Strange Pair
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“Mongols!” a man screamed as he rode hard into the village, his clothing dark with sweat and his horse’s coat practically frothing. My tired bones groaned at the word, but the warriors and peasants about me leapt swiftly to their feet, the glaze of fear in their eyes. They grasped at swords, bows and pitchforks and ran quickly to their deaths. I knew – they all knew – that a pitiful band of sixty men armed with old swords and wooden tools, stunted by either old age or rash youth would not stand a moment before the terrible and awesome onslaught of the Mongol Horde. Still the men rushed to the field, palms sweating and cheeks flushed with the blood lust that had kept us alive for so many generations. We had withstood Persians, Greeks and Romans – these horrible destroyers would either be turned back or forced to march over our fields slaked with the blood of every last man.

I rose slowly to my feet as the rest rushed away. My entire being was weary of war. I had seen enough blood and fire and destruction in two damned crusades. That is why I had left and braved the deserts of Palestine, the treachery of Persia and the harsh peaks of the Caucasus Mountains to come back home. I had not seen my beloved Ukraine in over one hundred years and the soil had welcomed me with open arms and the sweet fragrance of wild grass in the summer wind. The village of my childhood stood upon its majestic plateau, though any man, woman or child who might have recognized me had long since been given to the earth that supported them, nurtured and fed them so lovingly all the lives. I took nothing from this earth any longer, and gave it the same, yet it welcomed me like the prodigal son.

I had wished to stay here for a time, visit with my unknowing relatives and commune with the earth and air that had known my childhood, enjoy the peace of a forgotten existence. But even on those idyll plains the whisper of war and blood was carried by the wind, soft and silent as the approaching riders.

There were only two of them. A single pair of riders appeared upon the dusky horizon, moving at almost a leisurely pace. I held my breath for several minutes, continually expecting the monstrous Horde to follow them like some angry hand of God. Yet no thunder filled the air as they approached; the ground did not tremble fearfully under the weight of a thousand hooves.

Now we stood upon the crest of a hill, the village not far to our backs, a small, desperate wall of human flesh. The riders approached without hurry or hesitation. The steady plod of their horses finally reached our nervous ears and they stopped at the foot of the hill within easy reach of bows and spears. A taught silence filled the air. We stared at them in apprehension, confusion and proud anger. They seemed indifferent to our gaze, almost like children – party only to their own curiosity and self-assurance. For sixty men to fell these two strange strangers would be simple, and their gaze seemed to acknowledge that. Yet their stature, their exuded self-confidence, held us fearfully at bay. We had never seen a Mongol before, but this pair – a man and a woman – seemed to fit well the description passed from village to village of the horrible foreign conquerors. Their skin was dark and smooth, a light walnut polished to a shine, their bright blue eyes held in narrows slants. Their faces were flat but noble – assured of their power and might. The man was beardless and they were both young, their figures robust with youth and the stature of an ancient people who thrived beyond the wastes of Siberia.
God only knows what took hold of me to step forward. “You speak our language?” I asked in Ukrainian. They stared at me blankly. “Persian?” There was no recognition in their beautiful eyes. “Arab? Hebrew? Russian?” They continually shook their heads. I was sure I was beginning to either amaze or frighten the villagers.

Finally, the woman smiled a beautiful, hungry smile. Her teeth shined a pearl white in the light of the torches. “No, brother,” she said in the Kindred tongue. My eyes opened wide; I struggled to maintain my composure. “We have not but this in common.”

Again, just two of them riding slowly side by side. I watch from a lucky rooftop – seven stories that somehow survived the Armageddon. My Manhattan sprawls around me, the ruined vestiges of a decayed and empty age of humanity being slowly overtaken by nature’s green, inerrant hand. There is a certain clash and irony in seeing Tiffany’s overrun by kudzu, but a justice and a kind of homecoming that makes me smile.

Human life still thrives here amongst the ruins, carving its obstinate place in the world, daring the heavens to strike at it again – it will endure. Much to my dismay the nomads and pilgrims who for decades have used my island as a refuge and resting point have begun to settle here. Buildings that were still mostly intact have been repaired with wood and clay, asphalt and concrete torn up and gardens planted. A regular community has begun to grow and the restless earth welcomes them now freed of its prison.

Faerie life has begun to thrive, too. Hidden deep within the magick of Central Park the pixies, faeries and elves who faded a millenium ago have now begun to emerge from their magical hiding places. They glimpse with childish curiosity at the unsuspecting humans and this strange, new world. The elves and faeries are wary of my shadows and me, but the pixies are as fearless and curious as babes. They flock and play about my garden constantly now, gently teasing the magical shadows there. I endure some of their usual pranks, but there is a line drawn that they seem to recognize. I know better than to incur their wrath, though. Pixies are a small and frail race, but they are ancient and steeped in magicks even the greatest Ancients cannot fathom.

I hear Dew buzzing at my shoulder. Odd how each pixie’s wings makes a distinct sound, even more distinct than their tiny voices. “What is it?” Dew asks.

With a sharp, thin finger I point at the two figures approaching slowly on horseback. “Old friends,” I say.

Dew gives me a sideways glance and nods silently. He was among the first pixies to make my acquaintance, and we have spent many evenings speaking of places far away and ages long past. He knows that “friends” is not the right word at all. “Enemies” is far closer to the mark.

“How do you come?” I asked the strange Mongol pair. They were strikingly similar—perhaps siblings, perhaps lovers, perhaps merely beautiful like all the Kindred.

“For you, we come in peace, brother of the night,” said the woman. She was being exceedingly formal. I could not tell their age, but they exuded an air older than mine – more than 250 years.

“For them,” the man said, motioning to the villagers behind me, “we come in hunger.”
I did not hide my frown. A presence more powerful and devastating than the Mongol horde stood before me in simple if foreign clothes, gracefully astride beautiful mounts. I could see the hunger gleaming in their eyes, smell it on their breath. “These people are mine,” I said firmly, tightening the grip on the broadsword in my hand. The man laughed. “You cannot expect to claim—”

“Don’t be obtuse, Red,” the woman snapped. The man’s – Red’s – smirk vanished. He slouched like a scolded child. The woman turned back to me: “Your fealty does you credit, brother. But our journey has been long and we are hungry. And besides,” she dismounted in one swift motion, “you carry your age like a banner. You would be no match for us, Young One.”

My eyes grew wide again: “Young One”? Were these Ancients? Of the millenium-old kindred I had met only one: a gnarled but wise man in Madrid. He had smelled of tomb dust and incense, of ancient earth and dried blood. His control of magicks had been frightening and amazing. He had been a power to be feared.

“What is it, Vromn?” called Joseph from behind me. “What do they want?”

I became suddenly aware of the pack of villagers behind me, aware of both their agitation and apprehension. I was stranger to them still, arriving just the night before and not emerging from my tent all day. But I was Ukrainian of face, spoke their language, knew and revered their customs and their earth. They welcomed me with typical warm familiarity. They were my people and I had expected no less.

I turned and snapped “I’m bargaining for our lives!” The crowd of men seemed to make a collective gasp and clutch their weapons more tightly.

After a breath I turned back to the strange pair. The woman waited patiently, her posture erect and haughty. Red drummed lithe fingers upon his saddle. Yet they did not seem to be so old – older than my paltry two and a half centuries, but not Ancients. They did not smell of that ancient dust, their eyes did not seem wise and terrible all at once. They did not give that aura of power as the Spanish Ancient had done. But these were strangers, I reminded myself. They were Kindred, but from the Orient, far across the white Siberian wastes. Who knew what magicks they might control, what powers they may possess.

I felt the nervous stares at my back again, and turned slightly to look at them. Their faces were hauntingly familiar, like the ghosts of a warm memory, but now they were filled with anxiety. Despite that, their eyes were filled with a headstrong determination. I could see myself too well in these people: poor serfs who loved a stubborn earth and each other with a fierce intensity. My gaze sank to the ground, the earth that seen my first steps, that had provided my childhood with nourishment, joy and wonder. The air whispered through the tall grass, singing a summer song.

“Well?” the woman called. “We do not have all night, brother.” I could hear the sinister smile form on her lush lips. “You are welcome to join us.”

The phrase jerked my head from the ground and my eyes locked for a moment with Joseph’s. “Fire!” I yelled suddenly. “A torch!” The tall muscular peasant tossed his flaming torch to me with assured ease. I clasped the torch tightly and whirled about to face the strange pair with blood lust already glowing in my eyes. “Kill them!” I screamed.

The strange pair did not know my native tongue, but they had been alarmed. They understood exactly when the villagers swarmed screaming down the hill. The woman hissed as I lunged at her, knocking her across the face with the torch and then my blade.
“Glory!” Red cried in angry alarm, and then was tackled out of his saddle by Joseph’s enormous flying frame.

But, this strange pair would not be easy prey. A deep guttural roar erupted from their throats, an angry cry of only the Kindred. With claws extended and tremendous muscles tensed they tore angrily into the oncoming wave of human flesh. Through the intense pain of Glory’s gash on my chest I heard surprised screams and the wet sound of skin and muscles being ripped and torn.

But my kinsmen were true to their souls. They raised a shrill, thundering battle-cry of their own and swarmed upon the Mongols with desperate ferocity. In a matter of moments swords and pitchforks and the mere weight and press of flesh overwhelmed Red and Glory. Soon they lay upon the ground, lip and twisted, their flesh bruised and torn, their bones shattered and broken in countless places.

For a moment a silence pervaded the air as the villagers blinked and stared at their gruesome handiwork. I heard a deep rumble in Joseph’s chest that soon erupted into a loud, barbarian cheer from all of them. I remained silent, pensive, staring at the two abused bodies leaking thin blood onto the thirsty earth.

I watched over the gravesite for weeks. Eventually I began to feel the uneasy stares of the villagers and then packed up, said my good-byes and disappeared. Still I returned each night to the graves. I waited. When the first bit of earth began to shift and shudder I dug there swiftly and grasped the thin hand I found. Quickly I dug towards the body beneath the soil. I found a thin waif of a creature there, dry desiccated and drained. But the fierce, beautiful fire still burned in Glory’s eyes. I ripped her harshly from the earth and flung her to the ground. She drifted through the air like a leaf. Then I dug furiously for Red, found him just coming to consciousness, even thinner and more grotesque than his companion. I tossed him alongside Glory. They clutched desperately for each other, pressing their naked flesh tight together.

I glared at them for a few silent moments. “I could have easily destroyed you,” I said. “I could have had them burn your bodies to ashes then stamp you into the dirt. I could have dug you up sooner and left you for the blistering dawn.” They cringed visibly at these gruesome fates. It is not easy to kill a vampire, but it is possible. “But I did not. I let you live – if you can call your wretched existence alive.” I knelt close to them - they did not even have the strength to flinch away – and grasped their thin bony jaws with each hand. “Don’t think this mercy has no price. Nothing is free.”

Red’s frightened eyes became even wider with fear; Glory’s narrowed with helpless anger. Their grips tightened on the other’s translucent, sickly skin.

“Those are my people in that village,” I growled. “You cannot have them, or even lay a finger upon their mortal skins. No vampire ever will.” I lifted the strange pair like two dry twigs. “You tell any Kindred you meet, this land is sacred ground.” With a violent roar I tossed them away. They scraped, bounced and skidded across the dry earth, groaning with thin, weak lungs. I stood watching until they gathered the strength to stand and slip away in shame.

They came with the Mongols the first time, just before that great cataclysmic wave of angry barbarians who fought – who lived – for nothing but war. My furious warning to Red and Glory had been effective, but only for my Kindred. While no vampires save myself have ever set foot within the village, the Horde swept over and through it not a few weeks after I had left. I learned through folklore centuries later that the battle had been viscous and heroic, but in vain.
Sixty-some of my relatives and neighbors were brutally slaughtered, practically run over, by the masterful horsemen and archers of the Mongols. The village was left standing, but ravaged: most of its pitiful and modest buildings were burned and destroyed, its women raped and children stolen. The ground wept the blood of my people and took them lovingly back to the soil.

As I stand upon my crumbling perch, a thousand years later and as many kilometres away, I can still hear the screams of those men and women, violated and slaughtered, their blood and tears soaking ground like rain. My eyes narrow in anger as I watch the arriving pair. A millenium ago there were exotic harbingers. What horror rode at their heels to my Manhattan? The setting sun paints a deep bloody red, almost a violet, upon the remaining clouds of a swift summer storm. The pair’s shadows loom dark before them, groping, reaching, hungry.

It almost surprises me that they are still alive, so to speak. Even from a distance their gait and posture exude a hubris which has destroyed even greater Kindred many times before. They must be Ancients by now. I have been one now for over a century, slowly gaining and mastering the magicks hidden deep within our unhuman souls, crafting my power with the faeries of Manhattan. How much longer has this malicious pair had to gather and craft their own magicks?

“Shall we meet them?” Dew asks. His polite phrase is soaked with hostility. It still surprises me to see the angry and vicious side of the playful pixies.

“Of course,” I say, and we float to the decayed and cracked street. Gravity, I discovered one day, is a relative and malleable thing. Even the gravity of events – though I have yet to master that control over even myself.

They halt as soon as they see us approaching. Their shadows loom like great hungry towers on the broken asphalt, their eyes glowing a faint red. Red begins to laugh. His deep, throaty chuckle quickly explodes into a malicious guffaw. Glory remains silent, taut and angry.

“You!” Red roars through his laughter. He is clearly amused. “Of all places, times and people, you again!”

“I thought they knew you,” Dew says quietly, riding upon my shoulder.

“Not well,” I reply.

“That could be even more dangerous.”

“I would rather they never have known me, even of me.” I grimace. “I would rather they both have been long ago destroyed.”

I cannot see him, but I sense Dew raise his eyebrows and turn to me in surprise. In our long discussions we have stumbled upon my love of life and death, but intense hatred of destruction – the death of the unliving. “Perhaps I should go – “ he begins.

“You will do nothing but sit there,” I snap. “And warn the others should things go as I suspect.”

He shifts uncomfortably but remains silent.

I stop a few paces away from the strange pair. They still seem out of place, aliens, strangers: their dark skin and thin glowing eyes, flat features and long dark hair. Their mounts are decorated and hanged with an odd melange of glittering junk and beautiful fabrics of an almost forgotten age of humanity, that decadent era called the twentieth century. Red has finally ceased his guffaw, now only looking at me with smug eyes and a stupid smile splitting his face. His companion Glory remains silent, almost glaring at me in appreciation and bitter
remembrance. I can see the hatred playing across her beautiful face, tightening the corners of her lips and clenching her fists.

We stand in absolute silence for a long while, the air tense like a tightly coiled spring. I shift my weight, and the crumble of gravel echoes in the empty street. It is an almost stupid question: “How do you come?”

For the first time, Glory smiles: a ravenous, prideful grin, baring sharp, gleaming teeth. “Hungry, of course.”

I grimace again and Dew gasps in my ear.

The haughtiness of Red’s voice grates my nerves: “I don’t suppose you claim those people as yours?”

I give a beat, almost battling within myself. I do not enjoy the presence of the new settlers, do not enjoy the unspoken burden of caring for and looking after them as part of my island.

“I do,” I say. “You shall not have them.”

“Oh, but we will this time, Vromn,” says Glory, slowly dismounting.

I freeze and stare at her in complete surprise.

She allowed herself a slight chuckle. “Do you think you were and utter unknown, Vromn? Far from it: you are an Ancient, like us. We are few and far between. Our names are whispered in fear among the Young Ones, even among mortals.” She took a few steps toward me, and opened her arms for stupid showy emphasis. “You are a celebrity, Vromn! Everyone on the East Coast knows of your tranquil Manhattan and every Kindred knows your name.”

I grimace yet again.

“What? Did you think you could be forever an unknown, Vromn? Forever hide from the rest of the world, holed up on your little island? Hah!” Glory turns away, walking slowly, her back bared wide.

Something turns in my gut. Dew senses it, too. “We should not have come,” he whispers.

“But I digress.” Glory stops beside Red, who is gleaming with childish pride. “This time you will not stand in our way, Old Man. We out-number you tonight.”

“They do not!” Dew’s whisper is fierce in my ear.

Red smirks wider. “Even more than you think.”

My gut wrenches harder and my legs tense, but I know it is far too late. The scream and roar of a mob of punks fills my ears as they pour from the dark alleyways and around the corners. They come from all sides, roaring barbarically, baring filthy teeth and caring pipes, boards and cudgels.

“By the nails of Jesus!” Dew cries, twirling about to see the surrounding mob. I fight with myself to remain calm, my mind whirling with ways of escape.

But by the time I hear the click of the shotgun, I know it is too late. I glare at Glory and Red, who are standing calmly, haughtily in a throbbing sea of filth and blind hatred. My eyes glow a fiery red, and then I feel the burning agony of a shotgun shell tear through my chest.

“Vromn!” I hear Dew exclaim, and then a blinding white light fills my vision.

Followed by a welcome, utter black.

From black there comes grey, cold but glowing. It grows slowly brighter, from a dim shine to a luminescent steel to a warm sand to a pale milky fluid. I can feel nothing. I am
merely a pair of eyes in a now almost-white void. Is this death? This gut-churning floating, groundless and unknowing? But the solid white about me begins to melt away, revealing figures and shapes that are strange yet familiar, as if I am revisiting an old haunt, a city after many centuries. The streets are there, dark alleys and old homes, the courts and sidewalks, but all are strange and disfigured, shaped and molded by some grand, inexplicable force. There is the fold of a canopy, the bulge and flow of sheets and blankets, dark walls adorned with mirrors and myriad photographs and paintings. A warm, smoky smell of cigarettes comes to my nose, scratching at my throat like an old lover. Everything seems to glow and blur, as if seen through a distorted lens.

A muffled sound flows in my ears, sliding warmly into my brain. It is at first nothing but a sound, a tone, little more than a simple noise. It is repeated, and begins to take form. It comes again and again, growing and shaping slowly.

"Vromn." Hardly intelligible. What does it mean?
"Vromn." It comes again. "Vromn are you there?"

The voice is absurdly small, yet familiar. It is calling for something, or someone. I find the strength to loll my head to the left, my hair sliding on a silken pillow. Upon the edge of the bed stands tiny figure, perhaps no larger than my fist. Its tiny wings gleam in the soft lamplight. "Vromn!" he cries. "Vromn! Amen! You’re alive!" He pauses, troubled with his words.

“Well, not —. You weren’t destroyed. Thank God.”

I feel a smile push across my lips. “Who are you?”

He falls silent, the glow wiped from his eyes – but only for a moment. “Ah. Your memory will return. You took a few blows to the brain.”

A small block falls into place. I feel a shot of pain scream through my body.

“Don’t move!” my small companion says. “Mother of God, you’ll upset your wounds.”

He begins to flit about me, removing the covers and then tightening and replacing bandages.

My eyes widen to see the shattered and battered state of my body. It is no wonder my very bones throb: one entire arm is clamped tightly in a splice, a leg is covered by several layers of bandages and still bleeding, the other spliced like my arm. Bloody bandages swath my whole chest. I can feel my head wrapped tightly, too. I don’t want to think about the holes in my skull and gut, the broken bones and torn muscles.

“Jesus-Joseph-and-Mary, Vromn. You Vampires may be immortal, but it still takes time to heal from these mortal wounds.”

Wounds? Well, of course these are wounds. But how was I wounded? I close my eyes, and the dim memory of two vicious forms comes to mind: red, bloody, prideful and hateful creatures.

“It was damn fool of you to meet that strange pair like that, Vromn.” My caretaker finishes dressing my wounds and lands again on the edge of the bed. “I was lucky to be able to drag your corpse from those punks. And now…. ” He hangs his head. “Now you should see what they’ve done to your people.”

He flies to the deep maroon curtains across from the bed and draws them aside.

I gasp, and shove the covers aside.

“Vromn!”

“Damn my wounds, Dew,” I snap and stumble to the window. It is late at night, but still great clouds of billowing smoke fill the clear air. They block the stars and are illumined by fires that ravage about my island. I press a bloody hand against the window and snarl.
They came with the Mongols, with a sweeping wave of destruction and fear.

“Vromn!” Dew cries as I stumble towards the door. “You can’t be serious. You can hardly walk. You can’t expect to face them, let alone stop m them.”

“Shut, up, Dew.” I swing the door open – it seems impossibly heavy. The distant smelled of fire and spilled blood floods inside on a pressing breeze. The air carries the cacophony of muffled screams and wails. I lean against the doorframe for a few moments.

“Vromn, please.” Dew tugs gently at my sleeve. “Go back to bed. There’s nothing you can do like this.”

I wobble precariously, my knees suddenly becoming liquid beneath me. I cling desperately to the doorframe until I feel solid ground beneath me again.

“You see,” Dew says. “You’ll never make it to the village, let alone stop those two monsters.”

I breathe heavily. “I think,” I say, “you’d be surprised at the strength of an Ancient. I stand as straight as I can, but completely on my own two feet. “Oh ye of little faith.” Slowly I descend the steps from my door to the rough, broken street. Dew looks forlornly from the doorway.

In truth, I do not know where I am going. Rationally, Dew is right: there is no way that I could possibly hope to fight and defeat the strange pair in this state. My body is knitting itself magically back together – but slowly.

“Well?” I say to Dew. He heaves a pixie-sized sigh and flies to join me.

I limp slowly towards Central Park. As I approach, the trees seem to call to me, their quiet, calming whisper floating on the breeze. The shadows in the park are deep, and the raucous thunder of the ruined village does not penetrate the forest. I trudge slowly along a wide, clear path, Dew following silently at my shoulder.

Finally I come to the lake and sit on the verdant bank. Normally the water glitters with stars reflected in its calm surface, but tonight, dense black clouds of hideous smoke blot out even the full moon. It is a sinister reminder of an age long past when the haze of millions of cars choked the sky of New York. My feet dangle precariously above the water that became poison to me after the Armageddon with Angels’ blood. I heave a great sigh and stare bleakly at the calm pitch-black water.

I am sitting here in a dull, blank limbo, staring at the water and listening to the quiet mantra of the trees. Dew sits beside me, maintaining a solemn silence. My mind is churning, fighting with the surrounding calm. Scenes of the Mongol invasion are blasting through my mind, the smoke-tinged air, blood coating and soaking the ground, the screams and cries of maniac warriors and fallen children mingling in the air. My blood boils and my fists clench painfully. I did not see my village fall, but the sweeping wave of war caught up with me like fate. I have fought in many wars, perhaps too many for my soul’s own good.

Over all of these bloody memories float the alien eyes of Glory and Red, glowing slits surrounded by skin the color of polished walnut. Strangers amongst the estranged: Kindred of the Orient

In the Far East a man named Bodiharma centuries ago crossed the treacherous Himalayas, carrying the wisdom of Buddha from India to a war-torn China. He carried with him a way of being – not a philosophy, not a religion – the Chinese called Ch’an. Ch’an stressed the achievement of enlightenment, the attaining of the state of Buddha. This nirvana was achieved
either by gradual steps, like the slow wind of a river, or suddenly, like a tremendous strike of lightning.

I stand suddenly to my feet.


I say nothing, but turn and walk resolutely towards the flaming village. I am not limping anymore and my wounds have stopped bleeding; but my skin is still fresh and all my bones are not healed. Most movement is still fiery pain, but a slow burn now instead of fireballs running through my limbs. How long have I been sitting here?

“Vromn!” Dew cries. “What in the nine hells are you doing?”

I turn to him and smile my Buddha’s smile.

Dew lurches as if I have struck him. “Oh Mary Mother of Mercy, don’t you smile at me like that.”

I turn and continue on my way.

“Damn it, Vromn.” Dew puts himself directly in my way. “Peter smiled at me like that on his way to be crucified. And I’ll be damned if you march yourself into that village into the jowls of those two jackals.”

I smile again and merely sweep Dew aside.

“Vromn!” Dew cries as I pass him. “I’ll not follow thee to thy grave!”

“I have died already, Dew,” I said, not turning to look at him. “What should I fear my own grave?”

As I pass West out of the park, the roar of the burning village becomes slowly louder and louder. Eyes of frightened pixies, faerie and elfin folk peer out of the deep forest shadows as I go. I cannot see them, but I feel their presence and their states of pity, sorrow or disbelief. I carry past, whether to my doom or victory I do not know – nor do I care.

The stench assails me, but I pass unhindered into the burning waste of the village. Bodies are strewn about like broken pottery, and the decimated asphalt is sick with splotches and pools of blood. The cries of the dying have long disappeared but I can still hear them echoing among the destroyed buildings.

Yet I walk as if oblivious among the rubble and fire. I step slowly, purposefully down the street. A large group of punks and trash is reveling fifty metres down the street, dancing, drinking and cajoling about a huge bonfire. Sinuous and feline, Red and Glory move about the crowd, offering them drink, dancing with them, singing and carousing. They are devils among their demons, drinking the blood and defiling the women of their spoils.

I stand only a few paces from this ring of grotesque debauchery, glaring at them in their revelry. My blood boils anew as I fight to keep from replacing the punks’ slick leather jackets with the silk shirts and chain mail of the Mongols. But the Strange Pair does not change. They remain constant in my frantic hallucination. I fix my hatred upon them.

“Red!” I roar. “Glory!”

The raucous noise tumbles to a halt. All eyes turn upon me – a lone black shadow against the raging fires. For a moment a tight silence settles upon us, even the roaring fires seem to quiet themselves.

Red’s tremendous laughter shatters the silence like thin ice. “You insolent fool!” he yells. Suddenly he launches himself toward me, flying swiftly through the air.
I draw my shotgun more quickly, though. My black trench coat flutters to the side and does not fall back by the time I have pulled the trigger. Red’s head disappears in a hideous shower of gore and his body falls unceremoniously to the filthy ground.

Dew was a fool to think that I would leave my mansion unprepared.

An unearthly cry erupts from Glory and she flings herself ferociously at me. I try to pump my shotgun, but Glory’s anger speeds her through the air. She tackles me with incredible force. The shotgun flies far into the shadows and the two of us skid ten metres along the broken asphalt. I feel my still-healing wounds rip and tear and suppress a cry of agony.

Glory clasps her clawed hands tightly about my throat, her eyes glowing a bloody red and her fangs bared. Blood flows into my eyes, but I do not need to see. My nearly senseless hand flies up to smack with a solid squish into Glory’s face. Her grip loosens with the impact and I rise to shove her away. But Glory quickly recovers from her sudden imbalance, and flings me back to the ground, clasping her hands solidly about my neck once more.

“Damn you, you sack of shit!” she screams as I struggle beneath her. “I should have torn you apart the first time. You and that cursed faerie.”

“I’ll have you burning on your own cross for that, harlot!”

Anger melts to stunned confusion as Dew’s voice thunders over the raging fires about us. As Glory looks up a ball of magical fire blasts her in the chest, flinging her to lie beside Red’s decapitated corpse.

I stand slowly and turn to look at Dew. Behind him, hovering like an ominous white cloud, is a horde of his fellow pixies. An angry drone floods the air: the hum of their tiny wings grows louder with every moment, quickly overpowering the noise of the fires.

I let a wry smile slip to Dew, but he barely nods.

His sudden change of expression, however, belies Glory’s silent lunge. I turn about swiftly and my clawed hand collides with her chest. Anger again drains from Glory’s face as I push her slowly off my forearm.

I growl, blood bubbling from my throat. “I’ll see you burning on that cross.”

The angry drone of the pixies swells to a ferocious roar as they fly past me to the stupefied pack of thugs. The enormous sound rises like a wave and engulfs me as I lose consciousness yet again.

At the south end of 57th street two crosses burn atop a heap of mutilated corpses. Glory and Red are too far past consciousness to feel the flames licking hungrily up their flesh, but it consumes them nonetheless. Dew and I watch on with exhaustion and grimness as the flames filled the pre-dawn light with a hellish glow.

“I do not know,” Dew says, “if you are extraordinarily brave or simply incredibly foolish, Vromn.”

“Does it matter?” I say softly, being careful to allow my body to mend itself properly. “Nine hells, it matters,” he exclaims. “I’ll not follow your every crazy expedition.”

“I need no one to follow me,” I say as I continue to glare at the pair of flaming crucifixes, as if glaring into the gaping maw of Hell itself.