

The first two pieces in this sample are excerpts from ongoing projects (*Skate or Die*, and *Beatrice Muffins vs. The Damned*, respectively). The first is a sci-fi/fantasy piece, and the second is contemporary fantasy. The next two pieces after that are short stories, one of which I wrote for a public reading (*The Curse of My Imaginary Vampire Boyfriend*) and the second of which I wrote for r/nosleep, a subreddit devoted to short horror. Both were well-received. I hope you enjoy the stories.

*Skate or Die (excerpt)*

On clear days, you can sort of hear the sound the sky makes. It's the sound of the cold space between the dirt and the vacuum whirling around itself. It's the kind of sound that makes you think, hey— it's gonna be alright.

It was that kind of day. Big empty blue sky, roaring far away. A man was halfway to sleep by the dry riverbed. He liked to warm himself on the smooth black rocks like a snake. He imagined painted turtles probably sunned there, back when there was water. If you squinted your eyes really hard, the man might look like a painted turtle— a painted something, at least. He was tattooed head to foot. Maps and symbols, animals and names, faces, mantras, weapons, skulls.

There were little whitish scars all over, too, like hundreds of paper-cuts on his arms, legs, and chest. A lay person might assume he'd survived some kind of unusual torture. Perhaps that wasn't far from the truth. They were stretch marks. The kind you get from the sort of muscle growth which only comes from a workout regimen so grueling it legally counted as unusual torture.

Upon his forehead, huge letters, was his name:

BLOOD KEITH

The tattoo was new. Skin was still red and sore. He'd only been named within the week, and he was still becoming accustomed to using it.

Blood Keith couldn't fall asleep wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted, like some people. He had to be in his own bed with all the lights out. Ever since he was a kid. This quasi-nap by the riverbed was something closer to meditation. The smoke and filing metal and trash of the camp got into his head. Every now and then it was good to come out and just lay naked on a warm rock, you know? Nothing weird about that.

The other thing about the sky is that, on a clear day, it's almost like a blank TV screen. You can project whatever you like up there. Babies spend a lot of time staring at the sky, getting carried around in those baskets, looking up. They sense, perhaps, the presence of a parent carrying them, but they see that big blue expanse up there, and maybe, Keith thought, that's where

God comes from. The wailing roar of the sky. The sense of being carried by a familiar force. The swaddling comfort of predestination.

That all changes, of course, when you start walking around on your own, and keeping your eyes on the path ahead. You make mistakes. You end up in places you never meant to go. You end up getting BLOOD KEITH tattooed on your forehead.

Whatever memories Blood Keith projected onto the vast blue sky didn't last up there long. That was because, on this day, at this moment, a piece of the sky was falling.

The object, which was tiny and flat and shimmery like a fish, rocketed through the stratosphere in a straight line from whatever arcane origins a thing such as it had into the exact space Blood Keith's face currently occupied. He heard it before he saw it. The whistle of this little thing shrieked over the peaceful roar of the sky, and then there was a flash of light on metal, and Blood Keith understood something very sharp was coming at him very fast, and made the very sane decision to roll out of the way. He rolled off the black rock and into the riverbed, hitting the ground at the same moment as the object rammed through the rock and cracked the whole thing in half.

Blood Keith rubbed at new cuts and scrapes. He sat up in the dry riverbed, incredulous. He looked up, panning for any more falling sky chunks, and climbed back atop the rock to discover that the thing had torn right through his pants. He'd been using them as a pillow. Now he could use them as scrap fabric. Maybe in some kind of cute collage of all the ways he'd nearly died.

The object, which was embedded in the splintered rock, was platinum and rectangular with odd little buttons on one side. It looked like a TV remote. From space.

Blood Keith reached into the rock crevice and wiggled the mystery object free. He wiped off the dust and turned it over in his palms. It was heavier than it looked, like a gold brick. But it felt hollow as well. There were slits in the sides, long and marked with little metal grooves. The buttons had little letters on them written in some odd, jagged alphabet, consisting of sharp but concentric angles twisting on in one another.

“Jeez,” said Blood Keith. “Maybe it’s a bomb,” he guessed to himself as he started pushing all the buttons. “Maybe I shouldn’t be pushing all these buttons.” But nothing happened to him.

Blood Keith had once known a handful of people who might be able to decipher this language. Eager, brilliant scientists who had once been his friends. Perhaps one of them would have even known what this object was, or where it came from— or at the very least, would have been able to track the trajectory of its fall to some celestial source. But Blood Keith didn’t know any of those people anymore. Most of them were dead.

Greatshaman Gatorbreath would find this interesting. Blood Keith knew he’d need to take it back to her sooner or later. He was obligated. She would interpret this as a sign from the gods, probably of the coming of a messiah and the salvation of their people. Gatorbreath was the smartest person he knew. She knew tech, and medicine, and was probably the last bastion of common sense that the tribe had. But she was also a nutjob. Queen of the nutjobs. Nutjob shaman of a nutjob tribe. Blood Keith’s tribe.

He tied his black shirt around his waist and gathered up the sad scraps of what had once been his favorite and only pair of pants, and walked through the dead field all the way back up to the camp.

The Skullcrusher tribe had put down temporary roots in an old military training camp. Heaps of burnt scrap were shoved against all the fences as a preventative measure against dust and ash storms. Street signs painted with the Skullcrusher logo— creatively, a hammer crushing a skull— stuck out around the perimeter. There were rib cages and human skulls out there as well, dressed in bondage gear and impaled on pikes. Blood Keith had helped his compatriots unearth these skeletons from the layers of ash and dust that blanketed the training camp when they first arrived.

Blood Keith approached the big front gate, a chain fence with old boards nailed over it beneath two empty guard towers. He knocked on the fence, sending shivers rippling all across it, like chimes. A small slide-away window opened up in the wood. A foul-looking mouth appeared in that window, with silver teeth and snakebite piercings on both lips. A deep voice hissed,

“Who da man?”

“Fuck the man,” Blood Keith replied. The gate opened.

“Welcome back, Blood Keith,” said Gut-shredder, locking it shut behind him. “Lookin’ good.”

“My pants got destroyed, man.” He unfurled the fabric so Gut-shredder could see. The left leg and entire groin region had exploded into loose threads.

“Shit, man, you bust one hell of a nut. Up-top.” He high-fived Blood Keith.

“No, it was this,” Blood Keith passed the space remote to Gut-shredder. Gut-shredder turned it over a few times in his clawed gloves. “It fell from the sky. Outta nowhere. I gotta bring it to the Greatshaman.” Gut-shredder frowned. He, like every member of the Skullcrusher tribe, had his name tattooed in the middle of his forehead. GUT-SHREDDER. The letters wrinkled as he arced his brow.

“Can’t bring anything to the Greatshaman right now, my dude. She’s in the Soup.”

“They’ll let me in.”

“Nuh-uh.” Gut-shredder passed the space remote back to Blood Keith. The little bald man cracked his neck and stretched his back. Gut-shredder’s tattoos were all of wolverines and tanks, barely hidden under a too-tight sleeveless denim vest with massive shoulder pauldrons. They were made of solid steel and probably gave him serious back problems, but he wore them all day anyway. “It’s serious. They got the red light on. She’s been in there since breakfast time and the red light hasn’t gone out.”

That wasn’t good.

“I gotta see her. She’ll want to see this asap. I don’t care how stoned she is.”

“Go ahead and try, my dude. It’s your funeral.” Gut-shredder waved Blood Keith away and went back to playing Mario Kart on his security camera feed, under his blue tarp.

Blood Keith walked past the armory, the cook-pit, Snakemilk Jake’s workshop, and a bunch of little tarp-tents that people had set up all around. Skullcrusher mothers and grandmothers taught little Skullcrusher children how to weave net traps from chopped-up aluminum cans. Auntie Coyote, with her spike-studded collar and greying half-shaved dreadlocks, was cooking something in a great big pot with four younger girls, who were all clearly only just old enough to get their first nipple piercings. They eagerly skinned and chopped up the rat carcasses Auntie had

strung up days ago to hang. One rubbed the meat slices with Industrial Seasoning while another fried them in large batches on a scrap metal slab over a huge cook-fire. Auntie shoveled the cooked meat into her cauldron. The heavily spiced, pungent aroma of fried rat stew wafted across the campsite. The odor was objectively upsetting, but also upsettingly mouth-watering. Blood Keith surprised himself when he realized he'd learned to enjoy rat meat. Just one of several surprises he'd endured after joining the Skullcrusher tribe.

Snakemilk Jake's workshop gave off a different kind of upsetting aroma. Snakemilk Jake sat in a blue-and-white striped lawn chair in front of a tall tarp filled with scrap metal and junkyard treasures of all kinds. A plume of horrid, choking black smog poured out a hole in his ceiling. The skinny stoner was the weaponsmith, mechanic, and tech expert of the tribe. He was as brilliant as he was stupid. He always smelled sour, and he looked like a goblin with his big eyes and second set of teeth. He waved to Blood Keith, knobby fingers moist with engine grease, and spat on the ground. Blood Keith waved back.

"How's she treating ya?" Snakemilk Jake called. He was referring to the hoverboard Blood Keith had received upon his Naming, which Snakemilk Jake had crafted.

"She's a beaut," Blood Keith laughed dutifully. He sounded like some kind of east coast dad all of a sudden.

"She handle OK? You tried the rocket pedal yet?" Snakemilk Jake sipped from a green can and wiggled his bare toes.

"I haven't uh— taken her out, much, yet." Blood Keith hadn't tried using the board at all. He was afraid it would combust. It looked like it was held together by prayer. He was pretty sure that Snakemilk Jake had cobbled it together fifteen minutes before the Naming ceremony from old microwaves. "But I will!" He lied, so that he could keep walking away.

"Let me know!" Snakemilk Jake called back after him.

Interacting with Snakemilk Jake always left Blood Keith with the feeling like he'd stepped in something rotten. There was some nasty quality about the man that Blood Keith couldn't place. You know how some people are just like that? Like you meet them and instinctively know they do something weird like taking regular dumps in other people's laundry.

Blood Keith made his way to the main gymnasium, leftover from the army days. It was guarded by two burly lesbians with spiked and dyed mohawks, Baphomet and Sharkpuncher.

“Hey guys, I gotta get in to see the Greatshaman. It’s an emergency,” said Blood Keith.

Sharkpuncher shook her head.

“Nah, she’s in the Soup right now. Can’t get in,” she said, “not till she’s done anyways.”

Blood Keith passed her the space remote.

“This fell from the sky. It’s a sign from the Gods. Nearly killed me.”

Sharkpuncher barely glanced at the object and passed it along to Baphomet, who tried pushing the buttons.

“Wonder if it goes to something?” Baphomet said. “Think I’m changing the channel on some big TV somewhere?”

“Knock it off, dude.” Sharkpuncher said. “Like, it’s probably just trash. Space trash. But if it’s dangerous you shouldn’t mess with it. Blood Keith, you’re gonna have to wait a while. The light’s been red all day. The Bishop says she’s been seeing signs.”

“What kind of signs? End time stuff again?” Blood Keith took his space remote back.

“Where are your clothes?” Baphomet asked.

“Space trash,” Blood Keith replied, and showed her his destroyed pants. “This thing shot down from the sky and ruined ‘em. Split this giant rock by the river in two. Barely missed me, by the way. I’m was very heroic.”

“That raises more questions than it answers. Were you not... *wearing* the pants when it...” Baphomet mimed a missile shooting to the ground and exploding.

“*Obviously* he wasn’t, or else he’d be a bloody torso,” said Sharkpuncher.

“Don’t judge me,” Blood Keith said. “Are *your* pants always on your body? It’s only weird if you make it weird.”

Sharkpuncher rolled her eyes, Baphomet nodded in agreement.

“Space trash isn’t an emergency. Come back in an hour. She might be finished then,” Sharkpuncher turned the conversation back to business. She was a mean and loyal guard dog, definitely the kind of person you wanted on your side, and almost impossible to bribe. Baphomet was not.

“I’ll throw the next deathbowl match,” he said to her. “If you let me in, Baphomet.”

Baphomet’s grin grew huge. Sharkpuncher scoffed.

“Don’t you dare. You wouldn’t forsake the glory of an honorable fight for—“

“*Fuck* yes. Make it look real,” Baphomet clenched her fists in excitement. “You gotta make it look super fuckin real for my mom. She comes to all my matches. She always bets against me. I want her to see what it feels like to lose.”

“Jeez,” said Blood Keith. “Yeah, of course.”

Baphomet squealed and did a little hop, her many chains and guns clinking together as she did. Sharkpuncher just scowled at the two of them as Blood Keith went past.

“Don’t blame me if the bishop executes you,” she called as he walked down the hallway. The door closed behind him. Sharkpuncher had a thing for Baphomet. She wouldn’t stop him.

The gym was completely dark. Black as pitch. The kind of black that feels like oil as you walk through it. Greasy, heavy. Silent, though. And empty. He heard the echo of his own footsteps and judged where to walk from that, sort of like how bats see, but way worse. He followed the sound of low chanting.

Down one hallway, turn a corner, down another. It was like a labyrinth. He imagined there were probably drinking fountains, maybe old corkboards, benches— the type of stuff in gym hallways. He couldn’t see any of it, but it was probably there. He knew he was getting closer by the thick smell of incense, layered with other, more occult smells. He could hear the sound of chanting.

The darkness lifted. A thin, red light gleamed around the next corner. As he turned, he saw its source— an old streetlight, disembodied from its post, gleaming ruby in the darkness. Next to it stood the Bishop. The thin old man glanced Blood Keith’s way, and turned his gaze back to the shadows in front of him. He wore a black turtleneck and duster, and around his neck hung a bronzed lizard fetus. He had a thin white goatee, and only modest neck tattoos.

“You need to leave.” The man had a grave, deep voice. Blood Keith stepped toward him.

“The Greatshaman needs to see this,” he said. He held up the mystery thing.

“The light is red. You know what that means. Whatever the problem is, it can wait.”

“I can help.” Blood Keith offered.

“She didn’t ask for you to help.”

“Why is she in there alone?” asked Blood Keith. “You should be in there, at least.”

The Bishop made his mouth into a line.

“It’s my job to be out here. What happens in the Soup is shaman business. I guard the holy texts. I don’t overstep my bounds, and neither shall you.” Blood Keith walked toward the door behind him, from which wispy smoke drifted. The Bishop gestured to his handgun in its holster. “If you touch that door, I will shoot you,” he said. Blood Keith pushed the door open anyways. The Bishop did not follow him, nor did he draw his weapon.

The room was filled with smoke and steam and thick red light the color of cherry coke. This fog swirled around him, liquid-like, and made him sweat. The chanting he’d heard down the hall was loud now. It was the low, wailing howl of an old woman, only vaguely formed into words, and barely separated by breaths.

It really was like a soup, that fog. He breathed it in, drank it into his lungs. He wasn’t in there for long before it started to make him feel light. The Greatshaman had been in here all day.

He found her laying splayed out on a yoga mat in the far end of the room. It had once been a weight room, but all the equipment had been taken and smelted into weapons and armor, and now it served as the Greatshaman’s door to the spirit world. The key which unlocked the door to the spirit world was drugs. She was a strong, broad old woman with more piercings than Pinhead. Her body and clothes, a simple black silk ritual robe, were slick with sweat and condensed vapor. Her chest rose and fell heavily as she sang into the smoke.

“Hey, man, are you okay?” Blood Keith asked.

She stopped her chant. He briefly worried she’d just died.

“Water,” she croaked. Blood Keith found an orange Gatorade cooler full of water in the corner, and poured some into a metal cup. The room was hot as hell. A sauna. That was something people always said. *It’s a sauna in here!* Blood Keith had never been in a sauna, but he supposed this is what one was like. Large hot plates boiled perfumed water and psychedelic mushroom extract to steam in the air, and bundles of incense sent black streams of heady smoke up in clouds around the old lady. He brought her the water and pushed it to her lips. She didn’t open her eyes, but drank it down thirstily, and then called for more.

He brought her four cups before she finally opened her eyes and sat up.

“Blood Keith,” she said to him. “I was looking for you this morning. But you’d gone away.”

“I went to sit by the riverbank, and think about some old stuff. Sorry.”

“You should have waited until breakfast to go down. I could have used your help.” She grimaced, and took another deep, long gulp of the water. “The devil is here.”

“I saw the light,” Blood Keith said. “Everyone says you’ve been in here all day.”

“All day, eh? How long has it been, then?”

“It’s almost suppertime, man.”

“Shit,” Greatshaman Gatorbreath laughed. “I’m so stoned right now.”

“You need to get out and go breathe air.”

Greatshaman Gatorbreath grabbed his arm suddenly. She was sweating bullets, but her hand was cold as ice.

“The devil walks beneath us. Upside-down. He’s trying to turn himself right-side-up. Like a great big tick on the world’s back.” Tears welled in her eyes. Blood Keith sat down next to her, and grabbed her other hand. She closed her eyes and wiped her tears away, calming down. “Blood Keith, will you chant with me? We’ll finish this up and go get something to eat.”

Blood Keith agreed, and they both closed their eyes, and inhaled the Soup. Blood Keith knew the words by heart.

*“Ash, protect us. Ember, empower us to protect ourselves. Death, let us not fear as we walk your path. War, bless us with your glory. Bounty, draw us to you. Mystery, may we know you. Darkness, may we find ourselves again. Great haunted cosmos, we are the hungry ghosts of a world not yet dead, and we live as vessels of the unquenched vengeance of the unliving good against the unjust. Evil cannot walk here. We have taken this place back for the ghosts. We have taken this place back to haunt it. Evil cannot flourish. Evil cannot stand. Evil was mankind’s master, but we are not mankind. We are transcendent. Begone.”*

Greatshaman Gatorbreath was crying again. She collapsed into Blood Keith’s strong arms. Not in a romantic way. It was just a fact that Blood Keith’s arms were incredibly strong.

“Did it work?” Blood Keith asked.

“No... No... No, it’s still here. But,” the shaman sat up and sighed. “We might as well quit. I’m starving anyhow.”

Blood Keith put out the incense fires and turned off the hot plates. His head was swimming. He was more than a little buzzed by the time he and the shaman made their way out into the hall, and they both cracked up at the Bishop’s exasperated frown.

The sun was low in the sky when Auntie Coyote rang the dinner bell. They served the Greatshaman first, then Bandit Chief Gorelust, then the Bishop, and so on and so forth until the laypeople got their serving of spicy rat stew and veggie mash. Sharkpuncher tapped his shoulder in the serving line. He jumped, and saw her smirk when she turned around. She was the only Skullcrusher taller than Blood Keith, broad-featured, built like a human tank, with a deep scar over one eye that she once told him she’d gotten while trying to rob Satan himself on the road. He believed her. She passed him a bundle of patchy leather and denim.

“From Baphomet,” she said, and suddenly glanced away. Then she coughed and spat. “She says you’ll need ‘em for the fight, because you need something to piss through when she makes you cry.”

Blood Keith unfurled the bundle.

“Wow! Jeez!” He said. New pants! “These are beautiful!” He slid them on underneath his makeshift kilt, untied his shirt, and pulled it over his torso.

“Used to be mine,” Sharkpuncher said. “Baphomet also told me to tell you we can tailor ‘em for you if there’s too much crotch space, because of your small you-know-what. Those were not her exact words.”

“She does understand that I’m throwing the match as a favor, right? Maybe save the trash talk for the ring, and lay off the dick stuff somewhat?” If the Skullcrusher tribe could get through one day without bringing up his dick, or anyone else’s dick, or pussy, or whatever genitalia, he’d be able to die happy.

“Bribe. Not a favor. But I’ll tell her if it makes you uncomfortable. And, seriously, though, I can tailor those if you need to. They might be baggy on you. I got thick legs. That’s what they used to call me back when I was Civvy. Thick Legs Melanie.”

Blood Keith glanced around and eyed a junk pile nearby. He hopped out of line and grabbed a rubber electric cable, which he tied through the belt holes around his waist.

“Got a belt,” he said. “They fit great! Baggy is the style now.” He beamed at her, and her lip twitched uncomfortably. There was mutual understanding that this was the nicest thing that Sharkpuncher had ever done for Blood Keith, and that it had nothing to do with Baphomet.

“I’m gonna make a fortune betting against you,” she said.

“You’re a chill dude, Sharkpuncher,” Blood Keith patted her gargantuan shoulder.

Blood Keith explained exactly what had happened to the shaman over dinner. They ate in her sleeping tent, along with the Bishop, and to Blood Keith’s dismay, Snakemilk Jake.

“What do you think? Not a bomb, is it?” The shaman said, pushing all the buttons.

“Nah. This metal, whatever it is, looks tough. Probably’d survive an explosion. It survived the fall,” Snakemilk Jake replied.

Greatshaman Gatorbreath slept in the only real tent in the fort— authentic North Face from before the Big Boom. It was orange and white, and the sacred symbols of the Trash Gods and the Ghost Gods were painted on all the walls. Gods of the here, and gods of the beyond. Totems and herbs hung from her ceiling, made from old CD’s and glass bottles and other pretty things. The four of them fit quite comfortably in there.

The Bishop stroked his goatee.

“It’s not a piece of satellite. This language is not one I recognize. None of the old cultures built things that looked this way.”

“New, then.” Blood Keith said.

“Maybe.”

“I don’t know what this thing could be, my friends,” said Gatorbreath, “but its coming here and now cannot be a coincidence.”

“The red light,” said Snakemilk Jake.

*The Devil walks beneath us. Upside-down. Like a great tick on the world’s back.*

“Our crops are failing. Our hunters catch only rats. Our raiders return empty-handed, or not at all. Our mothers give blood instead of milk. The Devil is here for us, and there is no chasing him away this time. He’ll claim us in the end this time.”

“Gatorbreath—“ the Bishop sighed.

“Shut up. The Gods have sent us this thing. It came from the sky, you said, Blood Keith. The domain of the Ghost Gods. The Ghost Gods sent this to us. To you.”

“The Ghost Gods have it out for me, I guess. If I hadn’t moved in the last second they woulda sent it straight through my skull.” Blood Keith said.

The shaman nodded.

“The Gods don’t fuck around.”

The Bishop spoke up. “Listen, friends. If we accept that the Gods have sent us a holy artifact to act as the conduit of our salvation, we acknowledge that the Fifteenth Chapter is at hand.”

“I’ve been saying the End Times were coming forever,” said Gatorbreath.

“That means that a Messiah has been chosen. But we have identified no Messiah. It’s certainly not Blood Keith.”

Blood Keith was offended. But he said nothing.

“The problem with prophecies,” the shaman said, “is that they’re never clear until they’re over. I care about the here and the now. And we’ve been given an artifact, here and now. It’s our sacred duty to chase its purpose. Snakemilk Jake, are you sure you have no idea what this might be?”

“Yup. No screws, no seams, looks like some freaky god-shit to me.” A glimmer appeared in his creepy eyes. “But I do know about a guy who might know. Blood Keith, you know him, too. Vester Vick, out in the wasteland. He’s a legend. Out of his mind. Bad sort of dude. You know him, right?”

“I knew him,” Blood Keith said through his teeth. “Back when I was Civvy.”

“If anyone on the planet knows anything about this thing, it’s Vester Vick. But we’re gonna have a helluva time getting him to chat. No one’s seen him in years— meaning, really, nobody who’s gone to see him ever came back to tell about it.”

Blood Keith didn't doubt that. Sylvester Vick had the kind of theatrical insanity you only ever saw in old horror movies. Blood Keith was a little scared of him the entire time they worked together, and always suspected he'd go full Batman villain when left to his own devices for too long.

"I guess I could try to talk to him," Blood Keith said. The Greatshaman nodded.

The Bishop suddenly snorted.

"So we're all onboard with this, now? We're sending Keith, an outsider, to bring a holy artifact from the Gods to his old capitalist, heathen, opportunistic bosom-buddy, who will *certainly* steal it for himself, and use it to build bigger bombs and worse plagues and, and, wipe out the rest of us all with his hubris?"

"We've been over this, Bishop," said Gatorbreath.

"I stand by my words. I swear, I'm the only one around here who cares about the sacred texts at all anymore." The Bishop unzipped the tent, grabbed his dinner, and stormed off. Gatorbreath rubbed her temples.

"Snakemilk Jake, could you give us a moment?" She asked. Snakemilk Jake bowed deeply as he took his belongings and went back to the mess hall with the others.

The shaman motioned for Blood Keith to hold out his tin cup. She poured him some brown boozy drink from a big canteen.

"Don't mind him," she said.

"I try not to."

"Well, I do."

"I guess I do too."

Gatorbreath sighed and reclined into her bean bag, taking a long swallow from the canteen.

"He helped found this tribe. You know that."

"Yeah."

"His grandpa was a prophet. One of the original Five. In the time after the Big Boom, he was ostracized from the Civvies with the others for his loony talk. They all had to scrape by in the wasteland, petitioning the wild men and merc groups and canny caravans for disciples. The

Bishop watched his family work themselves to death for everything the wasteskater tribes are now, and he feels that our Gods are his birthright. Lots of people waltz in here and join up, get named, etcetera, but Bishop feels like I've been giving you too much insider info on holy stuff too fast."

Blood Keith drank from his cup. It tasted like old rum and bad wine.

It was true that Blood Keith had more or less stumbled into the Skullcrusher tribe and immediately became next in line to become Shaman. It had been about a year and a half ago that they'd pulled him out of a burning helicopter deep in the salt mire. Aunt Coyote had fed him cactus goo and mushed-up crickets through a turkey baster while Gatorbreath patched up his wounds and engaged in ritual healing to draw the poison out from his DNA, with the help of what passed as the tribe medic—a drunk old man named Trent Saw-Arms.

"It's a good thing I have saws for arms," Keith heard him saying as he'd blacked out that day. When he woke up on a yoga mat in a tent the next morning there were two messy "surgical" scars on his right and left sides. "We had to get your appendix out. I always forget which side that thing is on. Good thing God gave me two saws," the old man laughed, and tipped a blue sedative pill into Keith's mouth from one of his saw arms.

Even though he was an outsider, and a *scientist* at that, Gatorbreath had taken an immediate liking to him as soon as he got back on his feet. Eager to help out and repay his rescuers, Keith led them to the half-exploded laboratory he'd escaped from, and pointed them in the direction of the good loot. He'd had ulterior motives, of course. He always had ulterior motives back in those days. But those days had passed and he didn't want to think about them anymore. He was Blood Keith now, wasteskater, warrior, and apprentice shaman. Friend to the Skullcrusher tribe and loyal, honest, and true to those friends. Nothing that happened before mattered.

"He doubts my faith," Blood Keith said to the shaman.

"He doubts your allegiance. Faith has nothing to do with religion." Greatshaman Gatorbreath smiled, the deep wrinkles in her face creasing up like very fine fabric pulled through with a thread. She was beautiful in that way that very old people are beautiful, with scars and laugh lines and frown lines and all the years visible in their skin. "To the Bishop, the prophets and their flock are his family, they're his birthright. From his perspective, if you're not in with *him*, you're

not in with the Gods. If he thinks his daddy wouldn't like the cut of your jib, the Gods shouldn't either. You waltzed all up in here and I gave you a mantle of honor before he could decide whether he hated you or not. From his perspective, you never earned the right to be part of his family. And there's greater changes going on in the clan, too, that he doesn't like— you know," Gatorbreath took another long swig from her canteen, evidently forgetting that Blood Keith had a purpose for being there, and sinking into comfortable gossip, "Different folk coming in, ways changing, old folk dying, people hungry and weak from the blight. He doesn't like that this thing that was supposed to be *his, his* family, is something out of his control now."

"You're so smart." Blood Keith drank from his cup, too. The lingering effect of the fog and the new effects of the booze mingled and swam in his brain. "I always look at you and think, 'jeez, she's so smart.'"

"Nah. Just old. You talk like an outsider when you get booze in you."

"It's good to be smart, man. I think it's good. It's not *bad* to think it's good, man."

"There's more important things to be, among our people." The Greatshaman closed the lid on her thermos and tucked it beneath an open copy of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. *Reese Witherspoon Tells it All!*

"What do you think, Blood Keith?" Gatorbreath asked him.

"About... which thing?"

Gatorbreath handed him the space remote. "All of it."

Blood Keith pondered, and shrugged his massive shoulders.

"It doesn't look terrestrial," he said. "That was my first thought. My second thought was old military satellite piece or experimental aircraft— spacecraft— something. Maybe not even from above the atmosphere, it coulda exploded off some machine on the ground and gotten launched our way— that's the most likely one. Explanation. These symbols, they could be Korean. I don't know Korean. Or Tagalog. There's actually a lot of languages I don't know. All of them, except this one, actually. There's no reason for me to believe that it has supernatural origins."

"But you brought it right to me anyways."

"Yeah."

“As a scientist,” Gatorbreath said, “how would you suggest we proceed, when an unidentified flying object crash-lands in our midst?”

“As a scientist? A good one, or the kind I was?”

“Both.”

“If I’m trying to be a good scientist, I’d consult experts. I’d use every safety precaution at my disposal. You’d have to take radiation readings, test it for explosive elements, write down its mass and properties, and gather as much information as possible without damaging the object before going any further, if further analysis is required before we know its function.”

“Okay. And what if you’re being a Keith scientist?”

“I’d crack it open with a buzzsaw.”

Greatshaman Gatorbreath nodded thoughtfully.

“I think Snakemilk Jake is right. And you’re right, too. And the Bishop is right. The Gods have given you a breadcrumb trail to some kind of answer here— for better or for worse. At heart, you’re still an outsider. But I believe— and I’m right— that your spirit is a Skullcrusher spirit.”

That night, there was great jubilation as the Skullcrusher men, women, and children all gathered around the Slaughter Ring for an evening of blood sport. Gut-shredder, Trent Saw-arms, Lady Rabies, and Attila the Hunk faced off against a trio of giant mutant boars. The meat was deadly inedible, but it made for good gambling and better drinking. The firelights flickered red under the cloudy black sky overhead. Sharkpuncher and Baphomet pelted crushed-up cans at the gladiators, laughing and shouting crude insults in good jest. Blood Keith drank only plain water from his personal canteen, which he could keep in his brand-new giant pants pockets. He liked the energy. He liked to fight. But he never liked to gamble. He’d gambled enough in the past, with more at stake than he had any right to risk, and he’d lost dearly.

The boars shrieked like men when Gut-shredder plunged his spear through their bloated yellow bellies, and pus spewed out onto the killing floor with the creature’s oily blood. The Skullcrushers screamed and cheered with bloodlust and excitement, exuberant to be alive and breathing while the hulking monster between them bled out and died. Its rotten innards spilled

into the rotten earth, back where they came from, where it all comes from, where it all goes.  
Mud. Dark, sulfurous.

When it was over, they shared the cold leftovers of their communal dinner, and the mothers and fathers put their children to sleep while the rest of them, the lonely ones, walked about the camp, picking things up, washing the pots, and watching for trouble. Blood Keith was among these. He walked the perimeter of the Skullcrusher fort, on the outside. He was on guard duty for the first shift this night. The sky did not seem so comforting anymore in the full dark, no stars. The roar of the wind sounded more like the roar of some terrible animal. He shivered and tightened his grip on his warrior's gauntlets, mindful of the wind in the dead grass ahead of him, and behind him the fading laughter of his tribe, backlit by the red light of the fires against the low-hanging clouds.

*Beatrice Muffins vs The Damned (excerpt)*

Camp Budgie's dining hall was decorated with fake wood panel walls, green Elementary school lunch tables, and one huge, kitschy wooden cross with an inscription that read "All I need today is a little bit of COFFEE— and a whole lot of JESUS!"

It was where the Peace Methodist pilgrims stored all the party snacks and wine coolers which would sustain them for the days to come, since Judd Budgie's cooking was inedible. As Beatrice walked in with her boxes of lemon bars, she discovered that Recipe-Stealer Helen was already in there.

It appeared (from the way Helen's rear end stuck up into the air as she rustled around through the tins of baked goods) that she'd moved on from simply stealing *recipes* to stealing all the food directly.

"Yoo-hoo! Save some for the party, sweetheart," Beatrice snickered. Helen stood and smiled. She had a plate stacked high with crumbly chocolate squares.

"These are for Lizzy. She's sick, the poor dear," said Helen sweetly. "She's been writing to me, you know, she *loves* my best bars."

Ann and Marge, the two cronies who followed Helen everywhere like a Greek Chorus, nodded emphatically.

"Is that so?" Beatrice pretended to speak sweetly as well.

"Why, yes," Helen went on, "she said, 'you know Helen, I just could *not* get over those best bars you brought! How do you make them?' And I said, 'well you know, they're easy, you just use saltines and peanuts and butterscotch chips,' but she said 'no, no, I could never make them the way you do, Helen, you *must* bring me some more.' And lo and behold! Now that I'm here she's come down with the flu."

Everyone knew that Helen's so-called 'best bars' were *actually* Georgia Poe's cracker-stack bars. She brought them to fellowship all the time before she moved to Florida. Shared the recipe with the whole congregation. The nerve!

"Pity," said Beatrice, opening her teddy-bear tin. Pop. "You know, I wonder if she likes lemon?"

“Well, she’s a chocolate gal.” Helen laughed and pressed the tin closed again. Pop.

“They say citrus is good for the flu,” Beatrice said. Pop. Her nimble fingers plated six powdery almond lemon bars on a dixie plate. “They’re my *original* recipe.”

“Oh, Helen! You won’t stand for this!” Ann and Marge cried.

“The more the merrier,” Helen smiled with all her thin white teeth. The four of them clacked up the musty wooden staircase to the attic. Camp Budgie’s attic was a big green room with a great big oak table, and bookshelves with leather-bound encyclopedias and bibles. It smelled like asbestos and worn fabric. Originally intended to be a kind of bible-study room, in the recent decade it had become more of a storage space for files, glass milk bottles, old bed frames, and the broken coffee machine from the kitchen. It struck her as odd that a flu-ridden Lizzy would choose to make the attic her sickroom.

“He-looo, darling!” Helen sang, rushing under the threshold. “We brought goodies!”

Lizzy Budgie shuddered under a thin white blanket. Chains rattled. She lay on top of the oak table, fully concealed by the sheet.

Upon her sharp inhale the sheet drew tight to her entire form like a vacuum-seal. The musty air was thick with an unnatural chill.

“Who is it?” rose a voice beneath the sheet.

“Why it’s me again, Helen! Ann, Marge, and *Beatrice* are here as well. How are you feeling, my dear? It’s been a lifetime.”

“Helen. Ann. Marge. *Beatrice*.” The voice repeated. Then it laughed. Deep and uneven, like a bird’s imitation of a voice. It sucked in a breath and went still. No further comment.

“Why, Helen,” Beatrice took the other woman’s arm and gently pulled her back, “you’re certain she has the flu?”

“Supposed to be dreadful this season,” Helen nodded. “I mean, just look at her.”

“I use anti-bacterial,” added Ann.

“Best to use anti-bacterial,” agreed Marge. Both women pulled little bottles out of their purses and squeezed sanitizer onto their hands in choreographed unison.

Helen broke free of Beatrice’s grip, trotted over, yanked the sheet off from Lizzy’s face. All four women would have screamed, except that it would not have been polite. She looked like

grey beef jerky. Lizzy's once-beautiful skin was stone-grey and clung so tightly to the bone you'd think she was a skeleton shrink-wrapped in thin flesh. Swollen, bloodshot eyes glared out from deep within the sockets. Her lips curled and bent and stretched in a terrifying facsimile of a smile. People didn't normally have so many teeth, certainly.

"Why are you chained to the table, sweetheart?" Helen chirped.

"It's better for my back," replied 'Lizzy'. She sat up. The sheet clung to her body. "What feeble offerings have the prey brought before me?"

"Well," Helen gushed, "I know you *love* my best bars, so...." She held one of the chocolate-covered cracker stack bars in her hand. As she spoke, Lizzy struck like a snake and snatched it with her teeth. There was a crunch as her neck bones snapped back into place. Lizzy mashed the bar between her dry jaws and swallowed it, head-back, like a bird. There was a moment of silence. Then her eyes bugged out. She leaned back and projectile-vomited the bar, along with a lot of grey slime, upon the ceiling. It burned through the plaster on contact. Ann and Marge leapt back with cries of horror, and immediately began to dab more anti-bacterial sanitizer on their hands.

"Well!" Beatrice clapped. "It looks like *'your'* so-called 'Best Bars' aren't as irresistible as you thought." Helen's face had gone white and she was fuming.

"N-no!" She shot. "*Clearly*, Lizzy can't hold down many solids right now, that's all. So I'll just leave these here for later. Ladies, we might as well leave her to her rest."

"Why don't we just let her *sample* a lemon bar?" Beatrice slid toward Lizzy, maintaining a safe distance. She broke off a corner piece from the plate and tossed it in her vicinity. Lizzy's body contorted—her collarbone, shoulders, ribs, and hips all unhinged—and she snapped up the bite of lemon from thin air.

There was another silence. Beatrice couldn't read the expression on Lizzy's repulsive grey face. Her lips spread in a wide smile of rapture.

"*Beatus vindictae! Daed si yentraccm evila si sivle...*" Lizzy moaned. "MORE."

"Certainly!" Beatrice said and tossed her the rest of the bar. She swallowed it whole. "I'll just leave these here. I hope you, well, get well soon." She smiled. She bumped Helen's elbow on her way out. "I guess... *my* bars... were the 'Best,'" she whispered.

For the rest of the day, the Methodists played Canasta, and then Scrabble, and then charades. Beatrice led the women's group in one of those stupid musical circles. They went swimming in the heated pool, ate a cheese-and-meat plate, and after the evening sermon all the ladies retired to the sitting room to exchange mean, witty banter about the men.

"My husband hasn't taken me out since our honeymoon. He's done his share, why should I be annoyed?" Betty shook her head. "The dummy."

"Oh, who wants to go out? Three drinks in and Johnny's already hanging off some floozy like a fat tick, and when he passes out like a log I have to drive him home."

"That's mortifying, but not as mortifying as the time Gary stole some woman's purse. He thought it was mine and picked it up on our way out. I don't even *have* an alligator-skin purse, nor would I *ever!* Who does he think we are, the Rockefellers?"

Everyone was drinking, including Beatrice— surprising herself as well as everyone else. She never expected to break decades of sobriety for a 4\$ bottle of cabernet. The ladies raised their paper dixie cups of wine for a cheer.

"Here's to husbands," said Ann. "May we outlive them all!"

Everyone laughed uproariously.

"I hate Dale," said Beatrice. A few ladies chuckled. "I do. I hate him."

"Tell us about it," laughed Marge, who was deeply drunk. "Spill! Spill! Spill!" Ann touched her shoulder gently.

"We never loved each other, you know," Beatrice said, taking a sip of her wine. The other ladies had gone quite silent. "And now that the kids are gone, he's the only thing in my life. The only *thing*. He's not violent," she raised a finger. "Never. He's meek and mild. He doesn't love me and I don't love him. We were convenient for each other. But what do I need him for anymore? I fantasize, sometimes, about divorce."

"Don't talk like that," said Betty. "Marriage is marriage. You can't make a commitment like that before God and turn your back when the going gets tough."

"Did I, though? Did I make a commitment? I said the words. Saying something doesn't make it true. I could say the earth is flat. God wouldn't make that true either." Beatrice sighed.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter, really. I don’t mind not being in love— never been a priority. I just hate my husband. I hate seeing him every day. In fact, I hope he dies.”

No one said anything. They all just drained the rest of their drinks. There were coughs and murmurs. Finally Cecily asked if anyone wanted to play Monopoly.

Beatrice woke up at three in the morning, craving some popcorn. In her cotton nightgown and curlers she walked barefoot down the hallway into the camp’s dining hall. Old wooden tables were stacked high with snacks. Junk food and homemade treats. The floor tiles were mismatched and cold. Too cold, like ice.

Beatrice heard rustling in the far corner, among the food boxes. They looked as if a wild animal had clawed them apart in places. Strawberry jam and cracker crumbs seeped out and smeared around the floor and walls.

*“Yes... yesssss!!! Sweet golden slabs!! Eeeheehee...”*

“Yoo-hoo,” she called. “Hello? ... Helen, is that you?”

The rustling stopped.

A figure rose into view. Lizzy Budgie’s sunken face stared back at her with bugging, blood-red eyes. Her long, greasy black hair fell in clumps around her face and body. She wore a deeply stained daisy-print nightgown, and she was stuffing lemon bars in her mouth like a chimpanzee.

“Lizzy,” Beatrice’s stomach dropped.

*“Lizzy isn’t here anymore,”* said Lizzy.

Lizzy’s bones creaked and snapped as her head twisted upside-down. She uttered an impossibly deep, masculine laugh and leapt onto the wall. She scuttled like a crab toward Beatrice, cackling all the way.

*“I’M GOING TO RIP YOUR TONGUE OUT, PIG——”*

Beatrice yanked the “All I need is a little bit of COFFEE” cross from the wall and swung it several times at the broken scuttling thing.

“No, no, no, absolutely not. Go away; I don’t want anything to do with this.”

*“I’M GOING TO RIP——”*

“No. Shoo.” Beatrice waved the cross like one would wave a broom at a raccoon.

*“FOOLISH HUMAN.”*

“Go back upstairs,” Beatrice said sternly. “I will not deal with this sort of nonsense anymore.” She swung the cross again. “Get,” she yelled.

Lizzy’s upside-down face scowled. She dropped from the wall, and re-aligned all her body parts.

*“You misunderstand,”* she said. *“I am here... for YOU, Beatrice Muffins.”*

“Did you see any popcorn while you were in there?” Beatrice went over to the food crates. Lizzy had really torn them all up. Most of the food was ruined. What a pity. “Not the popcorn too,” she groaned, rifling through ripped microwave bags.

*“I sought the lemon confectionary offerings. Wretched whelp,”* Lizzy explained.

“Boy howdy. Looks like you found them.” Beatrice examined the tins, all of them emptied except one, which had only one bar remaining. “You’ve had your snack. I think it’s time for bed.”

*“The Damned do not sleep!”* Lizzy screeched and levitated two feet in the air. Her long black hair twisted around her grey body like tendrils. *“Gaze upon my true form, PATHETIC ROACH!”*

Beatrice sighed. Lizzy’s rib cage burst open like a pair of jaws. The poor girl turned inside-out, and the demon inside was revealed.

It stood seven feet tall and hunched at the waist. It had spindly, skeletal limbs made of some kind of tough grey spongy, coral-looking substance, slick with oozing grease. Square scraps of grey fabric fell from its bones and puffed out, drifting weightless, above its elbows and knees and over its torso. Its head, forearms, and calves remained bare and skeletal. Beatrice was reminded grotesquely of Big Bird without his head on.

The demon’s face was a giant skull with one, singular, enormous red eyeball, and five jawbones all around the head almost like a flower bonnet. They creaked and clacked open and closed.

*“Know me, Beatrice. I am your righteous death. I am a demon of VENGEANCE, called to this plane by the PARASITE called Grimsbane the Necromancer, to exact BLOODY RETRIBUTION for the SINS YOU HAVE MADE against him!”*

“Oh, I hardly remember any of that business at all, it was so long ago. That was all Lucy’s endeavor,” explained Beatrice. “If he’s still upset, he can take it up with her.”

“*SHE IS NEXT.*”

“Well, there you go. Hop to it.”

“*I am not some MERE MESSENGER. The PITIFUL necromancer sold me his soul in exchange for VENGEANCE, Beatrice Muffins, and VENGEANCE shall be MINE! YOU SHALL KNOW PAIN LIKE NO OTHER MORTAL. I WILL TEAR YOUR EYES FROM THEIR SOCKETS. VENGEANCE! VENGEANCE! PIG! PIG! PIG—*”

“Calm down,” Beatrice popped the last lemon bar into the demon’s mouth. It sat down to chew thoughtfully.

“*What’s in these?*” It asked.

“They’re fairly easy to make. You just need to get lemon curd and slivered almonds. I could give you the recipe.”

“*It wouldn’t be the same,*” the demon sighed. “*I offer you this, PATHETIC HUMAN. PRODUCE MORE LEMON BARS and I shall spare thee.*”

“It would be better to just teach you how to make them yourself. And anyhow, I don’t have any more lemon curd.”

“*PRODUCE THE BARS OR DIE.*”

“I can probably finagle a lemon merengue pie. Would you like that?”

“*FINE.*”

Beatrice broke into the camp’s kitchen. It was easy. A bolt lock. Child’s play. The demon followed behind her, carrying its aura of unnatural evil with it. She really wished she’d worn slippers. The floor was cold.

She was dismayed (but not surprised) to discover that the Camp Budgie kitchen was lacking in many essential tools and ingredients. Where was the flour sifter? The slivered nuts? The whipping cream? The ingredients Judd *did* have were in short supply. All Judd Budgie seemed to have in surplus was marshmallow fluff powdered ham.

“Well, we shall just have to improvise, won’t we?” Beatrice said to the horrible, drooling thing. She set to work.

Judd Budgie's kitchen had one single lemon in the basket— which was not exactly ideal for a lemon dessert. But Beatrice was a child of the Depression, and she knew how to make food stretch. She began to grate the lemon peel. A pleasant, zesty scent filled the air. Almost enough to overpower the stench of concentrated sin.

“Watch this. We're going to make lemon peel tea,” she said, and dumped the grated zest into a pot of water.

*“Foolish mortal! Do you wish for death? The bitterness of the skin will ruin the flavor!”*

The demon hissed.

“That's what the caramel is for,” Beatrice explained, stirring a boiling sugar-mixture, and turning the gas flame down so it could simmer and brown.

*“VENGEANCE is displeased by this! Eriatolv saw ksam noriehtninameht.”*

“We have to wait until the caramel is browned, but we don't want it to get overcooked. Do you know why?”

“No,” said the demon with all its jawbones.

The demon watched her cook as she explained how heat transformed sugar. Cooking brought out new flavors, like bitter, nutty, toasty— that's what caramel was. But if you let it go too long it'd turn hard like glass and separate from the oils in the butter.

The demon was so astounded by these teachings that red hellfire blazed forth from its single, terrible eye.

*“Impossible,”* the demon scowled, baring four rows of human teeth. *“Such transmutations are beyond your dirty, pathetic kind.”* Beatrice shrugged.

“Well, it can be tricky. But if you practice enough, anybody can make candy at home.” She took the caramel off the stove. “Could you lend me a hand? Be a dear and go grab some crackers from the dining hall— any kind. Doesn't matter if they were crushed or broken during your... episode.”

*“Seekest thou to command ME?”*

“You're too good to be bothered, now?” The demon grumbled and stalked off, dragging its ethereal rasping weight in cloth strips and entropy. It returned, long skeletal arms full of cracker and cookie boxes.

“*The deed is done.*” It dropped all the boxes upon the linoleum counter in a pile. Beatrice handed it a rolling pin and told it to crush her about two cups of cracker crumbs. The demon of Vengeance laughed its choking, unearthly laugh as it examined the wooden tool. “*You see fit to give me this GARBAGE as my hammer?*”

“It works like this,” Beatrice reached over and spun the wooden wheel around. The demon gaped.

“*A riddle!*” It hissed.

“You’ll figure it out,” Beatrice assured it. The thing honestly reminded her a little of Dale. The way he acted in the kitchen it was like he forgot how to use his own two hands.

The demon struggled with the rolling pin for a few minutes while Beatrice strained the lemon tea and added some cornstarch, the juice, and a few drops of honey. Best not to make the filling too sweet. She folded some chopped almonds into the caramel, along with a king’s helping of almond extract, and whipped up some merengue.

“*WITNESS!*” The demon bellowed. It gestured at the two cups of cracker crumbs it had poured into a big metal mixing bowl, in sandy heaps. The demon picked up a cracker in its spindly, grey bone fingers and lay it upon the counter. Then it took the rolling pin in both hands and rolled it into powder in one violent stroke. “*I have mastered your puzzle-hammer!*”

“Good job, Vengeance. Now we add melted butter.” She handed it a stick from the fridge. The demon cackled. This puzzle was child’s play to a deathless evil like itself. It summoned a lick of Hellfire and the butter splashed out of its wax prison into the bowl.

Together, they patted it into the pie tin. Into the oven. When the timer went off, it was time to assemble everything.

The demon loomed over her shoulder, single red eye transfixed by her work. The caramel-almond goo went at the bottom. Next came the lemon mix. It was nearly jellied, which was perfect— It smelled fragrant and citrusy, and tasted quite gentle, with hardly any of the sharpness of most lemon pie fillings. It glopped out into the tin and Beatrice smoothed it down with gliding motions of the spatula.

On top of that she squeezed loops of marshmallow fluff from the pantry in a plastic baggie with the tip cut away. Best to make things look pretty, right? And then to top it all off, the thin layer of merengue. Fluffy white peaks arced and swirled like an Antarctic landscape.

“This will need to chill,” Beatrice said. She placed it in the icebox. “An hour at least. We shall have to occupy ourselves until then.”

The demon begrudgingly accepted Beatrice’s invitation to play a game of Scrabble. They sat in the dining hall under the elderly yellow light bulb which did not normally flicker, but which flickered now in the presence of Evil. The demon had to hunch and twist quite a bit to fit its humungous bony form onto the cafeteria table bench.

“*Your TRICKERY will not save you. I have the SUPERIOR HAND.*” The demon cackled and played the word *raze*. It was a good use of the Z tile.

“How did you find me, Vengeance?” Beatrice sipped a cup of chamomile tea. She shuffled the letter tiles around.

“*I am summoned by HATE and DESIRE FOR RETRIBUTION. The imbecile Necromancer needed only a strand of your hair or drop of blood to seal my TRANSCENDENCE into this VILE REALITY.*”

“Of my *hair*? That’s what you use to find me,” she asked.

“*OR BLOOD.*” The demon nodded its grotesque skull.

“That’s all it takes, huh?” Beatrice played the word *equate*. “Anybody with a scrap of me can figure out where I am.”

“*YES.*”

“Huh.” Beatrice filled up the demon’s teacup once more. Its fingers clicked against the porcelain as it sipped. If it was so easy, why hadn’t Lucy sent a demon after her years ago? Perhaps she’d moved on in her life as well. Perhaps she didn’t even miss Beatrice. Lord knows Beatrice didn’t miss her.

“*FEEBLE CREATURE,*” the demon said and played its final word. “*I HAVE WON.*”

“You’ve spelt it backwards, dear.”

The demon swore in twenty-one languages.

It came time to check on the lemon pie and perform the final step. Beatrice gave Vengeance the honor, and directed its terrible claw which blew flames upon the merengue and gave the pie its signature brown-baked top. When it finally came time to cut it, the demon's great, slimy red eyeball was full of anticipation as Beatrice slid the knife into the crisp white fluff.

"The crust held up really nicely," she said.

"Yes," the demon nodded. The pie slice jiggled neatly. Beatrice trimmed herself off a small slice as well and plated it on a paper napkin.

"Bon appetit," she said. The two of them dipped their spoons into the yellow goo puddle before them.

It was pretty good, Beatrice thought. As good as a lemon pie could be. Had a nice chew to it. She could make this for her grandkids. She'd been a little apprehensive about the lemon peel, but it added a depth of flavor that she decided she ought to preserve in future recreations. She glanced up at the demon to ask it how it liked the pie, and saw that the demon was weeping.

"*Help me,*" it whispered. Massive drops of salt water splashed over the dirty linoleum. They touched the demon's withered bony claw feet, which sizzled. It took another bite of the pie and teared up once more.

"Are you crying human tears?" Asked Beatrice with concern.

"*This has never happened before,*" said the demon, lifting the spoon once again to its lipless maw.

"Perhaps... you shouldn't be eating so much of that."

"*NO!*" It shrieked and pulled the napkin tighter to its form, hissing.

Beatrice shrugged. "Well," she conceded. The demon had three more slices of pie. With each slice, another centimeter of salt water rose from the linoleum. The demon's feet were quite literally dissolving beneath it. The demon finally collapsed upon its infernal knees and fell upon its infernal side, burning like a creature in acid. It wept and wept, and cut another slice of pie.

"*It's just SO GOOD,*" sobbed Vengeance. "*Never, in a billion eternities, in all the moments of raw hate and bitter retribution, nor through all my manifestations— VENGEANCE— in this or any world has VENGEANCE been swayed from its purpose. And yet—*" It snorted as huge

splashing tears sizzled at its face. Noxious black smoke rose from the burning devil. “— *How can I stay angry, when you have given me this pie?*”

“I can give you the recipe, if you want it.”

“*Beatrice Muffins... I accept your offer. I can no longer seek VENGEANCE upon you... because... I forgive you,*” the demon rasped and gurgled. The salt water rose up to its nose, half-way up its face, and filled its mouth. It burned and burned and smoked away. Beatrice was wet to her knees, holding her nightgown above the water line. The demon grabbed the half-full pie tin off the counter as its limbs became cinder and smoke in the purifying sea. “*And...*” it gurgled, “*I accept... your for—*”

The demon’s entire body exploded in a puff of unholy flame. The pie went with it. The lemon pie and the hulking monster vanished wholly from our universe. And, as Beatrice realized as she was cleaning up the kitchen later on, it had also taken the rolling pin.

Lizzy Budgie (the real Lizzy Budgie) lay in the pool of tears on her back. Her long black hair billowed out, washed in salt. Her face was pink and full. She slept like someone coming out of a long fever.

Beatrice helped her out into the parlor and left her laying on the sofa with some blankets on. It was rude to leave a dirty kitchen in a stranger’s house, and ruder to leave a dirty kitchen flooded with saltwater. But she was tired of cleaning up messes and resolved to fix it in the morning. Judd Budgie would at least be happy to have his wife back to her old self. Probably.

As she put herself to bed, Beatrice thought about Dale. She thought about Lucy. She thought about the green truck that killed her dog.

“Forgiveness,” Beatrice scoffed as she lay down in her little cot and pulled the covers over her little form.

*The Curse of My Imaginary Vampire Boyfriend*

I was put off at first by certain quirks Zoey had—like the way she evaded most personal questions. But I liked other things about her, like her soft shoulders and quiet laugh. And still there were some things that I slowly grew fond of over the weeks: her scent (cotton candy nicotine vapor and keyboard cleaner), the way she said “melk” instead of milk, the terrible techno music she put on my ipod.

I thought things were going pretty well, until one day she just closed herself off. She’d answer my texts, but they’d be one-word responses. It hurt. I asked if she wanted to break up. She texted me no. But there was something she needed to talk to me about. So I drove to her apartment and she poured me a coffee. She looked sick. Her hair was all matted. She looked like one of those half-drowned hurricane dogs they show you on tv to fundraise for Animal Allies.

“Listen,” she said, “I really like you. And I want to keep this going. But only if you want to. And you can’t consent to wanting it until you know what it would mean.” I wondered if she was dying. I said I was all ears.

“The reason I haven’t been able to see you,” she said. She groaned. “...is that my Vampire Boyfriend from middle school... has come back to haunt me again.” Zoey put her face in her hands and waited for me to take it in.

I couldn’t. The premise was too high-concept for me. “If he’s a vampire and you dated in middle school... wouldn’t he still be in middle school?” I asked, imagining a little, pimple-spotted emo boy with orange brace-bands over his fangs.

“No. You don’t understand. *I* was in middle school, but when I invented him I imagined us living together in a penthouse as sexy young adults. I was a private investigator. We fought crime. And occasionally the vampire hunters trying to kill us for our love. It was pretty standard stuff, honestly. I wasn’t very creative back then.”

“Well, who was?” I shrugged. I’d been into those Warrior Cats books back then and I’d named our rescue kitten Firepaw. I figured this was pretty much the same thing.

“Ever since then, I’ve never made him disappear completely. The longest I ever kept him from getting out and ruining my life was during college, when I chained him in my closet at

home with all my old YA books. Sometimes he's quiet. Like he's not there at all. But he gets more active when I start new relationships, or when...." Her brown eyes met mine. Then she looked away and took a really long drink of her coffee. "Alright, Meg, ... don't take this the wrong way, I don't want to be weird, I'm just trying to be candid... like, I've never been as willing to get serious with someone as I am with you."

"Oh," I said stupidly, all the blood suddenly rushing to my face. "Huh."

"So... I need you to meet him," Zoey said. "Meet my imaginary vampire boyfriend. So that you get it."

When we were finished with the coffee, Zoey led me through her apartment hallway. There was a boiler room attached that was never used since renovations. She unlocked the door, white-knuckled, with dread and ardor.

"Talon?" She called into the darkness.

"*Talon?*" I giggled. She glared daggers at me.

"Yes, my Dark Princess?" Came a deep, wistful reply. A pair of white hands rose out. And then a face. And a body.

He was ghastly tall, like the statues in the park. He was tethered by an old bicycle chain to a pipe. His skin was the color of an anemic olive, his heavy-lidded anime-style golden eyes were feathered by deep long lashes, his features had no shadows. He wore a studded leather jacket and a Simple Plan t-shirt. He had rimless glasses as well. Those were very popular in 2008. And of course, he had a pair of sharp white fangs protruding over his lower lip.

"I missed you, my Dark Princess," He chuckled gently (in the way of YA love interests). "The beauty of the evening pales in comparison to the loveliness of your eyes." He chuckled gently.

"Talon, this is Meg. Meg, this is Talon."

"Any friend of my wife is a friend of mine," Talon chuckled gently.

"*Wife?*" I blurted. Zoey groaned.

"Zoey and I are soulmates," said Talon. "I was a Roman Centurion and she was the queen of the enemy Vikings. *Our love was forbidden!* And it came to ill end. I *murdered* her in a tragic

case of mistaken identity, and ever since then she has reincarnated, and I have *searched* the *earth* for her so that we can be *together* for *all time*.”

“I stole that plot from LJ Smith,” Zoey explained. “It’s mortifying.”

“Can he get out of there?” I asked. The bike chain didn’t look all that sturdy. “Should he be out? I mean, is it okay to keep a man prisoner in your boiler room, imaginary or not?”

“It’s fine,” said Zoey. “It’s worse if he’s out. Lots of property destruction. Could lose me my job again... He’ll follow me around and punch cars out of my way, stuff like that. And cry about his past. And he burns in sunlight anyways. So this is really for his own good.”

“I have so many regrets,” Talon looked into the distance wistfully, and shed a single manly tear, chuckling gently.

There was something about his shadowless face, like poorly-rendered CGI, which located Talon firmly in the Uncanny Valley.

“I didn’t know how to draw shadows or textures in middle school,” said Zoey. “I got better at art in college, but Talon hasn’t changed.”

“Not for *ONE THOUSAND YEARS!*” Talon cried. “One *thousand* years of this *terrible, UNCHANGING* immortal curse! Am I destined to walk the earth without my soulmate by my side forever? Zoey! My Raven Dove! I would curse *God*— if only to relieve this eternal lonely unliving night! I would destroy a *THOUSAND* kingdoms for you!”

“That’s why you’re in *there*, dude,” Zoey patted him on the forehead. “He’s not always manageable. Sometimes he goes into one of his ‘dark reboot’ arcs and things get really gritty.”

Zoey turned toward me. I thought she might have been crying, but maybe not— and if not, I think it was only because the situation had gone on too long and she was too tired to feel any particular way about it. It was only then that I realized that I’d never really met Zoey. Not until I met this concept she had bike-chained in the back of her apartment.

“You said that he gets stronger when you’re with someone for a long time,” I said. “What does that mean?”

Zoey pushed some strings of red hair from her forehead. “He messed up my last two relationships. He, you know, decided they were vampire hunters trying to kill us for our love. He

can only take actions that fit his pre-established narrative, you see. He, um, threw them through glass windows. Separate windows.”

“Those hard-hearted old *bastards!*” Talon cried from behind us. Then he chuckled gently. “They couldn’t stand between us for long. *No one can.*”

“I’ll take you up on that challenge, Talon,” I said. I stood up so I could look at him. He looked at me. We locked eyes. Mine, normal and human, and his, poorly-drawn anime eyes, golden and mysterious in that approachable, YA love interest way.

“Perhaps,” said Talon. “But I was her first love. You will never be more pleasant than a pleasant concept.”

“That’s okay,” I said.

“That’s okay.” Zoey sighed, and took my hand briskly into hers.

Maybe I’d really fall for Zoey. Maybe she’d fall for me. Maybe we’d be together for a really long time. Or maybe we wouldn’t. Maybe we’d break up next week or the week after that, maybe Talon would decide I was a vampire hunter trying to end their love and throw me through a window. Maybe I’d get back up and march right back inside, chuckling gently.

Maybe, I thought, Talon would give up after that, and he and Zoey and I would sit on her stained brown futon watching terrible techno concerts on tv and passing bags of cheese puffs back and forth. We wouldn’t realize it, but none of us would have felt lonely in a really long time. It would be a silent anniversary. Talon would have nothing to curse God about. And in the months and years that would follow, Talon would grow quiet and quieter on that brown futon, eating cheese puffs, and Zoey and I would sometimes forget he was even there. He’d laugh at Dr. Phil sometimes but that’d be about it.

One day I’d wake up next to Zoey and ask, “where did you put that new toothpaste we bought?” And she’d say “in the bag on the futon” and I’d go pick it up and there it would be, and the room would be still, and it will have always been just the two of us.

*My Grandma keeps calling me. She died three months ago.*

My Grandma Minnie was a wonderful woman. I'm sure everybody thinks that about their grandmas. But my Grandma Minnie really, truly was a blessing upon this earth. She was funny, and kind, and beloved by her entire community. She volunteered to help the nuns can jams, and teach underprivileged children how to read, and had a kind word for everyone she ever met. Her funeral was absolutely packed. She'd arranged it so that the funeral was much more like a little party than a mourning affair, with sunflowers everywhere, and polka music, and chocolate cake.

Yes, she planned her own funeral. She'd taken a long time to die. Bone cancer. She just sort of wasted away.

We had her cremated and spread her ashes over her favorite sunflower hill.

Which is why it was weird when I got a call from her a month later.

"How ya doing, kiddo?" She laughed through the receiver.

"Who is this?" I said, even though I knew. It was a weekend night, and I was watching Netflix by myself in my apartment. I'd had just one beer.

"Why, it's just your ol' Grandma. Are you busy?"

"Nah, I'm just watching tv."

"You got a boyfriend over?" She whispered conspiratorially.

"No."

"Girlfriend?" She whispered even quieter. I laughed.

"Still no, Grandma."

We talked for about twenty minutes. She asked me how grad school was going, and how my parents were, and whether I was still a vegetarian. I told her about my new apartment, which I loved even though I always had trouble making rent. She told me to make sure I ate enough protein. She told me she loved me, and I told her I loved her, and then she said goodbye and hung up.

I don't know why I never breached the subject of her death. I guess maybe I was scared I'd wake up.

I made myself a cup of coffee and sat in front of my blank tv crying for a couple hours.

There were a lot of different emotions surging through me— happiness, love, grief, fear, unease, and a lot of confusion.

I could have called my dad or my sister or somebody but I didn't. Like, what would I even say? God.

Man. My Grandma was Catholic, and she always believed in heaven. I was raised Unitarian and I've always been sort of agnostic myself. Like, I've had a couple minor paranormal-ghost experiences that made me think there might be more than just this world. But... nothing like this, man.

I ended up having 3 more beers and falling asleep on my couch. When I woke up the next day I was convinced the whole thing had been a dream.

Five days later, I'm at my job (writing online ads for casinos) and my cell phone rings. It's an unlisted number. I have a freezing feeling in my stomach, so I pick it up.

"Hiya kiddo!" My Grandma said cheerily.

"Hi, Grandma."

"I'm not bothering you at work, am I?"

"No! No, I'm not doing anything important." I closed out of my document. My co-worker shot me a look across the desk. I stood up and left the room.

"You're still getting enough iron in your diet, I hope? I worry about ya."

"Yeah," I said. I took a deep breath. "Grandma, can I ask where you're calling from?"

"Oh, you know. I'm not supposed to talk about it."

"Please," I said. "Please tell me you're somewhere nice."

"Oh, kiddo. It's beautiful here. I'm surrounded by people I love— it's a good crowd! Don't worry about me. Honey, why are you crying? Don't cry!"

"I'm sorry! I'm just... so happy for you. And I miss you."

"Well, next time I see you, you'll get a big hug. Okay? Sweetheart, are you still having trouble with money?"

"It's not a big deal," I replied.

"It's a big deal to me! Listen, there's something I need you to do for me."

That threw me for a loop.

“Alright,” I said.

“Be on the lookout for a little pink snake.”

“A... a what?”

“You’ll know it when you see it. Just do that for me, alright, sweetheart? I love you!  
Have a wonderful day!”

She hung up on me.

I finished up work that day, as best I could. I was still reeling, of course. Maybe I was going crazy. Mental illness didn’t really run in my family, though. Grandma Minnie was lucid till the day she died.

I took my normal route home. It’s a little walk to the bus station from my building, and I do pass through some pretty gross parts of the city, but it’s nothing dangerous or anything. One building I passed had this disgusting pile of black trash bags in front of it. They stunk like piss and shit and rotten meat and vegetables. I had to hold my nose as I passed them—the smell was bad enough that I almost barfed.

In the corner of my eye, I noticed something sticking out from under one of the bags. It was long, and ropey, and beaded with magenta sequins. It caught my attention because for a brief moment in the animal center of my brain, I mistook it for a pink snake.

I defied all my instincts and approached the disgusting pile of bags. I pulled the beaded rope out—it was a key-chain, it looked like—and at the end there was a set of keys and a small Hello Kitty wallet.

There was no ID and no credit cards, or anything that could have helped me find the original owner. The only contents of the wallet were six hundred dollars cash.

“Jeez,” I whispered. That was more than enough to help me meet this month’s rent! I pocketed the money, and silently thanked my Grandma.

I was about to leave when I heard a small rustling sound in the alley behind the bags. A tiny little muffled cry I wouldn’t have heard otherwise. Upon investigation, I discovered a teeny-tiny little tortiseshell kitten, who had her front half stuck in a drain pipe.

She was little, and skinny like she hadn’t eaten in forever. She couldn’t get a grip on the pipe and was lodged up in it—I imagine she would have drowned if I hadn’t come to save her. I

helped wriggle her out of there.

My heart melted for this poor little kitten! She was just a baby, and where was her family? She should be with her mom. She looked like she was starving. Her meow was so tiny and pitiful! And as soon as I got her out of that pipe, she instantly cuddled up to me. I couldn't just leave her there.

I looked up what you were supposed to feed little kittens. According to the internet, she looked to be about six or seven weeks old, and could eat solid food, so I got some for her. I named her Bea, which was my Grandma's middle name. I never would have found her without my Grandma's hint.

A few weeks passed, and I didn't get another call from my Grandma. I didn't mind! Two calls from beyond the grave are more than I was ever expecting. Plus, I had a brand-new little pal who followed me around the apartment, and liked to sleep on my wireless modem, and always wanted to play with my socks.

As soon as Bea was in a safe, loving environment, she started to get healthy and happy. She developed quite a personality! She was silly, and melodramatic—I swear to god that little cat had a sense of humor. She would fake mortal distress if I ever picked her up from off the modem—running out of the room as if I was the devil, yowling—and then return 4 seconds later, bounding and chirruping like “just kidding!”

She slept on my chest at night. I think she liked the rise and fall of it.

Four weeks passed before I got another call.

“Heya kiddo!” My Grandma said.

“Hi, Grandma!” I replied excitedly. “I'm in the middle of making dinner. Mushroom omelette, your recipe.” I had a thick layer of vegetable oil heating to egg-blistering temperatures on the stove.

“You have to marinate the mushrooms first,” she instructed. “Did you?”

“Of course. How are you?”

“I'm just wonderful, sweetheart! I'm so happy you did what I asked.”

“Yes! Thank you for that, so much!”

“Oh, it's no problem for me. I love to help! Speaking of which, there's something else I

need you to do for me now.”

“Sure, Grandma. What is it?”

“You have oil boiling on the stove right now?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, glancing back.

“Good! I need you to take your little cat, and push her face into the pan.”

I froze.

“What?”

“I need you to fry your cat’s face in the pan.”

“... Grandma...”

I looked at Bea, who was purring happily on my clothes pile on the couch.

“No,” I said. “I would never. That’s disgusting! That’s horrible!”

“Oh, sweetheart. I know you don’t understand. But this is what has to happen! Do it for me. Do it for your ol’ Grandma.”

A sudden realization struck me. I don’t know how I didn’t think of it sooner.

“Grandma?” I said. “I need proof. I need proof that you’re my real Grandma Minnie.”

A pause.

“Of course, dear. I know things about you that only a Grandma knows. Your favorite kind of cookie is snickerdoodles— I always made them for you when you came over.”

“Something else,” I said.

“One time, when you were in third grade, you wet your panties at school. You were too embarrassed to tell your mom and dad, so you called me! And I came and picked you up, and we had hot chocolate together while I washed your clothes.” She laughed. “You were always so serious.”

I’d never told that story to anyone before in my entire life. Only Grandma Minnie ever knew about that.

She sighed over the phone.

“I really, really need you to do this. Everything will be okay, sweetheart. I promise. You’ll find me in this beautiful place and I’ll give you a huge hug and we’ll both be together someday. You want that, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Please take care of this one thing for me. It’s very important. It’s to keep me safe, sweetheart.”

“One more thing, Grandma,” I said. “You were Catholic while you were alive. So can you pray with me? The Lord’s Prayer. You said it every night at dinner.”

“Of course, sweetheart!”

I took a deep breath.

“Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is...”

I trailed off. Silence on the other end.

“Grandma, why aren’t you praying?” I whispered.

“Kiddo...”

“On earth as it is in heaven,” I finished. Grandma Minnie didn’t say anything. “You’re not my Grandma,” I whispered. “Who the fuck are you?”

The line went dead.

Let me fill you in on a little bit of obscure trivia. During the Salem Witch Trials, there was a minister named George Burroughs who was executed for witchcraft. As he stood on the ladder, waiting to be hanged, he recited the Lord’s Prayer. It was believed that witches and demons could not say the Lord’s Prayer. He was executed anyways. That’s how they rolled back then.

Don’t ask me how I knew this off-hand. Like you, I’m an internet gremlin who collects all kind of useless information in the back of my head instead of doing anything productive. I turned my cell off and disconnected my phone.

Whoever was calling me, it wasn’t my Grandma. They were using my Grandma’s voice, but it couldn’t be her. Whoever was calling me was something evil. Grandma Minnie’s heaven wouldn’t demand the mutilation of a kitten. Come to think of it Grandma Minnie’s heaven wouldn’t tell someone where to find six hundred dollars in a shifty dumpster.

I lay in bed, shaking.

I’d been so happy to believe that my Grandma really was happy and safe in the afterlife.

I'd been so relieved to know that there was an afterlife, that there was a heaven and a light at the end of the tunnel. To know that, after a long, drawn-out, wasting death— after two years of wasting down to nothing, and dying after days of agony with a broken hip and ribs— my Grandma's spirit was somewhere nice. That all good spirits went someplace nice.

I'd wanted to believe it so badly.

I still wanted to believe it.

Maybe, she really was safe and happy somewhere. I hoped so. But the thing that had been calling me was not her.

Why had it sent me to the key chain? What were those rotten bags of trash? Whose money had I taken?

Why did it want me to kill my cat?

I cried and cried. Bea came and curled up on my chest. She purred loudly, as if she knew I was in distress and wanted to calm me down. I petted her soft spotted fur.

I didn't think I'd fall asleep, but I did.

That night, I had a dream.

In the dream, my phone rang. The caller was unlisted. I picked up.

"Hello?" I said.

"H-hello?" quavered the voice at the other end. It sounded like Grandma Minnie. But not like I'd ever heard her before. She sounded scared. She sounded sick. She sounded cold. "I want to go home. I want to go home! I want to go home,"

"Grandma?" I cried.

"It's so cold here. It's freezing. I'm... so... cold... everyone is lost... I can't find you. Hello?"

"Where are you?"

"Hello? Hello? Hello?"

"Grandma!"

The line went dead. Suddenly, she was standing at the foot of my bed. She looked the way she did the day she died. All skinny, and shrunken, with sick, hollow eyes, and drooping

skin. She shivered, naked, frostbitten.

“Please help me. I’m in Hell.”

Then I woke up. I’m not going to work today.

I don’t know what the fuck I’m supposed to do.

