the ceremony was under way. But everything changed when he pulled the sheet back," she said, hoping to convey some hidden message that I misinterpreted completely, mistaking her thoughts and accompanying pitiful glance as self-indulgence into a painful reminiscence of her own, not a warning of what may lie ahead for me.

With that warning lost, she carried on, "The body beneath the sheet was my dad. That's what Billy had meant about sealing all deals from the mortal realm. Mother lost it, had not brought her faith with her as much as her body. Fatal mistake. She flew at Billy as the High Priest shuffled back, not wishing to become embroiled, merely to spectate.

"Billy held her off with an outstretched arm – not physically touching her, but by some more of his sorcery. He started drinking from my father's pulse; from the jerking beneath the sheet, it was obvious my useless dad still lived. My mother went into total, mental breakdown at the flick of this switch."

Perveen looked up at me, to see if all of this was sinking in. It was, sort of, and even then I wasn't prepared for what came next.

"The High Priest saw me standing there, unnerved, but totally calm, accepting the scene for what it was, realising – as I had done for months – that my mother and father were lost to me in any true sense of the word 'parents'. For my mother, the shock was too sudden; for me, although I abhorred Billy for what he was doing, it was her with whom I was angry. It was then that I realised just how much I'd got used to the fact that neither parent could help each other or me. Why couldn't she just accept it, the way she'd expected my coming over to this

life to be undertaken without question?

"Not to miss out on his role in proceedings, the High Priest summoned me around the table to the rear wall of the claustrophobic chamber, away from my father's convulsing body and my mother's pathetic attempts to stop Billy causing dad's spasms. I accepted his invitation and, upon doing so, seemed to glide across the cold stone floor on a mattress of air. I felt his teeth pierce the skin on my neck and simply melted into his arms. Such love, such knowledge, such history, yet he was offering me even more," she said, quite matter-of-factly, totally oblivious of just how jealous she was making me, lost in her thoughts of that moment.

"What did he show you?" I asked. If we'd been using the spoken word, rather than communicating with minds (a method, and its nuances, that I was picking up on rather quickly), the question would have come out as a squeak and I would have had to cough to make my tone more gruff in the question's repetition.

"Oh, to attain that 'more' there was something I must do for him," she said, looking at the pebble-strewn floor she'd started to dawdle upon. She turned her face up to look me square in the eye, "This High Priest is bountiful as long as you give to him what you can. He knows we are not all made equal, that we have our limitations depending upon the manner in which we're 'made'. And Billy is good at that, even if he takes his work a little too seriously at times. Now, promise me again that you won't hate me!" she demanded, turning on a sixpence, tugging my cheeks with her palms so that I could not stray from that pulsating glare of hers.

There was not a morsel of hatred in my body for Perveen, only sympathy; that some ancient custom of Asian cultures preferring sons over daughters had led her family to the demise she was retelling was pitiful. I nodded, understanding completely, yet scared that the truth would indeed turn me against my star-fated lover before we had had chance to become so.

Twenty-two – Some Mothers...

"Okay. Here goes," Perveen said, visibly blowing, struggling to summon the courage to run the tale that final furlong. "With the power the High Priest had bestowed upon me as a reward, I guess, for the willing acceptance of the task he'd outlined, I broke Billy's magical hold on my mother, who came, in turn, flying forwards into my arms as her resistance was suddenly forced against nothing.

"She began to blubber, telling me just how sorry she was; all the while Billy continued feasting upon my father's last droplets of blood, drinking in all of his life-force," said Perveen, with not an ounce of remorse. "My thoughts broke into her mind: 'Mother, you are so weak. I hate you. If you wish to be with him that much, go join him.' I stared just long enough for my thought to register in perhaps the last sane outpost of her traumatised mind, see the fear illuminate her eyes, and then I reared my head, fangs glistening in the red pulsating glow of the chamber and sank them, hardened as they had been following the infusion from the High Priest, deep into my mother's neck."

A tear welled in Perveen's eye, but then vanished as if sucked back in by an element of her body that wanted to show no ties relating to human sentiment, whatsoever. I was stunned, but on some level totally understood the motivation.

"Then something strange happened," she added, almost as if everything that had gone before was the norm. "Sebastian, you also want to know why I became so powerful? Why Billy serves me, does my bidding and not the other way around?" she asked, not that she needed my confirmation, she must have seen the question appear in my mind many times before this round of the hot new quiz - 'solve your fiancée's murderous history before she tells you it herself'.

"My father lay dead, but Billy still hungered, deprived as he had been of sharing in my mother's blood during their consummation. Not to be robbed, he pursed his lips around my mother's wrist - don't ask, he always drinks from the wrist, I don't know why - and plunged his fangs either side of my mother's pulse.

"He was instantly lost in the 'what could have been' and I could hear and even see every one of his thoughts, his distant dreams and murderous memories. Somehow, I managed to hold down the contents of my stomach, but I watched and listened and, sure enough, I knew Billy better than he knew himself at the point seconds before my mother's beating heart stopped pumped its last. More importantly, I knew his Achilles heel.

"When both of my parents were suitably dead, the three of us, Billy, the High Priest and I, concluded the ceremony. I conveyed to them both what I had seen; Billy was astounded that he had shown his soft underbelly so unwittingly. The High Priest decreed there and then that this should in no way become common knowledge and, as reward for completing the task and assurance that I should say nothing of Billy's Achilles heel, he was bound over to me by the High Priest to do my will, within reason."

"I bet he didn't like that," I scoffed, to which Perveen shook her head.

"On the contrary. He saw it as a sign of strength in me, something to be feared. And so he should. Many new vampires are made by poor vampires; we try to keep both them and their victims here. Those vampires linger too long, rob too much of their victims' mental capacity in the process; when they are born again to this undead life, they are nothing more than simpletons with a lust for blood. In truth, it would be better to let them die for the work it causes our community afterwards.

"This is nothing new. This 'Eden' as you call it was, mm, 'procured' for their benefit. Let those simple ones out on the mortal realm and our identity would not be confined to myth for long; it is better this way. The Well of All Time is made from victims brought down here to satisfy these 'trampires' hunger, so Billy calls them. The Well gets deeper every year and, although harmless to us of a higher creed, is deterrent to make all vampires and trampires alike think twice about breaking etiquette, for fear of ever becoming a part of its living walls."

We walked on in silence, our minds hushed with what we had imparted and learned of each other. The walls changed colour slightly, taking on a more orange hue, which grew redder with every few dozen steps. Again, she stopped and dragged my face so that she could look into my eyes and glimpse my very soul, beyond.

"We are nearly there," she said. "Have you heard all I have told unto you? Are you prepared for whatever it is the High Priest has in store for us before we commit to our vows?"

I nodded 'yes', but was more concerned about the 'vows' bit at the end. "We are to be married now?"

"Yes, Sebastian, my love. It is our time and I pray that I have prepared you, set you in greater stead, than Billy ever did with my mother. Are you strong enough, my brave boy?" she asked.

It felt strange, me being so much older than her in mortal years, her appearance so lithe and carefree; but her appraisal of the situation was justified enough. I was like her pupil, her little-boy-lost in this harsh, cruel sub-subterranean realm.

"Yes, I am ready," I answered, simply enough. If only I had known what did lie in store, I would have gladly ran back up The Well, using those gruesome hands as leverage and footholds to clamber out of the hell-hole that awaited us, the final commitment in our lightning courtship.

Twenty-three – The Point of No Return

And so we stood at the neck of the tunnel. This was it, our wedding. Not two days hence had I even dared to dream that the vampire realm was a tangible entity. Like so many mere mortals believed, forty-eight hours hence I too upheld the conviction that the undead were confined to either myth or that to acknowledge their existence was too unbearable a truth. Yet here I was, set to wed Perveen, who was to be my vampire bride and with it I would inherit her kingdom and affluence in this subterranean world.

The entrance to the chamber, which I presumed the church (if that's what you could call it) where the ceremony was to be held, pulsed angry red, as if we stood in the throat of a prehistoric dragon afflicted by severe tonsillitis; yet we were to enter its belly by choice?



The phrase 'The point of no return' is banded about all too readily, but this truly felt that one step out of this throbbing tunnel and that was it – life as I never really knew it would be lost to me for all time. I have to admit there was apprehension in my step, as if my feet were weighted with lead, attached to the coarse pebble floor, as Perveen took my hand and led me into the chamber.

If I thought there were candles a-plenty in the bed chamber in which I had awoken after our first exchange on the winter bridge, they were but a flicker of a flame compared to the scene that spread before us within the chamber. Roughly hewn hollows in the very rock walls housed skulls burning outrageously from kerosene candles within, so that dancing light and sudden shadow blazed and belched through curious eyes, cavernous nasal passages and gaping jaws long since silenced. A shiver ran across my leatherette skin; two of those crumbling craniums were likely those of Perveen's parents. I dared not look in her direction for fear of this conviction becoming too transparent upon my pale features.

Like the great hall at Hogwarts, candles festooned the ceiling. The overall intent was to highlight the main feature, which had not yet had cause to surface, though I knew from Perveen's tale we were missing an altar. I questioned my eyes as to its non-existence given the abundant light afforded us in this otherwise dingy place, but there was no sign, even though the light waned and puddled in the centre where I believed it ought to rest.

To the right of the doorway stood one of the henchman whose bodily outline and mannerisms I thought I'd recognised on the long walk down the corridor at the top of the stairs a short while earlier on the level above. With the frantic flames casting fidgeting shadows it was hard to tell whether I still held that belief, especially as I was of the impression that he was looking directly at me, but beneath his hood, there was only eternal blackness. Impenetrable pitch obscured any features, which I though highly unlikely with the copious candlelight, but it was so. Yet still I perceived recognition, but what was certain any longer?

In his outstretched arms, like some Saville Row tailor, he proffered an exquisitely folded outfit, gesturing for me to take it. To the left, Perveen was being handed her own change of attire by a bridesmaid who I would later discover to be Marie, who had been one half of twins like Billy, ordained to be at Perveen's beck and call by some higher power for the duration of their afterlife.

Perhaps, then, this was merely the fated vestibule of Hell and the main event was to take place beyond, through either of the two passageways that led past the far wall like tailpipes from an engine. But surely not - this was the image of the room that Perveen had portrayed to me telepathically, yet our ceremony was to be better lit. I put that down to her status without making any cognitive conscious connection. But where was the altar?

As if in answer to my question, and how I would regret not learning to keep my temporal mouth shut, in the centre of the chamber the ground began to tremble, bouncing loose soil and small bricks as if they were laid on a drum-skin and an invisible hand was beating an inaudible rhythm beside them. Soon, that beat began shaking the very walls and ceiling causing a dusting of granite to add a mysterious cloud to proceedings, the whole room, flames and all, jumped to the command of the unseen drummer and his silent salvo.

Without warning, the very earth slid open to the hollow sound of gigantic slabs being dragged across concrete and made the most perfect circle in the very centre of the chamber.

The quaking stopped, dust settled and a shock of dirty yellow hair began to rise from the pit that had formed before us. That unmistakable birth scar of an orienteering flag followed the bald pate through the opening and those crazy, soulless eyes came next, catching the candlelight, glinting an even greater madness than I had ever witnessed in them before.

Flat across his chest lay the Gil Hibben throwing axe, crumpling the ridiculous, yet fitting, collar of his ruff and lace shirt front; the iridescent blade shone its keenness, twinkling intent, as did his fangs, bared beneath that insane Joker smile, primed for use. That same fawn jacket (no special tailoring for Billy) lay open across the expanse of his gut, which the ancient mustard cummerbund struggled to hold back. But it was what appeared in our eye line next that froze me rigid.

A white sheet draped over a body laid flat on that altar table that Perveen had described and portrayed to me oh so well when she had been bridesmaid at her mom's own ill-fated wedding in this very chamber emerged with Billy. That outline I had seen somewhere only very recently – a part of my brain knew, yet another part was stopping me linking the two pieces of cranial information that would complete the chain of thought.

I looked at Perveen for help, but her return glance only served to hammer home the link on one side, as it said: 'Oh, I did so try to warn you'.

Billy, his smile spread quite literally from ear-to-ear, conveyed the sentiment 'I nearly had her last time, this time I shall not be denied' enclosed the other link. The thought was complete. Beneath the sheet lay my sister; in what state of consciousness, I could only guess. I hoped and prayed that she was already dead, but feared that she lay awake in some hell of living rigor mortis.

My initial thought was: 'God, I bet she's pissed at me.' The henchman by my side also seemed, for a moment, to flinch as the rising altar ground to a halt, eliciting one last shower of shrapnel, before all fell silent.

If I had never known the meaning of the word Petrified, I most certainly did now. The light from the candle-flame dimmed, the skulls' rage abated, as Billy spread his arms, axe almost touching the low ceiling and the candles that hung there from. For the second time in as many hours, I questioned whether this was what I wanted, but the Point of no Return had long since been crossed.

Twenty-four – Dressed for the Occasion

Tell me, have you ever seen those special effects in a late-60's/early-70's horror flick, where the image of crackling embers is superimposed onto a victim, usually a vampire as they're treated to their first glimpse of sunshine since becoming undead, to signify that they're on fire? You know, the flames are there but you know that they're not actually touching the actor/actress, it's so obvious? Well that's what happened to Perveen and I's clothes as we tried to take in the scene in the wedding chamber.

One minute we were standing there in the grubby, silt-covered attire that we'd been wearing as we were sucked into The Well by the stream of Black Roses; the next moment they had turned to cinders before our very eyes at the hand of some unseen force – leaving neither trace nor sensation on the skin – and crumpled to thin, wiry piles around our feet.

We were naked. I mean completely.

If my body was something new to behold to the henchman, bridesmaid, bride-to-be, Billy and those smoldering skulls, that was nothing compared to the shock to the system it gave me, totally obliterating for a brief second the thought of my sister lying beneath the crisp, white sheet on the altar. I looked down and saw my body for the first time since becoming this fledgling vampire, marveling at its leanness and physique.

Its colour and sheen was alabaster, the latter-day calcite form, not the matt of the ancients in Egypt, from head to toe; yet it shone as if it were a marble statue in The Tate Gallery that had been repeatedly dusted every day for millennia. Each and every sculpted muscle was pronounced, then undefined, then chiseled again in the sultry candlelight that seemed to lick each curve and sinew in appreciative lust.

I turned to Perveen, a crafty smile had crept onto her face and, oddly enough, intrigued me more than her own lithe, naked outline, yet to blossom into the true curvaceousness of a voluptuous woman – that treat robbed of her before her eighteenth birthday when she'd been brought over to this side of the grave – yet her athletic torso, pert breasts and streamlined legs did more than arouse my interest as my eyes wandered down from her cunning smile, drinking in every curve all the way to her toes.

Interrupting my train of thought – and it's a good job, too – the henchman tugged at my arm, motioning me to start dressing into my wedding attire; Marie did the same to Perveen, covering up that magnificent body with a silk ivory dress that flowed like trickling water over her olive skin. Each and every delicate curve of her slender body was accentuated by the fluid material; well, the parts of her body that it actually touched.

From her left hip the dress swooped down across her thighs, the hem getting nowhere close to her right knee before it swooped back up and around her peach of a rear to re-join its starting point at the femoral head on the left thigh. It was reminiscent of an inverted calla lily, cascading in waves as it did; the skirt of the dress the tender petal, the solitary strap cutting a diagonal across Perveen's delicately heaving bosom, no more than a silk sash of a drooping stem, if truth be told.

For I, the outfit was less daring, in coverage at least. A white see-through kaftan, laced in the fashion of a sailor's tunic at the front adorned this newfound muscular chest and stone-coloured linen trousers, tight over my gluteus but then fell away loosely covered my modesty, but again, one could have seen the outline of my legs and whatever else lay beneath the opaque material should they have had cause to look.

For the pair of us, jewel-encrusted Turkish slippers which sparkled with amber, rubies and diamonds, cushioned our feet in crushed velvet. I remember thinking that, at any moment, a flying carpet would come to whisk us away; but in our circumstance, I did not find the thought in the slightest amusing.

We moved forward as one up to the altar, resplendent in our ceremonial garments, awaiting Billy to finish his silent incantations. At my right shoulder stood the familiar henchman; immediately to my left, Perveen and beyond her, Marie. Between where we stood waiting and Billy on the other side of the altar lay the body beneath the sheet; now we were this close, we could see the breast slowly rising and falling, breathing as if the owner of those lungs – from this close, there was no denying that it was indeed my sister – was dreaming on some far away plateau. I hoped against hope that was true.

Billy's muttering stopped, all tension from his muscles fled and he almost collapsed onto the table through what looked like exhaustion. What- or whoever he had summoned, his prayer was over; he shuffled around to join his henchman to my right and we waited for the nightmare to begin.

Twenty-five – The Henchmen Unveiled

Billy began to perceptibly shake and tremble; moments later, so did the very ground beneath our feet. Once more we were greeted by a spectre-like figure rising through the floor before us, although on this occasion there was no hollow scraping of slab-on-concrete. A mist, akin to the living cloud that stretched for miles to the horizon of subterranea above, enveloped our feet and the base of the altar and began to scramble across the stretched out sheet before us. The rolling mist had that same parasitic quality as the cloud, feeling as if it almost wanted to burrow beneath your skin and start eating away at you from the inside.

Distracting as this was, we could not help but witness the rising of the second henchman from beyond the altar, Billy – almost thankfully – dropping to his knees. The familiar henchman did likewise, as did Marie. Perveen shook her head at me when I turned to her for clarification; we remained upright whilst the three witnesses genuflected beside us, heads bowed, searching the floor for some invisible talisman, it seemed.

The mist settled into a serpentine carpet and, with neither pomp nor circumstance the second henchman rolled back his hood. A cloud of black smog unravelled and then dissipated to reveal, on second glance, none other than Vlad Ţepeş himself, preserved in all his glory and stood not ten feet from us. Billy visibly flinched and appeared fit to swoon, even though he was already on one knee. From Perveen's sharp intake of breath, I do not believe that she expected The Son of the Dragon to be presiding over our nuptials, either. But there he stood, as bog-eyed and moustachioed as the portraits depicted him across the centuries.

He needn't have announced his presence because it was simply so demanding. When he was in the room, you were drawn to him; he, in turn, seemed to be looking at every one of us at the same time, drawing in the experience through his very pores, if indeed his weathered, leathery

skin possessed such a feature. He spread his arms, as would a priest blessing the communion host at mass; with a flip of his fingertips, the flames of the candles reignited to their previous heights, the heat and light instantaneously intense.

He motioned for Billy and the familiar henchman to join him; like altar boys, they stood shoulder to shoulder at one end of the table with their heads bowed in respect for the ceremony. Perveen and I were about to be the star turn in. Vlad looked at Billy, who looked up instantly and nodded; a similar reflex, too, from the second henchman. Without laying a hand on the sheet it whipped back as if by the trickery of some slight-of-hand merchant stripping a table of its cloth whilst leaving the ornaments that had sat atop in situ. I tried to close my eyes, but could not.



Was it morbid fascination, a sense of duty or some altogether more foreign hand forcing me to stare at my sister laid out before us? Whichever, I felt like the next of kin identifying a body at the county morgue, only, to my abject horror, I could see that my sister lived, eyes wide and petrified, unable to even turn her head to see whose company she shared. I could not help but feel her fear and panic – it emitted like some pungent aroma cloying the air above the laval streams of candle wax. My heart – what was left of it – crumbled.

This was different from [the Rite of Passage](#) – then, I could not see that fear in her eyes; yet here, I was even more helpless than back in that crystalline cavern with the Neanderthals and although she had not yet seen me, on either occasion, I saw her now.

A sensory meltdown threatened to swamp my cogniscence, like the pre-emptive rotations of a washing machine drum before the final spin kicks in proper. All of these emotions, skittering like a neon Skalextric along the neurological tracks of my brain, combined to make the next passage of events even more muddled in my mind than they probably were. And they get muddier every time I try to recollect exactly what came to pass, so bear with me as I relate this particular passage of events – it is difficult on so many levels.

The sheet whipped back, like I said, that much I can remember. Vlad signalled to Billy – I caught this thought through the airwaves – as he, Vlad, did not want to get his hands dirty on a mortal. I felt heat – not anger – and directed it at Billy, not Tepeş. Whether I held Billy responsible for everything or whether the Son of the Dragon deflected the blow and I had indeed intended it for him, I cannot be one hundred percent. But from the force of the heat, Billy was stopped dead in his tracks.

With all attention suddenly focused upon me, no one saw the second henchman swipe Billy's throwing axe from its sheath on his thigh. The first time Billy noticed it not there was when he intended to use it against me, mere seconds after the familiar henchman had procured

it. At that point, Perveen transmitted through her mind Billy's weak spot, his Achilles heel. Her message was so loud – I'm sure it was telepathic but it sounded like a scream.

For the second time, Billy was stopped in his tracks, confusion abound without his sacred weapon. As he stepped aside to see where it had dropped, the second henchman came striding into view, hood hoist away from his head with that same smog as had enshrouded Vlad disappearing in a vapour trail behind the head of...my brother. Whether he had picked up on Perveen's projection or not, I took no chances, transmitting an image of Billy's weak spot. My brother needed no second invitation and the axe went swooping in an upward arc, whistling through the air with the force of a double-handed uppercut, splicing the diagonal of Billy's flag-birthmark before the vampire had a chance to grasp what was occurring, the keen blade scooting off the top of his head as if it were no more resistant than a hard-boiled egg.

Down the ancient vampire crumpled, no dignity in this second death for Billy. The wisps of dirty yellow hair were suddenly slick with slime and blood, that old ruff looked ridiculous with only half a head protruding from it, as if Billy had been hammered down inside his own costume. The light behind those soulless eyes flickered malevolence one more time through the torrents of blood and brain that streamed down features twisted even more askew than usual, before it extinguished for good. On the altar, in the chamber, a spell had been broken; my sister started to rise.

Twenty-six – A Glimpse of Hell

Whether Vlad had been a little rusty or he was just not used to such disruption in his presence, I know not. If my brain was struggling to process any one single line of sensory input before my brother had slain Billy, with the spell broken that had held my sister in paralysis and my vampire bride-to-be and tutor thus far seemingly not knowing which way to turn for the best, I could feel my brain starting to turn into, for want of a better word, mush.

That haunting choir from whichever chasms of the Earth they inhabited beyond this chamber struck up their malevolent melody once more, as if Vlad's anger was the conductor to their tempo and choice of refrain. In a whoosh, my brother's clothes burnt to a cinder and he was left naked as Perveen and I had been not so long beforehand.

What struck me as odd about my brother was that there was no sign of life behind his eyes. The last time I had seen them alive, or they had seen me in fact, was prior to the evening I saw him being escorted out of our room by two henchmen under Billy's command on the other side of the grave. He neither seemed to acknowledge his current state of disrobement nor had he recognised mine or our sister's presence in this chamber before, during or since he had spliced Billy's head with the vampire's own throwing axe. Not on a perceptible level, at least. All I can suspect is that, as the eldest sibling, a sense of human responsibility not vanquished through whatever metamorphosis had caused his current flux had risen to the surface to protect us in our hour of need.

Yet even now, his vegetative state remained – the lights were on but Mr Brain's inhabitants were either off on a picnic or had circumvented my brother's passage to this side of the grave somehow. Perhaps he had been made a [trampire](#), as Perveen had described happens when inadequate vampires linger too long or extract too much of 'the juice' from their victims. If so, his attack on Billy may have been motivated by revenge and had nothing to do with either of his siblings' predicaments. On this latest evidence, I am glad that trampires are not extinguished as soon as their condition is recognised, but offered refuge in Subterranea. Given the atrocity he had just committed, however, and under in whose presence we were, I had an ominous feeling that his life as a trampire himself would be short-lived. This was confirmed just seconds later as, reminiscent of a scene from [Star Wars](#), my brother started choking as if being strangled by some invisible hand and his body levitated just far enough to convince me it was a death grip that held him. Yet, he did not struggle.

Vlad was doing that thing again, looking at all of us but none of us at the same time. Despite my desperation to help my brother, the Master was calling for me. His silent command was so powerful, it conveyed what may happen should I not obey. Not in a direct image or explicit words or demonstrating any pathway of events, but through the medium of colour. It was not one colour, but a horrid hue of many, like a fresh bruise surrounding a stellar nebula but emanating the threat of anger and violence. That colour combined with his reputation were enough to know that should I not obey, there would be torturous carnage. I yielded.

I see now why vampires eyes are often depicted as hypnotic. They say that our eyes are the window to our soul. How I wished that Vlad had a veil of cataract net curtains. Looking deep into his pupils I was dragged past the retinal wall in a very real and somewhat psychedelic trip, an outer body experience to play with the burning souls and dance with the daemons in the fiery pits of hell to which his eyes were a gateway. Scorched by suffering madness, daemoniac delusion and ferocious flame, it was more than sanity could stand. I was on the precipice when I, erm, well, popped back into my undead body and back into this chaotic inferno.

I had been gone but seconds yet felt aged beyond count of years. Time is just a way of measuring between appointments, a way of ticking off the corporeal days of decay from cradle to grave. I, of a sudden, understood why vampires were eternal – refusing to bow to time, that gene in the blood that gets transfused through the kiss of the vampire – they are coded to live outside of time. For all time. It is only on an earthly plane when the gene is young and needs fresh blood to truly embed the code into the undead's DNA, that the mortal and immortal realms overlap. I was about to be given that gene – the choice (as if I had one) was still mine; forsake it and die right there or accept it and be welcomed beyond. What was a boy to do?

Without giving myself the second option, I thrust my neck at Vlad. For one tantalising moment, I thought he would refuse it. I brought to mind the orgasmic convulsions that both Perveen and Billy had undergone upon first tasting my blood in my bedroom and on the

winter bridge.

Next thing, he was inside me. Had I just controlled the lust of the most celebrated vampire of them all?

I had felt neither Billy nor Perveen pierce my flesh, even when Billy used his axe to puncture my forearm, but this was brutal. Anyone who has undergone general anaesthetic and had a cannula inserted into their vein and the instant tooth-ache effect that rips through your limbs as fluids are forced into your bloodstream will know what I mean – this was akin to that, only it was not adrenalin and anaesthetic I was being blessed with.

Up until that point, I thought I had beheld many of the attributes of this ethereal existence; however, Billy's blessings and Perveen's promises were but child's play compared to this. After he had transferred the gene, Vlad drank from me, perhaps to sustain his own never-ending cycle of eternal life. I then drank from him, my first blood as a true vampire, from Vlad himself. The horrors he committed are not for this tale, suffice to say that I knew of them. I was complete.

With his blood came the essence of eternal life. Also, further instruction; to be executed with immediate effect.

Twenty-seven – Sibling Rivalry: To Die Or Not To Die

I had acquired the taste for blood. It filled my nose, coated my throat and reddened my peripheral vision. The fact that it was my sister from whom I was to take the next draught was neither here nor there. She was now alive to everything that was happening and, although the curse that had held her spellbound had been broken, abject fear was rooting her to the altar upon which she'd been lain for this very purpose – the sacrifice to bless our betrothal.

I turned and smiled at her as I advanced with purpose through the scarlet haze; the candles, too, were glowing crimson as they had before Perveen and I had entered this chamber. In fact, all colours combined to produce that same angry red that had pulsated as my queen-to-be and I had waited in the tunnel outside, when she'd tried to prepare me for something like this eventuality but my deaf ears had not listened. Although, I think that even she could not have foreseen this particular eventuality.

It was then that my sister realised what Vlad had commanded me to do. Shuffling back up the table on her hands and her rear, pushing with her bare heels to get away from me she found only the comfort of Perveen and Marie, who blocked her retreat and secured a shoulder each with both hands.

All this time I could feel the Son of the Dragon's eyes crawling over my back, enjoying this sport. And to think, I was now going to take the life of my sister whose honour only minutes earlier I had tried so very hard to defend, an ill-advised act that had ended up with Billy being slaughtered, my brother in a death grip because of it and me with my soul lost

forever. I had presumed to have momentarily took control over the Master's lust. What little I knew.

In my hand, I found Billy's axe. I cannot recall picking it up - perhaps like the [sword of Gryffindor](#), it belongs to the one who has rightfully claimed it the last. But that could not be right as my brother still lived, although dying was very much the order of his current predicament. Yet, he had made it is to slay its previous owner with it - then it clicked. I did not like the answer, but I had been given my instructions. This axe would never leave my possession for as long as I had the will and strength to wield it, that was for certain. Billy had slain its owner, whoever that had been. My brother had slain Billy, however his possession would be minimised by the fact that I would be the one to bring about his merciful death. At that, I wanted this artefact's life-cycle to be complete and think no further of it.

By the time I reached my sister, she had simply accepted her fate. The only glare she cast my way said "Get it over with quickly, you bastard." It contained anger, true, but also said, "If there is any decency left in you, you'll do what you have to quickly."

That hurt more than any mortal wound would ever have done and my conscience had been pricked. I turned to see if the Master had noticed my hesitance, but his attention had turned solely toward my brother, whom it looked like he was attempting to draw through a mental wringer. But it was doubtful whether there was anything left in his mind capable of being twisted further. If there was, Vlad would find it.



Without thinking, I split the skin of my sister's forearm with the axe as Billy had done to me what seemed like years ago, but in truth was little more than two days hence. The reason for me choosing this method was, at my last recollection, my fangs had not yet toughened to puncture a victim. As I knelt beside the altar and took my sister's arm to my lips, however, my fangs touched the abrasion before my mouth got close; they had become as hard as tungsten and I felt her blood enter my system through them, as if being drawn up a pipette. All of a sudden, I knew my sister's life. Her loves, her hatred (I was at the top of that particular pile, but the loathing was merely superficial), her ambitions and her son and daughter. My niece and nephew.

The part of me that was still human pined for release, wished that it could express the self-loathing at the action the corporeal body was undertaking, when really the winged soul wanted nothing more than to usher my sister forth and send her back to her children, as Billy had fooled me into thinking he had done after the [Rite of Passage](#). Perhaps on some subconscious level I had acknowledged his deception and that is why my blow, although Vlad's comment toward sullyng his hands on my sister was the catalyst, found its mark on Billy instead.

I guess my sister felt that emotion, too; saw that I'd tried to defend her honour when she had lain defenceless beneath the sheet in some state of conscious rigour mortis; her expression softened, only slightly, as if she were about to say something. As she thought formed in her

mind, another voice cut over our sibling connection. It was Perveen, my almost-queen.

Twenty-eight – Revisited – an old trick in my bride's head

"Sebastian," Perveen implored, talking through my sister's oh-so sweet blood to me, implementing the same method by which she had broken into Billy's thoughts as they had drunk from her mother all those years ago. I looked up, across my sister's belly, to see Perveen drinking directly from the same vein in my sister's opposing forearm. She was beckoning Marie to join us. Anger flashed again, but, feeling my sister jump as if charged with a powerful defibrillator, I reined the emotion back in forthwith.

As Marie sank her teeth into my sister's neck, Perveen started up the blood conversation again.

"Sebastian, I can save your sister, but it will have to be in exchange for you taking the life of your brother," she said.

"How can you do that?" I asked back, again through the channel of my sister's body; I heard my sister think 'Don't mind me, will you?' and almost laughed. We were, the three of us, plunged fang deep into her but extracting only the tiniest amount of blood each.

"Vlad wants vengeance on your brother for killing Billy. Look, he is toying with him now. I only hope his mind is as distant as it looks". I couldn't help but agree with her.

"Okay, what should I do?" I asked, still unsure of how Perveen would save my sister. I made that known, too.

"I know how Billy cast the spell that made your sister appear dead. A toxin I carry that will instil paralysis can be released that lives as long as its twin remote host does. I also carry the antidote; there are few of us that have this power. I can do it again, but you will need to slaughter your brother to keep Vlad's attention. It will put your brother out of his misery, save your sister and redeem you in Vlad's eyes for instigating Billy's murder. Do not be fooled into thinking that, just because he has 'made' you, he would not think twice about killing you also.

"Marie can then take your sister's 'body' back upstairs to my chamber whilst we go through to consummate our marriage. It is the only way," Perveen finished. Marie concurred, as, of course, did my sister. Three against one, and all women to boot, although all three now vampire women at differing stages of evolvement, granted. It was another case of I had choices, but only really one. I was getting kind of used to that.

Regrettably, I broke free from my sister's arm. For a moment I was deaf, as if I were on an aeroplane and the pressure had plugged my ears; I needed them to pop. I sucked the last of my sister's blood from my fangs and 'pop!', I was fully functional once more. Vlad felt me sidle up next to him.

"There is nothing left of your brother," he said, out loud, not resorting to telepathy. "He is of little use to me, other than perhaps to share in his blood. Although, I had planned on taking your sister," he grumbled, almost as if he'd been robbed of the pleasure and wanted the ceremony over with swiftly now that his prize had been sullied.

Whether it was with Perveen's help or upon her telepathic prompt, I cannot say, but I summoned a picture of the three of us drinking my sister's blood and imagined her dead as I had done when had I approached her, all of which portrayed to Vlad that he had missed out on that score.

"Very well. Do me the honours...Sebastian?" he was about to say that he didn't want to get his hands dirty, but must have seen something fearful in the blow I emanated earlier and he either was unsure of himself or could just not be bothered to get embroiled so late in this day.

Without thinking twice, I repaid Billy's debt to my brother, but ensured that I took his head clean off at the neck, no suffering. His body slumped forward after first landing from its levitated height with a barefoot slap, back onto the floor and executed a perfect parachute roll en route to its final resting place. Before his body had stopped rolling, Vlad had his hand buried deep into my brother's chest up to the wrist. He extracted the still-beating heart and drunk from the trailing aorta like it was vessel containing a fine '78 Bordeaux.

"If you ever take some of the flesh in by mistake," he said to me as a teacher may be passing on how to work out a dovetail joint in carpentry class, "suck the blood from it, but spit it out. Always remember to spit out the flesh," he repeated, then cast my brother's heart into one of the hollows that housed a skull-encased candle. The whole orifice exploded, flames licked up the walls and reached out into the room like dragon's breath. Then they all went out, apart from those that bedecked the ceiling.

In an instant, the shadows ruled this chamber once more.

I could see that the sheet had been rolled back over my sister's face. To my right, Billy lay slain, to my left, the decapitated body of my brother in a similar state.

"I will send for someone to clean this lot up," Vlad said, as I struggled to hold in another blast of heat. He had given me life eternal, but it did not mean I had to like the man/beast/vampire/[nightstalker](#) - whatever it was he was.

"No need, Master," Perveen said, curtsying before Vlad, "I have already commissioned Marie to do it. Her sister met with," she paused, all for the effect, "an unfortunate accident. Marie can bury them altogether." Perveen finished. Marie nodded her acquiescence.

"Very well," Vlad agreed. "Come. We have an audience awaiting and I cannot bear their incessant chanting any longer. You shall be wed before day breaks on the surface of the mortal realm above us, I assure you of that."

At that, he wrapped his cloak around himself, the hood went back up in the same motion and

he disappeared before a wisp of smog into the right passage beyond the altar, even further into the belly of the Earth. Perveen sighed and, but a few strides behind, we followed Vlad Tepeş into the unknown so that he could preside over our wedding ceremony. It was new ground for both Perveen and I alike; neither of us really knew what to expect.

End of Part Three.

Part Four - ???

Twenty-nine -The trek along the cavern wall

There was something wrong with Vlad. His whole demeanour had smacked of ill ease in the chamber, a lethargy that belied his usurping of power and conquering of many fronts during his recorded mortal life. Not to mention his lack of interest in taking human life, given the personal tally of souls he'd sent to the other side, to date.

I couldn't put my finger on it, even though he'd dragged me in to glimpse his very soul, a thriving version of Hell if not Hades itself; he seemed preoccupied.

As we followed him deeper into the seldom-visited pits of Subterranea, the impression that he was not all there intensified. Once past the tunnel entrance, the pathway almost immediately opened up into a wide ridge cut into the wall of a gigantic cavern. The sheer granite wall rose hundreds of feet above us and descended to our right, plummeting into pitch night.

However, this underground void was well lit, at least at the level we trekked, as if we were taking a pleasant stroll along a mountain path in The Highlands just before twilight on a mid-summer's eve.

The rim along which we followed Vlad was easily wide enough for Perveen and I to walk two abreast holding hands, although I would rather have had the inside track had I have had the choice. Dust kicked up beneath our footfall as if the pathway was seldom used. Vlad, I noticed, left no such trace at his passing over the shale-laden walkway; I did not mention it to Perveen.

We were descending, but only at a light gradient. The path hugged the wall, forever bearing left; it was impossible to see our destination even though the Master was advancing further and further ahead as we followed. With no fork in the path and no sign of being able to either ascend or descend the sheer grotto walls, keeping pace did not seem important. We were not going to lose him per se, but there were times when I could have sworn he was not wholly there. As if he were a hologram but the power sustaining the light-beam image was fluctuating at the whim of an aging generator.

The chanting grew louder the further into the pit we traversed, yet it was impossible to tell whether it came from above, below or resonated from the very granite itself. It was nowhere, yet everywhere. I could see how it would become irritating after a time. I could not stand the melancholy melody much longer and, feeling certain that any conversation would be drowned out or, if Vlad heard us he would not be in the slightest interested in what we had to say, I began to probe Perveen again.

"Why did you show me that image of us making love like that?" I asked, now suspecting that the act in which we were involved in her telekinetic transmission may not be entirely possible in our truly metamorphosed state. I had no doubt, now, that I was a fully fledged, union card-holding brethren of blood after receiving the infusion, the memories and the gene of outside-of-time from Tepeş, himself.

"I did not know whether you would come of your own volition", she said, hardly apologetic, more in genuine doubt whether I would have followed her into this life without the dangling of an imaginative carrot. "I cannot confirm whether our love-making is not possible, only that, from what I've learnt, we will be expected to perform some erotic ritual before the elders. It is all a part of the vampire wedding tradition."

Of all my readings from the light side of the grave I had come across nothing that had told me of vampires joined in wedlock. Seducing, slaughtering and entrancing virgins to do their bidding, yes. But of these ceremonies and what rites to be adhered and vows to be honoured that Perveen insisted were part of vampire lore I was completely ignorant. That we would be expected to perform the consummation of our marriage before an undead audience filled me with more dread than I had felt at any moment since we had exited The Well of All Time and brought to the level. A level that looked to be eating further into the Earth than any man-made mine had ever burrowed.

Jacques de Molay, nineteenth-century colour lithograph by Chevauchet (Photo credit: Wikipedia)



"Who are the elders?" I asked, not wishing to question Perveen's judgement; her argument hardly filled me with confidence. Given Billy's power to impart deceitful information, I had good grounds for my lingering doubt.

"They are those whom Vlad brought here at the end of his mortal reign over [Wallachia](#), I think," she said, adding "A select few Knights who were to die before a French King outside Notre Dame inherited some special power at the stake..."

"Yes, I know the tale," I cut in. "[Jacques de Molay](#), the Grandmaster, was said to have brought both Pope Clement and [Philip the Fair](#) before the court of God to be judged for their sins against humanity and the Catholic Church shortly after the king had him and other Masters of The Order burnt before the ancient Parisian church for revoking his confession and proclaiming the purity of The [Knights Templar](#). But surely that was before Vlad's time...unless they had the secret and simply waited for destiny to deliver them the right man to come along to face the Muslim threat from Ottoman, a war they had waged themselves in the name of The Church and Christendom in The Crusades." I pondered this, exploring my

earlier thought which had grasped the equation, but had got the factors in the incorrect sequence.

"Is it possible he kept these Knights in Wallachia, that they were the secret of his army's success in unlikely circumstances. Were they offered safe refuge by Vlad, hence anyone who came near to his castle, especially the Turkish envoys, found themselves impaled or beheaded if they had discovered the secret and then left to die in the baking sun as a deterrent?"

"Did they steal into the enemy camps under cover of the night, these Knights who had found a way to cheat death, and bring the towns to their knees so that all Vlad had to do was complete the rout to further his reputation and win favour with Pope Pius? Suppose then, as Vlad felt age approaching, encroaching, he took them up on their offer and accepted the gene that rebuffs time and they all sought safe haven below ground, here?" I pondered, quizzing myself as much as Perveen, getting excited about the sense and logic in my argument now that I knew that preternatural existence could be taken to such extremes.

"You know more than I, then," Perveen said. "This is just what I think I know - I understand that you have your doubts. Even if I could not read it in your mind, it is etched all over your face. You put this chain of thoughts together as if by magic, but do you really believe them, all of the pieces of the jigsaw?" The question had the desired effect and I was momentarily set off my stride.

"It's okay," Perveen added, "I, too, am beginning to doubt a lot of the things I learnt from Billy...I understand if you cannot take my word as Gospel, knowing the source of much of my learning of this life, its capabilities, its history and its truths. Billy was not all..."

Her sentence trailed off into the abyss and seemed to catch on the ascension of a crescendo from the cacophonous choir. It sailed upwards, like down on the breeze, floating towards the ceiling before disappearing into the vast nothingness of the yawning yonder above - there was no way of knowing whether the ebony blackness above was below the earth or whether it was indeed the night sky. For the first time I saw genuine uncertainty in her eyes; I wished I could have offered succour, but I was as lost as she, following Vlad blindly to who knew where...

Thirty - A Shift in the Natural Order

"You must not doubt my love for you, Perveen," I said, this time daring to take her cheeks between my palms, pointy fingernails (the first time I'd noticed them) making dimples either side of her lips, as she had done to me so often already. It was my turn to try to instil confidence, take the burden of responsibility from those lithe, olive-skinned naked shoulders.

When we looked into each other's eyes this time around, with me peering down upon her never-to-be-fully-grown height from a seemingly taller perspective than I had been used to, with the blood of Vlad Tepeş still coursing through my veins, there had been a very definite

shift in control. I knew it, she knew it. And it affected her a great deal more, which is why I had to convince her now that whatever trial lay ahead of us our wedding would proceed as planned.

As we had both knelt at my sister's side, I had sensed Perveen's pure blood vibrating through my sibling's very blood cells, knitting broken fibres together in preparation for her stage one metamorphosis before joining us on this undead side of the grave. But nothing could prepare me for my first real draught of my queen-to-be's blood. I combed that ebony hair back, which slipped like silk through my fingernails, exposing a smooth, sleek neck; gently, I pierced the jowl, just beyond her jaw line.

The blood was pure, unscathed as a result of an unsullied mortal life; no wonder she had such vivid fantasies about what intimacy between a man and a woman could be. She had never experienced male contact in the way that she pictured it, with the two of us entwined, in and out of each other in every way imaginable. Every fibre of her being quivered as my lips drew closed towards my fangs, puckering her skin between lips that merely sipped from the bounteous well of blood, a stream pumping around her body like a river in torrent.

She closed off her mind, desirous of only the physical contact she'd been deprived of all of these years.

Her nails dug into the top of my [gluteus maximus](#) as she ground her pubis against my rising left thigh, taut with new muscle, forged by a master vampire's blood; I drew her up by her own firm rear so that she sat in the cradle of my hip and thigh. I kissed her eyelids, one at a time. Her legs clenched around that thigh, all sinew and steel since my making and she crushed herself against it, digging her nails in further to get her neglected womanhood as close to my flesh as possible.

Perveen's body flexed backward in an arc from her lumbar, those pert breasts thrust skywards, magnified by the fluidity of the ivory silk, crowned by nipples that looked as if they could have split the milky material of their own volition. I ran one thumb delicately between those solid breasts, the nail grazing the skin enough to draw the slightest trace of blood, a mocha strip on her brown décolleté in the waning light, darkening by degree the further down this pathway we had walked.

I bent forward and flicked at the incision with the tip of my tongue, so very solid in its purpose. I felt every fold and every crease of her tighten against the tendon atop my [quadriceps](#); she shivered and clenched her womanhood around me even more tightly, daring to lightly pound herself once, twice, three times.

I began to trace the line of my thumb beneath the hem of her sash, down between us across her belly button and the bright red ruby that sparkled there, even in the murk and down to the hem of her waistline, across the top of the soft sheen of silk, drawing ever closer to the top of

my own thigh as her breathing became shallow, heaving as...her eyes snapped open, she whip-lashed her torso forward and clamped onto my neck with an oh-so delicate bite. Even if I had seen it coming, I would not have been able to evade the cobra-like strike as her fangs purposefully punctured my vein. For one fleeting second she opened her mind, only to show me the pulsating of her every fibre, that when the time was right every inch of her being would be mine to do with as I pleased. But that time was not now.

A dark prince waited, as did his court. Reluctantly, she slipped off my upraised thigh, running the back of her fingers down the side of my cheek before nipping my chin with a playful bite.

Her feet hardly touched the ground before she was off, dragging me by the hand around the blind curve. Within yards we came to a halt, reaching a tunnel entrance that cut deep into the rock-face itself.

Standing in the shadows across the threshold was Vlad. He sensed the arousal in both of us, sniffed the very air as if he were a sommelier in the French valleys in '78, curating stock and checking its suitability for serving to the noblemen, lords and ladies gathered at a banquet. He nodded, satisfied.

At the click of his fingers torches ignited for as far as the eye could see, their incandescence stretching beyond sight into the very mountainside. labyrinthine forks split all ways, creating a trickery of perspective that perplexed the mind, leaving it not knowing which way was up, down, foreground or background.

The pathway immediately before us, however, was strewn with black rose petals. Vlad opened his arms, gesturing us forward so that we may step inside his ancient cloak. We accepted in silence, Perveen stood to his right, I to the left. The cloak enclosed us amidst a cyclone of black petals and down we went, yet again.

Thirty-One