

5 Castlevania:
Turn of Tragedies

III

10 **T**hree years. That's what I lost, spent
insentient in the nest-like ruins of Dracula's
razed, resurrected, and reburied Castle. I
suppose I'm grateful that's all I lost, but
three years as a breathing corpse... is a lot
15 of wasted time to recover, so while it
pleases me that you're curious about my
doings, you'll have to forgive me if I don't
coddle you through this.

Such cosmic disturbances as those that
20 overthrew me are bound to leave a
lingering radiation of chaotic energies. I
understand the miasma of the second fall
never cleared while I was laid out.

You'd think such solid sleep would have
25 brought some refreshed, fluttery-eyed
dawn, but no. As I recall it, the sensations
returned in this specific order: Numbness,
awareness of self, awareness of paralysis,
concert of stabbing nerves, leadenness,

30 nausea, ache, transient introspection, and
finally, compulsion. Welcome back, Isaac.

The years leading up to my undoing were
such a strain. All those grievances forced
into one single malicious, ill-fated – well,
35 you probably know.

It was a rattling experience, so, yes; some
recollection, some reduction of my self was
required to differentiate it from.... what
wasn't, I guess.

40 With those processes out of the way, I can
offer a degree more *lucidity*.

My devils, I could tell, had given their best
attention to maintaining me all that time,
though they were devils, after all. They
45 perhaps were fitter for necromancing weird
repairs than grasping the true needs of a
human. Regardless, though they were
worn thin with their task, I was awake, and
shortly thereafter, on my feet.

50 The chamber I found myself in, at least, was
suitable: Dry, solid, with a bit of airflow,
and an exit.

The remnant evil creatures that had
burrowed their way back into the ruins bore
55 little of their prior respect for me. I thought
they'd gone witless from their trauma, but I
became an acceptable target of their malice
as I clambered up toward the night sky.

My body continued its ceaseless demand of
60 needs as soon as I hit the moonlit air,
redirecting to thirst.

The Castle had rested on the shore of a
dark, brackish sea; the water, noxious.
Nearby though, there had been a spring in
65 the eaves of the woods that bordered the
fortress. I found it and threw myself in,
hating its iciness, but drinking, soaking, and
lolling in its burning cold none the less,
savoring the sensation of *something* outside
70 myself.

Just when the chill had all but seized me, I
pulled myself out and had my devils kindle
fire. The sudden heat was intoxicating. As
I turned myself in it, my eyes fell back on
75 the debris that'd housed me and, entombed
somewhere still, the Lord of the Castle.

Taking that in, I wanted little more than for
this to be a parting glance; to collect my
devils and run off. They're *mine*, after all.
80 But a separate compulsion ate at me, and I
stood, bound to the site.

Then my eyes fell on the tunnel from
whence I'd escaped, and I saw Abel emerge
in a gale of stony feathers. He sped toward
85 me, darting and veering in a trail that
mimicked an old battle signal we used to
employ. As he passed in front of me, quite
involuntarily my arms extended, and he
dropped into my hands my corseque, the
90 *Chauve-souris*.

They do say that beasts train their masters.

We moved through the woods like animals then, till the deadest hours of night. The trees sloped into a town, all but deserted for
95 its proximity to the place I'd called home near half my life. A single curling plume rose from deep amid the neglected rooftops.

Perched on the gable of a moldering house, I watched an old man brooding over goods
100 by meager firelight in the store yard below. He was unkempt and decrepit, gnarled and blemished, but he had things I needed. An encounter, as unsavory as the idea was, would be necessary.

Distaste laced my tone when I called to him. In alarm, he spun and landed himself into the stores he'd been counting, stuttering over several threats at once. I let him go on a moment before interrupting again. When
110 he finally spotted me, his haggard skin went gray.

"Sir Isaac? Lord, save me..."

"Don't grovel," I moaned from the roof, "it's unbearable. And yes, it's me. I thought
115 you'd be ecstatic."

"They said you'd been buried... with his fortress and—" his courage sputtered.

Dropping from my perch to join him on the patio below unsettled him even further.
120 "And so I was."

His pallor thickened. Meekly, he ventured, "Your clothes... sir?"

"Didn't you hear me?" I knelt and leaned close him so he'd understand me not to be a
125 specter. He had, at some point, lost an eye and a portion of his nose to a flesh-eating bout, yet *he* was the one shying at this intimacy.

"Yes! Buried!" I finally boomed. "Go, fetch
130 me some rags. Do see they're not *soiled*."

I picked over his stores while I waited. When he returned, clearly having slipped himself something for nerve while inside, the shabbiness of the garments he brought
135 made my lip curl. I wouldn't touch half of it, not to mention the food he tried to offer. No armor, either.

I pressed him with questions as I wrapped straps about the leggings, trying to conceal
140 their cheapness.

He gave the year, 1482 by the common man's calendar, which was enough for a moment's pause.

The riding boots, I pulled up as far as I
145 could; these, along with a tawed-skin cloak, would for the time have to suffice as finery.

The region, I learned, though supposedly uncursed, seemed yet afflicted. The evils that remained, he'd muttered, eying me an
150 instant, were slow to abandon their realm, the darkness slow to wane in folks' hearts. Little relevant detail could he offer though, being repulsive, and generally excluded from gossip of the towns he occasioned.

155 Still, as I made ready to leave he alluded to compensation for his services. In the past, the boldness that his greed incited in him had usually amused me into entertaining the request, but this time I just laughed off
160 the absurdity of it. I left him a list of things to acquire for me and then, cloaking myself, still chuckling, melted into the dawn.

There was this brief period of wandering.
165 Not that you would expect someone who'd only just escaped catalepsy to have much in the way of plans, but I found myself... rather incapable of making any. This, however, did little to relieve the sense that
170 every moment spent not in motion was unbearably stagnant.

From the time of my awakening, there was this gnawing on my spirit to find my Lord, but that was it; just the impulse. I knew the
175 mission, but not the means, nor the purpose. I'd try to imagine it, but each time, there was only this foggy, cyclical vision, always ending, or beginning, with Hector.

180 ...I suppose you'll just have to trust that I'm giving you no less than I was at the time.

Conversely, my *memory* was fine, and becoming keener, seemingly. I had the impression Hector was still to be an
185 offering, but there was no delusion about how well that scheme went last time I'd

attempted it. I had doubts, but wasn't permitted to consider them.

It wasn't until my wandering took me to a particular old haunt that the vision to which I'd been subject became supplemented with a piece of new imagery.

This abandoned castle was, in fact, far from the reach and thoughts of common men, but it was none the less the stage for many an uncouth encounter and witchery.

I roamed the grounds and passages, imagining again the scenes in which I'd personally played a role. Eventually I made my way to a lofty hall.

In this room, I'd left behind a strapping, young, dead man, his blood permeating the carpet. Apart from the deeper hue of vermilion that marked the spot, no sign of him remained: no bones wrapped in rotting flesh and fabric, no crucifixes or vials, no armor, or weaponry.

Of course, Trevor wouldn't be there. Hector had survived the fight with Dracula, I was certain, though I'd yet to detect the elusive bastard. He would have wanted to play the role of a decent, and returning, would have seen the Belmont body recovered to a grave more ornate.

That heirloom, the whip, the *Vampire Killer*; it embarrassed me to think I'd overlooked the chance to snatch it up at the time, for use as I saw fit, but in my defense, I was

neck-deep in my obsession by then.

220 Anyway, if it wasn't where I'd left it, I suspected I knew where to find it.

Since my intuition at last permitted me to see a path, though not just yet to question it, I took it.

225

The country where that divine bloodline settled was far, but that mattered little. Anyone with any sort of mystic status knows the methods of the surviving mechanisms; gateways put in place many era ago, folding the distance between the remote schools and shrines of our ancients.

Moving from one gate to the next, closing the gaps between them on foot, by dusk of the next day I was emerging from a lofty temple just half a mountainside above the remote territory I sought.

It wasn't the breathtaking glide down the sheer cliffs of the mountain, hanging from the feet of my winged, dragon-like crimson devil that unsettled me. Nor was it the skulk over the sparse plateau as I made for the homesteads clustered near its evergreen-coated edge.

245 Bridging the deep, white-water river gully that cut across the plateau; that was what did it.

My crimson and I sailed through the air to the far bank, but just as we reached it, it was

250 as if we hit a web, or a membrane, invisible all but the sparking tendrils that caressed us as we passed through.

The devil retched and reeled, and we both crashed to the ground. I shook it off to find my drakeling writhing and crying weakly, looking to me, unable to understand its plight, its searing pain.

It was the place, its sanctity; the air itself wouldn't tolerate such a discordant entity. The sight cut me, and I sighed that the afflicted devil be put away.

I could feel the land's influence also, wrapping around me, cocooning my arcane essence until it seemed little more than a smoldering coal in my stomach.

As I knelt there, alone and snuffed, the still distant cabins and stables seemed entirely too close. I began to reconsider my venture. Such oppression I hadn't felt since the war ended. Yet logic was interrupted again by the now familiar, formless urges to proceed.

Turning from the buildings, I crept along the river till it met the narrow woods clinging to the cliffs. I hoped to close in beneath their cover, avoiding the houses of the living entirely.

It was told that the *Vampire Killer* would not leave its wielder's side until the next heir claimed it. The clan wasn't a prolific one; it was quite possible that hadn't happened yet. So inhibited, however, I couldn't guess

what type of match I'd be against the
inhabitants I might encounter, in particular,
the ancestral shades that no doubt guarded
285 the tomb I was about to rob.

I couldn't tolerate the idea of being *seen* so
unnerved. But though I could command
even my breath to emit poise, my heart
began to mimic that old, skittish rhythm.
290 As I hiked, I heard it clearly over the
needles hissing above me and the quiet of
all else around.

I slowed my step when the first drab,
mournful figure lit up ahead among the
295 splayed evergreens.

When the second appeared, I stopped,
reaching for my corseque, but I didn't draw.
The power that made the weapon of any
use against such beings was likely as
300 disrupted as my own. Instead, I pulled off
the cumbersome cloak, crouched low, and
slunk reluctantly on.

As I drew closer, some uneasy laughter
escaped me. These figures I crept up on
305 were sculpted.

I had reached the burial ground of the clan's
departed. The monuments wore the rising
mist and moon as luminous shrouds. But
here, I detected no presence, no entity
310 observing me, unless you count the pines.

I walked among the stones and crypts,
noting names with which I'd become
familiar since the family's reemergence,

looking for that one in particular. Then
315 among them, I noticed a smaller stone
beside a sapling birch, the years recent,
bearing the name Rebecca.

Not the one I sought, but I knew it too.
Years back I'd learned it, as my vengeful
320 plots were first maturing. It'd passed the
slanderous lips of swarthy tavern folk. I
paused, reading the cryptic epitaph:
"Inherent goodness pursued by evil,
delivered to the hands of saints."

325 I stood there long, staring; something was
off. My thoughts murmured, and my heart
sank into my gut where my sorcerous fire
yet smoldered. Without noticing, I began
330 dousing, guiding these arcane fumes,
delving for a sense of what lie beneath me.
I murmured to her.

At length, my enfeebled preternatural sense
seeped into the earth, delineating its
335 contents...

This grave —
"Fiend," the growl intruded, pulling me
from my meditation. The rasping sound of
it was like a switch reigniting my nerve. "It
340 cannot be the damned General Isaac."

"That's right," I smiled softly, turning to
him. "I thought you may have found your
way here."

"As has your malevolent wraith," Trevor
345 grumbled bitterly.

"Ah, but I'm no wraith," I gloated, but then
my smile caught on the realization, "but
you'd know that if you... so you too must
have... hm."

350 I tried to laugh it off, but neither he nor I
could conceal our earnest disappointment.

Mine trickled out of me as a briny jab.
"Your departed kin don't bother keeping an
eye on things, I see."

355 "My departed kin have left you to me."

He was planted several paces off, bristling,
understandably, as he beheld me. After
another pause, I began again, "You were
bleeding out when I left you. It can't be that
360 Hector —"

"No," he interrupted slowly, "Hector might
have perished that night as well, but for..."
Then, cocking half a smile, savoring, he
said, "Tell me I'm the first to inform you...
365 it was your sister who saved us both."

I wouldn't satisfy him with the answer,
though I dare say my expression took care
of it. True to form, however, he grew
sullen again as he assessed the scene a bit
370 more carefully.

"Why have you come here?" he asked
sharply, finally.

"I thought I might see if that heirloom was
hanging around in reverent uselessness —"

375 "No," he cut in again, "*this* grave."

“Oh, *this* one?” I nodded to it dismissively, though still a bit too perturbed to smile. “I thought I might retrieve a remembrance... A trinket, a chestnut lock, you know, something appropriate,” as I spoke, his face and frame began to twist, “but there’s none to be had here. So strange.” His simmering wrath heartened me. “And now here *you* stand, alive and well. Honestly, are *all* the Belmont graves empty?”

At this, he seemed to harness his rage, stepping back in a fierce readiness. “Oh, *Trevor*,” I goaded, “Tell me I’m the first to inform you —”

“You’ll regret it too,” he hissed through his teeth. “Here’s your useless heirloom!”

So fast it was drawn, before he finished speaking, before I could dodge the full length of it, a ripple was rolling up the lash and licking me across the cheek.

That was actually my first taste of the relic, taking me to my knee. But his step betrayed his next swing, and I sprang away. He came after me.

I caught the next crack of the whip around the *Chauve-souris* and, leaping into a spin, I tried to rip it from his hands. He followed like he was attached, stumbling. As I landed, I buried my blade into the earth where I’d expected his head was going to be. A spray of daggers flew at me from somewhere else. I rolled and found my feet just as another crack issued from the lash.

This one I caught across the chest. The wound cauterized on the strike and marred my symbols, yet the searing sent a palatable rush down my spine and I checked my howl with a laugh.

Still, that was quite enough. The range of the *Vampire Killer* was at least twice my own. And while the place stifled my power, this Belmont was infused with the strength of at least a dozen generations. If not for my God-given physique, which Trevor wasn’t quite able to match, I’d have been dead already. I escaped another strike of the whip and took off.

The trees hindered his swings. I sped for the river, for the point I’d marked as the narrowest on my way in. The woods dropped off, and closing the gap to the brink, I leapt, tumbling midair to propel myself over the narrow gulf. My feet just made the turf on the other side, ushering an instant of relief... until I heard, saw, and felt the lash coil around my neck.

I couldn’t slow my steps, which tightened my noose, and I snagged, wheeling around to face him as I fell to the ground. He was planted on the other side, reeling me in, dragging me to the edge. I fought him fiercely, clawing at the whip, kicking and digging my heels into the turf, but I was being strangled and maddened, slipping closer and closer.

As is natural in such dire circumstances, I called — well, croaked for a devil’s aid.

In a flash of light he materialized before us: My *iytei*, which, if you don’t know, is a great, fur-coated, sort of ogre-like beast I guess, a little comical, but as detrimental as one could ask for. Trevor beheld him, awestruck perhaps, for he hesitated.

This devil needed little command. With a step he slammed his immense paw down on the taut whip. Trevor lurched forward. While I tore the slackening coil from my throat, the *iytei* leaned over the chasm edge, grabbed the lash, and heaved back on it. Trevor, unable to let it go, came flying after it like a fish on a line, right into the chasm. Just as I freed myself, the devil lifted his foot, and the whip snaked away over the edge after its wielder.

For a moment, all I heard was my own choked gasps, the pulse surging in my ears, and the river far below. Then I crawled to the chasm’s edge.

There he was hanging onto his whip, which he’d remarkably managed to coil around an outcrop of the wall some ways below me. I had to laugh at him swaying there.

“*That* being settled,” I finally called down, “you’d not be inclined to tell me where our idle friend, Hector, lies about these days, would you?” He swung himself sideways as I spoke, and suddenly caught hold of the rock.

“With your sister, no doubt,” he grunted,
475 focusing on the wall, then scaling quickly,
like he was familiar with the way.

My eyes narrowed and my smile widened.
Without another word I rose, kicked some
dust, spat on him, and fled to the mountain
480 peaks.

I didn’t retreat straight to the gateway. My
crimson was recovering, and with its help I
gained each cliff in good time, halting on a
shelf just at the tree line. Settling into the
485 top boughs of a dense grove with a view of
the distant homestead, we roosted, waiting.

Had anyone seen me, reclined, vacantly
vigilant, caressing the welts of my face and
neck, of my chest, caressing my drakeling,
490 nested on the bough above me, its head
strewn on my shoulder... *had* anyone seen
this, they even then would not have marked
my agitation, but I was seething.

After a little while, as the gray dawn first lit,
495 I saw a creature, falconish, ascend from the
houses and away. “This shouldn’t be too
taxing,” I whispered to my devil. “Follow
it, and then find me.”

The little dragon was happy to be useful
500 and stealthily departed. Then I climbed to
the temple in the peaks and took my own
leave of the horrid, hallowed site.

I’d been covering my tracks back through
505 the gateway chambers, meandering
towards the ruins I’d called home. Then I
took a wrong turn, so to speak, but the new
place I stumbled upon – I think it was the
must in the air – struck me as irresistibly
510 curious.

When I exited the chamber to learn what
type of place housed this gateway, I found a
subterranean Dark Age laboratory. At this
point, I just had to indulge my intrigue.

515 There was a familiarity about that place I’d
never been. I moved about, recalling the
names of disintegrating machines, decaying
components, vessels of broken glass and
tarnished copper.

520 Beneath a heavy counter, I found a switch
in the floor. When I hit it, a hidden
antechamber to the lab opened up. Dust
and occult air emanated from it. I pressed
past the cobwebs of the passage and found
525 a room covered in runes, scrawled wall to
wall into the stone.

Some devils, like their masters, might
disguise themselves as creatures less
impressive, though one could hardly say
530 the same of their power. My fairy-type,
who introduced herself to us as a *tiramisu*,
she was a knowledgeable creature. She
could read and speak, and her consultations
regarding cryptic lore were often priceless.

535 Buried in the runes, the sprite deciphered
archaic instructions... as she read I realized

their potential; the composition of a ritual, a
spell that may prove of key contribution to
this only mission I could keep in my head,
540 to access my Lord. There seemed to be gaps
in the crumbling record, but still...

When we finally climbed out of the lab, I
found the place had been hidden beneath a
decomposing cabin, tucked away deep in an
545 ancient, corrupt forest.

I picked my way across the land from there,
seeking similar forgotten places, searching
for the components required to reproduce
the strange rite I’d uncovered. It was
550 refreshing to have a distinct goal in mind.

After a few days of this, my crimson
returned.

The devil led me to a remote forest garden,
555 littered with old stonework, not far from
Dracula’s realm, but still far enough to
maintain a wholesomeness to it.

Amid the picturesque scene was a cottage,
clearly inhabited, though, I discovered,
560 currently unoccupied. I picked through the
stores and supplies: food, potions,
materials, et cetera.

Beside the bed, in a chest, I found pieces of
armor. There were gauntlets and boots,
565 stylishly tailored, much to my preference.
Beneath these I found a suit I couldn’t
mistake; a black and gold cuirass with a

symbol twin to the one inscribed across my back: The Devil Forgemasters' crest.

570 For that piece, I had no need, but I pulled on the gauntlets and replaced my shabby boots with the quality pair.

A path led from the back of the cottage down into the wilder parts of the garden, where the old masonry hung under the weight of strange foliage. It went on through the arched entrance of a sunlit glade.

580 As I neared, the voice like bells caught my breath as it came through the arch, "Hector's not here, Isaac."

My crimson instinctively wheeled toward the sound, the source of my animosity. I called it back, put it away, but said nothing else, and passed under the arch.

My sister had kept a shop hidden away in the mountains. I'd found it deserted when I wandered past after my reemergence, so I couldn't, when that grimy Hunter dared mentioned her, I couldn't deny or confirm what he'd insinuated. But I'm no fool either.

595 She stood in the center of the glade, nearly blending with the wisteria-ravaged statues around us. Behind her was another gateway. I crossed the root-work floor until I stood before her. We were both waiting for each other's move. At length, I gave in.

"Don't speak his name."

600 "Isaac—"

"Don't speak mine, either."

"Please, brother," she entreated softly. I cringed. "When I heard you were—"

"Where is he?"

605 "He is gone. It's just me."

"Move."

I made to step past her, but she threw her arms up authoritatively. "You're *not* following him, Isaac." I stopped and glared at her in disbelief. "I begged for these words with you," she went on. "This obsession of yours, can't you see it's not your own?"

615 "You really have no idea," I scoffed. "And I don't recall you begging *me*."

"Why can't you stop? Hector, he's lifted—"

"Stop *saying his name!*" I erupted, and then recovering some composure added, "It's a disgusting supplement to my imagination."

620 She responded to this with silence. How the guilt-ridden, empathetic resolution of it *aggravated* me... I had to break it.

625 "I don't understand how," I began coldly, "being so hell-bent on running with brutes and occultists, you can cast me away as you did. Honestly, you *owe* me."

She moaned softly, "You can't still think—"

630 "No, don't here pretend you don't know what fate awaited you had I left you in *their* care," I scowled at her. "And even after, as you stalked me; did you think you were getting that close without our notice? Without you, yourself, being stalked? Who stayed the blood-thirsty servants?"

635 "But you—"

"And what of *your* obsession?" I'd begun to rant by then. "Is it that you wish I were he? Would he be a blasphemer fit to call kin?"

"No—"

640 "No? Then you find your thoughts creeping at times... wishing he were me?"

"No!"

645 "Don't *scowl*, Julia," I chaffed, "I'm speaking in *jest*." I eased up a bit, while she drooped like datura blooms in the sun.

650 "Really, you've even succeeded where I've failed, haven't you? Capturing him..." My speech had become a bit gentler, though as I spoke, I was quite firmly pushing past her. "So you'll at least let me back in the game." I continued toward the gateway.

Had I not turned my head to harken to the unfamiliar incantation she uttered, I'd have noticed the shimmering at my feet, before the earth-laden roots themselves rose up like a fist and struck me. I found myself on

my back. Rolling over, clutching my face, I
saw her stark-still with her hands up, posed
just as she must have been upon utterance,
660 looking suddenly and completely abashed.

“You’ve been *practicing*?” I grimaced.
“Let’s see.”

She must not have realized I could lunge
from a sprawl on the ground the way I did,
665 and my kick pushed square into her chest
and sent her onto her own back. I gave her
time to find her feet before I came over.

Her tactics were of an elemental sort. I’d
strike, and she’d deflect. When I tried to
670 take hold of her, she would pull the earth
up between us, or the roots out from under
me. When I leapt at her, she’d divert me
with a tempest. When I drew my corseque,
she drew static from the air to stay me.

675 Of course, I only played with her.

As she grew tired, and I tired of it, I got in
the only other hit I needed. The roots she
sent to wrap my legs missed. I leapt, spun,
and whipped the flat cheek of my blade
680 against her shoulder. It dislodged and she
cried out, clutching the useless appendage.

I slipped the corseque down between her
feet and hooked her leg out from under her.
As she fell, I spun the weapon once more
685 and pinned her, between her legs, through
her skirts, to the ground with the spear end
of the *Chauve-souris*, growling, “Not bad,
now sit still a moment!”

The small, frail girl splayed there, one arm
690 holding the other, pleading compliantly,
eyes welling up... nearly she recaptured *me*.
But as my eyes drifted over her, they found
a scrap scrawled in silver glyphs protruding
from her collar, and a sneer pushed its way
695 back into my expression.

“What’s this,” I plucked it from her, “your
ticket back to him?” Looking it over, I knew
I had to be correct. This was what she had
been protecting; the gateway was a decoy.
700 Turning from her, I tucked it away.

She continued to advocate for him, talk of
him freeing me, *respecting* me, such
nonsense I hardly listened. Instead, her
words took me through my own experience.
705 Suddenly there opened up a locked vision
of her, hovering over my broken body,
smiling up at him.

I muttered to myself, still in my own head,
scolding her delusions of the nature of our
710 repose, her desires to cast off such a yoke. I
turned my silvery eyes over my shoulder,
onto her lying there, still trying to make
sense of me. “Yes...” I whispered as
malice seeped back into me. “It was you,
715 *wasn’t it?*”

I spun to kick her. She flinched, shielding
herself with her good arm, and chirped
another incantation I didn’t know. With
that one word, it was almost as if her every
720 atom suddenly crystalized, and as my foot
stopped short, the rush of it burst the rosy

silt sculpture into a cloud that settled in a
spray across the ground.

675 She was gone, the *Chauve-souris* skewering
only the pile of strange dust.

That residual matter of her displacement
scattered the wane daylight rustling in
through the trees. I let the curious, fine
730 pink sediment run through my fingers. The
properties were ... unearthly. I held a pinch
up, trying to detect an odor. I tasted it. A
flare of recognition came into my mind, but
I could hardly believe it.

735 I pulled out the spell-inscribed ticket and
considered it a moment, then stuffed it
away again. Using my cloak, I bundled as
much of the strange sediment as I could
gather before hastening to the gateway.

740

The new heels clicked merrily on the
cracked pavement as I jogged through
streets of the empty town. It was only early
evening, but his house was dark, although I
745 could still smell him inside. The door was
barred, but not the second floor window.

The old man shot up from his pile of rags
and chucked a dagger at me as I whispered
his name. I placidly watched it wobble past
750 to the floorboards. He drew another as I
stepped closer, but he must have then
recognized me, for he let it drop, becoming

drastically compliant, addressing me proper.

755 I inquired where in the town I might find a forge. He meandered aloud through memories of the place when it was alive, until I made it known I was in a hurry.

760 Then he recalled a building on the edge of town that once had an oven such as I described. He fell back into excuses for not obtaining the goods I requested, that he'd been ill or whatever, but I hushed him, telling him this task would suffice.

765 He took me to the place. It was decaying. There was a mill, once powered by a stream that no longer flowed. The bellows, axles, and mechanisms were in rotten, rusty pieces. Inside the structure, however, the
770 stone furnace and stack were intact, more or less.

I told him we'd gather all that would burn, which for a moment he pretended not to understand. That being done, I dragged a
775 shallow iron cauldron from the shop onto the roof and wedged it into the stack.

I'd never attempted to create a devil outside the mystic sites designed for us, particularly because I hadn't known of any access to the
780 material component necessary other than in these locations. But that substance that came into the world as my sister exited... I assumed it wouldn't work, but that doesn't stop a man like me from trying.

785 I overfilled the oven with heaps of worthless stores and sundries. My crimson kept the fire fanned and sweltering. Even from the roof, though the breeze wafted, the sweat dried upon my face and ran down
790 my back. I poured the minute silt crystals into the cauldron, which was beginning to take on a red glow.

Out the corner of my eye I caught the old ettercap hobbling away. I laughed and
795 leapt from the roof after him, praying he stay to bear witness. He begged his leave, but I enthusiastically forbid it.

When I turned back I found that flames had erupted from a few windows of the shop. I
800 gave a cheer of encouragement to the devil inside and hoisted myself back onto the roof. The cauldron radiated a fierce light now, but the crystals were unchanged.

I felt time was short, and started muttering
805 in a low voice, invoking the blessing of local unsavory spirits. The old man began to moan and mumble anxiously in the street below. I shouted once for him to hush, but then my attention was wholly diverted.

810 Before my eyes, the crystals took on a greasy luster and suddenly collapsed like flakes of wax into a molten pool. The substance convected hypnotically, invitingly, such that the hot airs stolen into
815 my lungs, the very blood surging through my veins became thrilling. The swirling melt begged I spare a shred of my soul. My

only desire became to oblige. I began the incantation.

820 To forge, one must have a clear image in mind of that which they are creating, or risk dire complications. I saw only a fog within the froth of the pool, yet the spell welled up around me as the flames began to creep
825 over the edge of the roof.

As I thrust my hands toward the cauldron and cried the last command, the severed scrap of my life force, serving as the final component, rushed into the hellish material
830 in a burst of unnatural light.

The radiation cleared except for, hovering over the cauldron, this small, churning cloud, boiling lethargically around a rosy, twilit center. What substance made it up
835 was unclear; there seemed to be many: white droplets, grits of ruddy gray, little glowing embers of orange and sparks of blue, all of the tiniest specks held in a loose, transparent suspension.

840 I'd seen many strange devils, even little animate gourdes, but this formless mass, I wasn't sure it was a creature at all. I could barely distinguish it from the smoke billowing around it. Caught in this wonder,
845 I missed the sounds of the beams collapsing beneath the shingles, and I suddenly dropped through the roof into the pit of flames below.

The entire structure had become the oven.
850 Everything that could ignite was blazing.

But landing amid this, I found myself not
cooked in the slightest. I stood up, and
from the hole I'd made through the roof, in
floated that little, cloud-like mass, its
855 flushed center leading a vapory comet tail.
It came to hover before me, accreting again
into that round, rolling wisp.

I could see it then, the aura that insulated
me, connected to the intangible being. My
860 skin glowed like embers, deflecting the heat
that writhed around me. This strange
nothing of a devil was *something* after all.

I walked coolly to the door. The thing
followed me. As I stepped out into the
865 street, flames consuming the workshop
behind me, I watched the glowing shield
fall from my hands and disappear.

I found the old man in a passive fit on his
knees, face pressed against the pavement.
870 His breath wheezed shallow and sparsely. I
turned him over with my foot, but he curled
up and failed to respond otherwise.

Rolling my eyes, I turned to my newborn.
"Let's go, you little pall," I smiled, "we'll
875 find somewhere else to put you through
your paces."

That silvery ticket took me to a chamber
similar to the many that I'd been. But
880 stepping out into the evening from a door
hidden in a rock wall, the abbey I faced was
unfamiliar, in addition to being beautifully

sculpted, deteriorating, and of course,
ominous.

885 I brought Abel out to accompany me.

There were traps and secrets among the
gargoyles and decaying ascetic decor of the
monastery halls. If the place was an endless
maze, it still seemed as though I moved in a
890 decisive line, magnetized to the innermost
recesses.

I finally entered into an alley, bright with
fresh moonlight. This turned a corner into a
central courtyard, rimmed with raised,
895 cloistered walkways. In the middle there
was a dead fountain of marble, adorn with a
mysteriously carved figure, robed, hooded,
and holding a scepter.

Behind the fountain, sitting on the steps
900 opposite those I descended, he suddenly
came into view; a slumped, icy sculpture.

His head was in his hands, his fingers
disappearing into his tendrillar, silver-spun
hair, his face hidden beneath it. His fitted,
905 crestless, blue cuirass was wrought with
fine silver chain, polished to match the
sheen of his hair, and lined with accents of
sable for his mood. A long, lethal feather
sword hung listless at his shoulder.

910 Without lifting his head, his words lapped
my ear. "I've known it was you since you
first set foot on the lawn."

"Hector, Hector," I scolded softly as I
approached, "Look at you, holed up in here."
915 This can't be what you've been doing with
yourself."

He said no more, moved not; I pressed a
little further. "So you knew it was me," I
shrugged. "It seems you may have been
920 hoping for someone else?"

Still, he made no reply.

"Did you think claiming a trophy I'd find of
value would protect it this time?"

He lifted his head then. Just a silent,
925 singular movement, but if looks could kill...
I laughed at him. "Hector, please! I'm not
a *monster*."

His head dropped again. "They said I'd
killed you," he lamented. "You're
930 supposed to be dead."

"But you knew I wasn't."

He sighed, stood slowly a few steps up the
dais, and turned his stare down on me.
Renounce as he might, he'd never be able to
935 contain the flooring effects of the power he
emitted. His eyes, so pale and reflective, so
like my own, released me as he spoke again.

"Why can't this be what I've chosen for
myself?" he countered. "Why can't I have
940 peace? I was promised a different destiny."

"*That's* a curious thing to say," I exclaimed.
"So was I. Perhaps we've been swindled."

We both waited a moment, as if expecting the other were actually about to *elaborate* on his words. At last, believe it or not, he put his back to me, stepping to a column of the stair, and supported himself on it languidly.

“You look tired Hector,” I cooed, “but *you* wish for peace? *You* said it: ‘always there, this “cursed” power.’” He seemed to wince. “You’re determined to call yourself cursed, when your soul knows better. It pines to be what it is. Denial is your worst curse. You deprive yourself.”

“With every forge,” he considered distantly, “we each sacrifice a piece of that soul. How long before there’s nothing left?”

“Too long,” I scoffed. “I ache for the day.”

“Such a liar,” he grouched, shifting on the column so I could see half his face again. “That, or you’re still mad. You’d even now fight for that which would destroy you.”

“Listen to you!” I laughed again. “Did it work, by the way? Did the good people take you back after what you did for them, snuffing that evil?” He didn’t give answer to this either, but I didn’t need one.

“Keep your soul to yourself then, Hector,” I waved him off. “That’s your own concern, not mine.”

“Then why are you here?”

“There’s no need to be curt,” I squinted. “My task... is a concern of yours also... but

understand, as I’ve said, it’s not personal this time.” Watching him, I added, “I thought perhaps you may have heard me.”

“You –” his eyes glazed an instant, “your voice – has plagued my recent dreams.”

“Oh, Hector,” I objected, “plagued? *Really?* You must lighten up. That darkness of yours obscures your vision.” A quick, solid glare my way demanded I get back on point.

“Speaking of that which would destroy *us*,” I continued as he turned impatiently away, “did you really think you could destroy *him*, our Lord? Haven’t you learned yet that for all that talent, your foresight is worthless?”

He stood still and distant as if he’d stopped listening, but his tightening frame said otherwise.

“Tell me,” I went on, “what’s in place to stop a knowledgeable person from yet again paving the way for his return?”

With that he snapped and spun to face me, “Isaac, if you dare try it, I swear to God –”

“Ha! Go ahead,” I sneered, “see if he’s listening yet.”

His smooth face held me in a look of contempt for just a breath, but then cooled. He’d had enough already, and I’d hardly given him anything at all.

“What’s to stop a person indeed?” he asked himself, drawing the sleek sword from its harness, looking thoughtfully at it as he turned it in his hand.

“Certainly not a self-induced invalid such as you, Hector,” I answered, sinking into a smile as I reached for the corseque across my back. Nodding to Abel, my eyes still on Hector, I put the devil away.

I waited as he almost casually advanced, keeping his distance until he’d partially circled me, and finally stepping in for an opening strike. I parried it with the bar of my corseque and countered it with a swipe. He flipped back out of my reach with ease. We were just testing each other out; it had been a while.

I really can’t describe the movement in such a dance, once it began. Concerning those arts of dominant combat, all of the elegance and unmatched skill we each singularly possessed we’d learned together. Even a direct hit or perfect guard may appear gracefully staged.

A shock traveled up my arms every time his blade struck my corseque. When in each other’s guard, trace scent of blood in his sweat sparked a madness that could’ve easily overwhelmed me if I held too long.

At one point I’d leapt back and mounted onto the fountain sculpture, and then away as Hector lunged up after me. His blow struck the scepter, knocking it out of place.

The courtyard rumbled and we both paused as narrow passages dropped open in each of the four walls. One after another, cutting straight through the maze, slabs were falling and hidden halls opening until, far up their paths, the perimeters of the abbey were encroached and four moonlit exits became accessible in a quick jog.

I'll admit that came slightly as a relief. What time Hector hadn't invested in his sorcery he'd spent on arms. And I'd lain still three years, my efforts invested wholly in keeping myself together...

I resumed the attack, sliding over in an attempt to skewer him, but he sidestepped me, weaving into an upward thrust of the long, narrow sword.

I ducked, but not quick enough. The sword ran through the muscle and sinew of my shoulder, and with a twist of his wrist, popped out the other side. The fibers shred as I raged, stumbling off the blade and away from him.

With calm confidence he let me find my way to the wall several shambles back. The weight of my weapon was too much for the jointed limb now, we both knew, and I managed but a mere one-handed guard as he unhurriedly stepped to me.

He was pulling his sword behind him when we were both pelted with that familiar flash from overhead. Hector stopped in his tracks, waiting to see the nature of the devil joining us. I myself peered with him, unsure of which unruly child came forth.

When the flash subsided, my unfamiliar new devil had materialized, if you can use the word. I'd nearly forgotten it. Hector stood, caught in his intrigue. The glittering cloud trailed toward him. He leaned away, as if dimly aware of a desire to keep his distance, but his eyes couldn't leave it, and he took only a single step back.

As it came to hover before him and I saw doubt just begin to dawn on his face, the pall suddenly lit up a raw blue. Grasping little streams of lightning arched to him and wrapped his head, down his back. Not a second it lasted, but when the light of the strike ceased, so the light left Hector's eyes, and he toppled back. I dove beneath him, sparing his skull the hit of the ground.

There I inspected him. Dead he looked, but on my blade I caught the fog of breath from his lips. Then I laughed, lavishing praise on the silent little entity that hovered over us.

I pushed his hair back from his face and traced the fine marble curves with my finger, laid my head on his chest and listened to his slowing heartbeat, felt the shallow rise and fall, and I laughed even harder.

"You should have trained some more," I finally got out. "This devilry was right in your hands."

As I picked over his person I took small things of use. I slid my hand over the hilt of fine sword; crafted in a divine substance we called angel halo, it was more appropriate, I thought, for one of the Belmonts, though I suppose suitable for traitors of Darkness as well. When my palm reached the blade, stained in my blood, I remembered the wound in my shoulder. My clever tiramisu patched that up without a second request.

Then I dragged Hector to a small room off one of the newly opened halls and pulled him onto a stone table. Laid out like that in the stained light, he seemed more a finely rendered carving in the lid of his own sarcophagus than a sedate, living man.

His symptoms said that he would lie there not hours or even days, but weeks at least, years, maybe, if undisturbed. I found chains to fix him to the spot anyway.

That furthest stretch of my imagination was filling in. At I last turned from him, strapping his sword to my back.

"Abel," I summoned softly when I was ready to leave. The devil appeared behind me. "Guard Hector," I whispered over my shoulder.

In a moment, I'd gained the exit of the labyrinth. In a handful more, I was gone from the land entirely.

<p>It wasn't an hour past midnight when I reached the dark, wind-bitten sea shore upon which the ruins of the Castle lay heaped. Mist crawled up from the saline waters and enshrouded the landscape.</p>	<p>past narrow gaps in crushed passages. Still, I didn't hesitate in my descent.</p>	<p>plaques on the walls, carved in life-size images of monstrous beasts and fabricants.</p>
<p>As I mentioned, the place where I'd lain so long continued to shift with time. I followed the tunnel from which I'd escaped down into the depths where I'd slept. Looking upon the spot again, of greater presence than when I left it, my resolve strengthened. But as I reminisced, the low roof suddenly groaned and crumbled, forcing me from the hollow. Then, peering back in through the dust, my eyes lit up.</p>	<p>Rumor among the faithful was that the lowest foundations of the Castle would stay intact as long as humanity itself.</p>	<p>1200 I returned to this room on my way out of the wing, struck again by its eeriness. It wasn't until this second scan that I discovered, past the altar where the far wall met the floor, there was a slit in the seam with a sickly green light trickling out.</p>
<p>It must have been that this caving of the ruins had disturbed my place of rest while I slept, and my devils had to move and apparently at least once <i>free</i> me from beneath the crushing rubble. Amid the rock that had been loosed in this last shudder, scuffed to hell but more or less intact, lay the collar, spaulders, chains and all that I'd worn so well for so long; my scant, remnant armor.</p>	<p>Though the sea had begun to seep in, and a footstep could insight a shudder from the stressed stone underneath, I found the integrity of these dungeon halls indeed less compromised.</p>	<p>1205 "Damn," I muttered. Abel could have carried me past such an entrance. The hall itself was no tomb, but the density of this particular place's atmosphere was unmistakable. I had to be right up on him.</p>
<p>As I affixed the collar, I know it occurred to me my luck was becoming... awkwardly... or suspiciously fortunate since I'd returned. You may recall I'm not used to that. But there again, such intuition simply wasn't staying in my head.</p>	<p>Of course, the deeper places offered a different variety of challenges. The air was like tar. Quite a few of the old traps still hid about also, along with bitter creatures.</p>	<p>I couldn't imagine anything worse than the spell failing if proximity was insufficient, or if I ignored the gaps we'd struck while interpreting the runes.</p>
<p>I had to worm my way into the inner ruins. At times I'd come upon a partial chamber or stairwell, but often I had to graze my body</p>	<p>I think only its master knew every room of the Castle. But after Belmont's victory, our fall, the rumor went on to say that Death had carried the remains of his charge to a secret basement tomb for safekeeping, till he'd secured passage back for its spirit. Such was intended in the plot that Hector and I had disrupted.</p>	<p>1215 The collected components I arranged as instructed on the altar. Strangely, the arcana of the air seemed to lessen as these items took their places. I breathed slowly, clearing my mind a bit... I may have been hesitating. Then I gave breath to the dead language of the hidden runes.</p>
	<p>That tomb was the place I sought. The spell scratched into the wall of the old lab required it: the place of rot. But the dungeons were vast.</p>	<p>1220 Still, there seemed to be no enhancement to the energy around me; not a shimmer of the air occurred. Yet, I'd not fully completed the verses when from behind me, between the altar and the exit, came that voice, heavy, heart-stopping even for those of us so graced to call it familiar. Just then my blood didn't know whether to freeze or boil at the sound.</p>
	<p>I'd passed one room in particular, very tall and deep, that triggered a hair-raising tension even before entering. But it was empty except for an unornate altar and hassock in the center, and giant relief</p>	

“Why do you call me so?”

I put my back to the altar. There he was, as he always had appeared; elite, ornate, vampiric, venerable, but nothing spectral or transcendent about him. For such a soul crossing over, I’d expected something less... of my world. It was the mundaneness of him that struck me.

I knelt and waited for him to look me over. “Well?” he went on. “The summoning spells were made widely available. Why do you call me this way?”

“I lack access to those spells, my Lord, and made do” I replied carefully, speaking from my bow. “This world has become... hostile towards me. I thought I ought check my status.”

“Your status...” I could hear that he smiled, and also that there was mockery in it. “You come with desire to be reinstated?”

“With an offer, my Lord, and a request.”

“A request?”

“I have questions, Lord.”

“Of course you do,” he patronized, “Ask them now.”

That meant right dreadfully now. How ill-prepared I felt just then, despite it all. I had to swallow first.

1260 “Your last orders to me... Why did you send me from your side at such a time?”

“Any who could defeat me, or even Hector, could no doubt have managed you as well. I needed you alive.”

“So you could kill me if Hector didn’t?”

1265 “Yes.”

“ ... ”

“Were you hoping for a more complex answer?”

“ ... Yes.”

1270 “Clearly, then, you’ve complicated it on your own.”

My heart still ached for the monster and apologies welled up in my throat, but the need to hear it persisted. I lifted my eyes just a little. “And if I’d killed him?”

His smug smile widened.

“I had a plan,” I went on. “You couldn’t give me a chance to finish restoring things?”

In answer he began laughing, long and low. Without waiting for this to cease, I pushed, “He was forging again. Was that not adequate preparation to receive you, if I’d defeated him?”

His laughter melded into a sharp sneer, 1285 “No, that was not *adequate*.”

... So, perhaps I had complicated the issue. Still, I wasn’t satisfied. “But *why* wasn’t it? Hector, the murderous General; Hector, the blasphemous Forgemaster; if the power invested in him wasn’t enough, how might my death help? The power imbued was your evil, was it not?”

But it seemed he had by then lost interest or patience for my questions, and put forth his own.

1295 “Do you still pretend to be unaware of *why* this world has become hostile to you?”

I lowered my eyes and shifted uncomfortably on my knee. “I’ve been absent a long time, my Lord —”

“Yes, I know, conspiring with some succubus in the Void,” he chimed, allowing my heart time to sink before adding, “Did you think you led yourself here?”

1305 I didn’t stir again. No, I didn’t stir, but I was taken back. I’d had to rebuke the lilitu quite regularly in his house, human obviously being their favorite prey, obviously more so being a human such as myself; that is, until the night I’d tricked one with a sly counterspell, twisting its own siphons against it...

1315 Anyway, they hadn’t troubled me since. I felt I couldn’t be mistaken about *this* encounter, but the suggestion, when he uttered it, filled me with doubt. And worse

yet, *were* I correct, and she not a servant of his, that meant he—

1320 “As for your ‘offer,’” he cut off my thought as if he followed it, “were it sincere, and also not one you’ve failed to deliver twice already, Hector has indeed made himself useless to me... unless as an ornament in my dungeon.” He seemed to smile at the
1325 thought. “But it may yet be worth a try, you say. No worse if it fails and claims him. Just where did you stow Hector?”

He glanced greedily at the sword I wore. I tried to conceal my mind, but clearly
1330 Dracula could pry as he wished. After a hard glare at me he muttered “I see,” and turned away as if to peer a great distance.

Finally he spoke again. “Loyalty, as you know, would have meant *returning* Hector
1335 when you discovered him, not pursuing him for your own vain indulgence. *Loyalty*,” he repeated, “would have meant accepting those terms I set for your demise, whatever your *plans*.”

1340 I began to glisten where I knelt, though as yet I still showed no other sign of the torture my mind was suffering.

1345 “I may have taken your stockpile of human weaknesses into account when judging your disloyalty and permitted you again to serve, void of your rank, in exchange for this recovery of Hector, but conspiracy is a crime I cannot condone.”

He paused and then, as if in afterthought,
1350 muttered, “Besides, I tire of you.”

Inaudibly I moaned. Yet this one I knew for sure to be a lie. I’d learned from the best. He tired not of me. In his manner I could tell that even now, he still relished basking
1355 himself in my self-loathing.

“You may yet serve a purpose,” he went on, “should it fail with Hector. Never could you be the vessel he’d provide, but—”

1360 “Ever the favored,” the contempt seethed past my lips. I lifted not my head, as if talking to myself, “I’d have made even a better traitor than him.”

My own surprise was not quite as great as his just then, though I’m certain my
1365 satisfaction was infinitely better.

But I *felt* his scowl weigh on me; I didn’t have to lift my head to see it. Long before, in rare instances of youthful insolence, it had taken no more than that menace to
1370 quell me. In fact, at one time I wouldn’t have thought I’d survive such back talk, but there at his feet, I felt that insolence flair, and still, there was this *deficiency* about him.

1375 “You answer much,” I growled on. “Such regard for one who never honored you properly. But held so aloft, can I hope to compete? You claim he is no good to you,” I was drifting off in my own head again, becoming rhetorical. “If it is for the reasons

1380 I suspect, perhaps therein my hope lies. Perhaps I can make myself worth less.”

He scoffed. “I deem it equally impossible.”

But this insult withered on me. From elsewhere the impulse came. I’d detached,
1385 and closing my eyes I delivered the final two lines of the incantation. Though I spoke them softly, power seemed to boom in the words.

But they fell dead to the ground, and when
1390 my eyes turned up, he glowered down.

“You wish for worse than death, human. That must be it.”

I dropped my head again, as suddenly I felt ashamed, not only for the failure I’d just
1395 experienced, but for my ingratitude to *him*; this along with feeling resentful, righteous, desperately fearful, and jilted.

1400 “No, Lord,” I sighed wistfully, “But neither Hector nor I are for the taking, and if you were to try now, I feel sure you’d regret it.”

“Miserable wretch,” he snarled, “you dare threaten me?” He spoke on, but I ceased to hear him.

1405 “No, Lord...” I thought I muttered, but, in truth, I ceased to hear anything, until a moment later, well after words had begun pouring from my mouth. Though my head had suddenly lifted again, my vision swam in opaque blacks and reds.

- 1410 I didn't know my own voice, or what I'd say until I said it. It felt eloquent, though I'm afraid I don't recall the better part of it, except the last, as I came back, "...to repair your influence. We have your lord's blessing."
- 1415 With that, whatever had been guiding me up and vanished.
- The astonishment I beheld on Dracula's face just then bewildered me; it was something I'd never seen... until it twisted into rage,
- 1420 which became only terrifying.
- It appeared, to say the least, that I had withdrawn my offer.
- Without another word, before my eyes he burst into one of his abominable guises and
- 1425 flew at me. I noticed then that I must have at some point risen to my feet, for here I stumbled on them, but he passed through me without a scratch. As I tripped, I stole a glance over my shoulder to see him
- 1430 disappearing into the back of the room, his leathery wings trailing like dust behind.
- Before I even recovered my footing, the monstrous images of the wall reliefs at once sprung to animation, draconic and demonic,
- 1435 screeching and writhing, every last one of them, all while the trapdoor of that lone exit sprung and sealed itself shut.
- So many of Dracula's most favored watchdogs advanced: Ragged wings,
- 1440 slavering jaws, eyes of glowing coals, fists of granite, scales, raking claws and fangs... I missed Abel dearly then.
- Unreal it seemed at first, but then I had to leap from the venom missile of an immense
- 1445 serpent. The bit of back-splatter that caught me ate into my flesh in a very real way.
- Next the wyvern dove at me. My consequence it while I called my crimson out against the barrage of winged beasts that followed.
- 1450 I evaded one after another, but the last of them, a great gaibon I think, caught me with a kick and sent me rolling head over heels into the alter.
- As I slumped to the ground, from my
- 1455 inverted angle I saw the first of the lumbering monster lords, a giant stone golem, baring down, lifting its arms overhead as it closed in. I flipped onto my feet, scooped up the spell components, and
- 1460 rolled away just as the rock limbs crashed down, smashing the altar to pieces.
- Surrounded as I was, any attempt I might have made to strike would have meant a missed evasion. My crimson retreated to
- 1465 me, depleted and powerless, after an unnervingly short time.
- From the corner of my eye, beyond the frame of a giant skeleton lord, I saw the remains of the altar begin to sink and then
- 1470 suddenly drop through the floor into a pit opening up beneath it. Without a second thought, I rolled through the boney legs to the brink and dove into the blackness.
- It quickly opened up into a subterranean
- 1475 fissure cutting through the bedrock beneath the foundations. As I fell, I had time to see the walls were emitting their own ghastly glow and tapering inward. It wasn't bottomless, but the landing would be
- 1480 deadly; no Abel, no crimson to catch me.
- The only thing I could think to do was thrust the *Chauve-souris* beneath me, points to the walls as they rushed in. The spiked ends cut and wedged into the rock. I
- 1485 swung into the jolt as it caught and kipped myself around, mounting onto the staff.
- Piercing cries came from overhead. A few smaller flying drakes had entered the chasm from the hole in the floor above and were
- 1490 diving toward me. I tried to free the weapon, but it was wedged fast. Ruefully I gave up the idea and dropped the last length to the bottom.
- Dug into the base of the narrow fissure's
- 1495 walls was a cavernous recess on either side. One appeared to be the mouth of a wide tunnel ascending away into black. On the other side, the recess was a rough chamber about thirty paces deep.
- 1500 In the very back of this chamber, in the seam of the floor where it met the wall, a little slit emitted a sliver of crimson light. I guessed it to be directly beneath the similar access point I'd seen in the hall above.
- 1505 I'd a second to notice this before the first drake reached me and forced me to dive

away. It rushed past me and sailed up into the black tunnel. The next two didn't even make an attempt to attack me; they tailed
1510 the first. As they disappeared I realized with dismay that they were not after me.

Three more came; I pounced onto the last one, got it by the tail, and was dragged after it up the tunnel.

The drake knew I was there. As we sped up the climbing cavern it tried to shake me, swinging me into the walls and rock columns. Some I caught in time to push off, others I hit with less grace, but I clutched
1520 the monster tight. Then up the tunnel I spotted rays of moonlight.

They spilt through the gaping, toothed maw of large metal doors. I got just enough of a look to see the top and bottom were sliding
1525 toward each other.

I called for my iytei, commanding he catch the door. He appeared beside it, and with his foot on the bottom and his arm against the top, he wedged himself between the
1530 panels and held them in place.

But just as we reached it, the monster I rode swung its tail. My leg caught on the teeth of the bottom door, and I roared as I was ripped open, hip to knee. As we hit the
1535 night air, the drake burst into breakneck speed and I slipped off, groaning and rolling to the ground.

My thigh was gushing. I sputtered the summons to my tiramisu as I struggled to hold my leg shut. She hastened to repair
1540 me. It was very close. That session wasted her and I put her away.

The iron doors were beaten into the likeness of a ghastly dragon head, hidden, I could
1545 see now, amid the haunted mountain forests that littered Dracula's land. The iytei stood in its jaws, propping it open. I didn't bother with this; he'd be fine there.

The drakes, they were long gone. I fished
1550 out a parchment, a scrap just like the one I'd taken from Julia, prepared while I was departing the monastery where Hector slept; I retrieved this and enacted it.

As I was emerging from that gateway in the cliff adjacent to the abbey of his repose, the drakes soared past overhead.
1555

I could hear the struggle in the courtyard long before I reached it. I found Abel there
1560 among the six drakes, struggling to defend Hector's hallway. I drew the length of the lightweight sword and called over to them. They heard.

Between Abel's flight and Hector's blade, the feathers were swirling like snow. We corralled the drakes into the center of the courtyard, and I called for Abel to finish them with his most explosive devil-fire, which he did. But he was worse off than I
1565

1570 realized. As the drakes fell away, he retreated back to me, a mere wisp of himself.

I ran over to the chamber off the hall to check on Hector. He lay just as I left him,
1575 wrapped in chains on the stone table. Then screeches came from without and I dashed back into the courtyard to find a wake of harpies dropping in.

The devil I called next, an animated skeletal
1580 armor that normally, for his instability, I only risked in times of desperation, he and I had only cleared out half of them when the next wave, a large pack of fire demons, flew into the yard. From just outside the walls
1585 came the howling of werewolves, eager to join us. I'm sure there were others too. They were just starting to pour in.

I left my devil to them and rushed back to the room Hector was hidden in, hoping to
1590 bar it shut.

He was gone. Only the chains lay across the table, hanging still coiled around it as if he'd simply melted away.

I looked frantically about, but to no use.
1595 My curses rose up over the bellows of the monsters spilling into the yard. Then I grabbed Hector's sword and ran back into their midst to work out my rage.

My armored devil became spent, and I was
1600 tired and hurting, but with a final thrust of the sword I finished off the last demon, and

for a few breaths I stood, alone it seemed,
ready to keel over.

Then, yet another group of drakes, fucking
1605 frost drakes, appeared in the graying sky.

I sighed wearily; it was getting to be such a
long night.

My last devil, my newborn, shielded me
from the first four jets of glacial breath, but
1610 that was all of the young pall's strength,
and I was blasted by the last two. I finally
hit the ground huddling, numbed through
with frost. My exhaustion washed over me,
and I made no effort, no move of any sort as
1615 the drakes circled back around.

I ignored their cries. It was the hissing
crack that finally turned my eyes up. The
drakes were recoiling. I couldn't see why
till a sleek, iron-shod boot planted near my
1620 face; that of the knight, grimmest of his clan,
the Hunter, Trevor Belmont.

His whip tore through their wave of
advances. Once he had the drakes at bay,
he turned his fierce, blue eyes upon me.
1625 Reaching down, he roughly grabbed and
lifted me by the collar, then returning his
gaze to the sky he muttered something, not
to me, and light rose up around us. I'm
sure it was the intensity of this arcane travel
1630 that at last ushered me into senselessness.

IV

1635 **M**any hours I must have endured the
nightmares: the skinning, the animus, the
iosis... until finally I jolted awake.

I returned to sunlight and softness. I found
myself in a humble, very human dwelling,
1640 lying on a very basic couch. Half-timbered,
leaded glass windows, plaster, gabled roof;
it reminded me so much of the places in
which I'd suffered my adolescence.

My armor was removed, wounds dressed,
1645 clothes changed, feet bare. I jumped up
from the couch and tore the clean, white
shirt from my back.

The room was cluttered with storage and
furniture; junk. As I scanned this scene, my
1650 ear caught a peep before my eye caught her
figure; Julia, standing just outside the
doorway, watching me.

I darted toward her. You can be sure just
then I meant her harm. But she seemed to
1655 flinch for me, not at me, as I slammed into
an invisible barrier in the doorway and
dropped.

Left to heal in their untidy, *natural* fashion,
my wounds overcame me and I stayed there
1660 on the floor, wincing and muttering. She
put a foot into the room. I growled a curse.
She moved closer, holding her nerve,
though rightly cautious.

"You're in a house of Belmont's" she said
1665 gently, "on sacred land of his family; you
know the place I mean. It's the only safe
place for you now."

"Not to mention for Hector," Trevor cut in
squarely, stepping in after her, "thanks to
1670 you. It's a sanctuary for him, but for you
it's a prison; don't forget it."

She watched me, and I watched him. He
glanced at her — regretfully I thought —
saying, "I owe a debt to your sister, and she
1675 insisted on your capture, alive." His
piercing eyes fell back on me. "You'll show
her no grief. And remember also, but for
her, and for Hector's recovery, I'd have
otherwise ventured your rescue only so I
1680 might kill you myself."

Julia threw him some sort of look I couldn't
see. I thought of several abrasive remarks I
could make to him, but we only stared off,
and at last I raised my hand to the small
1685 figure hovering near me. Hers trembled as
she led me to the couch. I sat on the edge,
holding my side, head down, grimacing in
silence.

She seemed to want to talk more, but I
1690 waited her out, and at length they left me.
Trevor made sure she was outside before
turning from me and exiting himself.

"You're *just* like him, you know," I breathed
as he crossed the threshold. He made no
1695 indication he'd heard me.

Of course, the window was secured against me as well, though it was open to the fresh, oppressive air. I couldn't leave the room, but I was free to move within its confines as I wished.

Belmont still felt it necessary to keep watch on me, planting himself somewhere at the end of the hall. At times Julia would be compelled to relieve him. She might pass the warded door, perhaps bringing me food or words, both of which I'd ignore.

As I could, I'd rummage through the contents of the room, thinking somewhere amid all the worthless articles was hidden *something* I might find useful.

After a few days of this, she opted to *beg* me to eat, to speak, to do something besides the nothing I appeared to be doing. I sat on the couch with my back to her. She went so far as to offer me a history from the library, digging in her memory for old comforts.

With this, I glanced over my shoulder and half-heartedly said, "I'd look at something old and dusty, maybe." As she left, I muttered, "Though I daresay it's *all* dusty."

A moment later she returned, but it was to follow after Trevor, who marched in, much agitated, and stood before me asking, "Did you really think I'd permit the ancient lore of my family fall into the hands of a necromancing, debauched lunatic?"

"You don't have quite the same way with words. It sounded—"

1730 "No, enough," he knifed his hand through the air. "In fact, you're just going to go back to holding your tongue from now on, unless it's to tell me what you've done to Hector and how we're to undo it."

1735 "And give up those secrets you claim are keeping me alive?" I laughed. "It wouldn't matter if you knew. I can only assure you we have no say in it."

"What you can *do* is settle in," he growled, "until I *feel* assured of that."

Julia made no argument to him as he exited.

As she left, I chose a footstool from among the furniture and kicked it violently out into the hallway. They didn't bother with me again for quite a while.

That evening, as I knelt shuffling through a chest, my eye caught on an imperfect floorboard. I considered it a moment, and then dug my nails into the plank until it pried up. Fishing around beneath it, my hand fell on a small thing of cold metal.

I pulled a little brooch from the dust and replaced the flooring. It was nothing special in itself, just a cheap, violet gem set in a copper wrap, but my eyes could detect the thing had been recently tampered with.

1760 Julia had left roses in the room. With a thorn I drew blood and let it drip onto the gemstone. Holding it over the single candle they'd left, I whispered sweetly into the vapor that cooked off, and then tossed it out the open window. As it passed the frame a brief shimmer radiated out from that one point, rippling up and down the walls, the floor, across every plane of the room.

1770 Walking to the window, cautiously at first, I put my hand through it. Then I hopped onto the sill and swung my legs out into the open air. Once my feet touched the ground a story below, however, I looked back up.

1775 After a thought, decidedly kicking the brooch into the growth below the window, I pulled myself back inside and moved to my couch, reclining vacantly.

1780 Two days later, I heard Julia draw Trevor away from his post at the end of my hall. I took the opportunity to slip out and find the library she'd mentioned and he'd forbidden. Quickly, I snatched up a few of the oldest hand-scripted tomes. I'd just slid them beneath my bedding when Trevor appeared in the doorway.

1785 "Hector is becoming restless," he told me. "Your sister thinks he may wake soon."

"Meaning I'll be free to go?" I asked, sarcastically hopeful.

1790 “Meaning there will be one less reason to keep you around, anyway,” he returned.

1795 Later that night, I discovered the reads I’d picked were of *intense* interest. Secret lore on their enemy, such as he would never reveal to us, his servants, perhaps even beyond his own knowledge; histories and recipes and codes, collected over the centuries by the shunned clan.

1800 A stone, a *crimson stone*, was a reoccurring motif even from the oldest, most anguished scrawl. It was a thing of substance, like our philosopher’s stone, only it commanded a much greater power, and at a much heavier tax on its wielder, the last of whom was said to be Dracula.

1810 As the night deepened, in that same tormented hand, I found an annotated, illustrated spell depiction, unbelievably familiar, captured in haggard patches ages earlier.

Dawn brought an end to my study, but I lay hours processing, figuring and wondering before I slept.

1815 As the evening shades were starting in, I was roused by crisp, heavy steps coming up my hall. Over the sounds of Julia’s piping, suddenly, at long last there came his voice, cold, hard, and clear: “...I want to *see him*.”

1820 I stretched and turned over. “Hector?” I smiled listlessly when he stood rigid at my door. “Up already?”

1825 He crossed half my room and paused, a thoughtfully hostile gleam in his eye. He was as dressed down as I, only he’d kept his shirt on.

Julia was nonplus, and stayed a few paces behind him.

1830 Trevor followed them in and leaned against the doorframe with his arms nonchalantly folded and his head down.

1835 “I couldn’t wait to see you either,” I went on. “I thought it’d be years before the light came into in your eyes again. How’s your head?”

I could tell Hector wished to do something like cross the room, lift me off my couch by the hair, and strike me, but he apparently resisted the urge.

1840 “I’m stronger than you, Isaac,” he said with cautious confidence. “I don’t *need* years.”

1845 “Perhaps,” I turned to stretch a bit more, “or it could be I practically cradled you into your repose; not that you extended me the same courtesy.”

1850 “Perhaps,” he concurred, “and I’m sure buried beneath ruins in the care of devils would be less wholesome than the care in which I woke to find myself.” He glanced softly at my sister. Aggravation flared in

me, but curiosity was dampening it. Had I spoken so specifically to any of them?

1855 “Still, I don’t doubt ruin is your preference over a place like this,” he continued, “where you wake, finding yourself rendered entirely human, Belmont’s power coiled about you, and all of us gathered, holding you in place to reap justice...”

1860 With his words, some roaming notions found their place in my mind, though not, I think, in a way that Hector intended. Suddenly far away from the conversation, I whispered, “Of course.”

Hector threw me a sideways glance.

1865 “Yet I’ve never been anything *but* entirely human,” I returned to him, “although, an exceptional one, I’ll give you that. Now *you* Hector,” I pulled myself into a sit, smiling wryly, “you seem exceptional too, and knowledgeable somehow, as if you’ve been places. Just where have you been, Hector?” His eyes glimmered silently. “Tell me,” I pressed, “you must have met her?”

1875 Still he hesitated, turning his head down, clearly considering more points than the answer he finally produced merited. “No.”

1880 Not to say I was surprised by such an answer, but he really is gifted in the way he just *delivers* the smile right off my face. With some effort he brought his gaze back to mine. “I’ve seen your mind across these

- leagues, heard you whisper to yourself... she's entirely you, Isaac."
- 1885 A wordless scoff issued from Trevor. Julia's eyes I found on me, blue with pity for my apparent suffering. I couldn't tell exactly which one of them vexed me worst just then; the monster, the hypocrite, or the liar.
- 1890 "Still, you deny it," I glared at Hector. "You are hopeless."
- "Consider who's talking," Trevor snickered.
- "Silence your subordinate, will you Hector? He already forgets the feeling of his heart on a skewer."
- 1895 Trevor struck his fist down into the beam he leaned upon and stepped toward me. Hector held him up, belittling my words to quell his agitation.
- 1900 That set me off. I began a rant, drowning their debate, crawling across the couch and watching Hector intently from where I knelt, repeating many things I'd said to him over the years. As he turned to leave the room, I grew louder, finally shouting after him as he vanished, "...and it doesn't matter if you're stronger, Hector, because I'll simply *never stop!*"
- 1910 Belmont and my sister still stood by. To her, he gestured my way as if I'd illustrated a point made earlier, which got me rolling, reclining back on my couch in a fit of
- hysteria. It drove him from the room as well. Julia followed reluctantly.
- 1915 Amid my mirth, I was spooked to notice Hector suddenly standing there once again in my room, alone. His solemnity quieted me. He did indeed appear in midst of a full recovery, and drew carelessly, uncharacteristically close. I let him.
- 1920 "...Something else?" I asked.
- He leaned in, putting his lips close to my ear, all but mouthing, "She is entirely you, Isaac. I met my own."
- 1925 My impulses teetered. "How... interesting..."
- "Didn't I always say we weren't so alike?" He took a step back to look me in the eye, and the textured mirrors of our irises reflected as minute, infinite corridors.
- 1930 "What *were* you doing there with him, Isaac?" he pried. "Why do I yet breathe?"
- A knowing smile scratched the surface of my face, and he knew I wouldn't answer. Then I shuddered as he drew away, leaving me there, stealing the warmth with him.
- 1935 Later that night I could hear, somewhere in the house below me, Hector and Julia speaking. Trevor, I didn't hear; doubtless, he perched outside my room, but there'd not been a shuffle of feet, not a creaking, not a clearing of the throat for a long time.
- 1945 I rummaged a neckless from one of the drawers and began plucking the beads off, rolling them one by one into the hallway. Nobody came investigating. Slowly, I put my head outside my door.
- 1950 His chair leaned against the wall at the end of my hall, and his head rested on his chest. It was adorable the way he slept with it curled up in his hand, the *Vampire Killer*. Dear Trevor must have exhausted himself, keeping watch all that time.
- 1955 I pressed myself to the wall and crept silently his way. When at last I loomed directly over him, against the wall he reclined upon, I whispered, "*Trevor...*"
- 1960 His head shot up. I wrapped my arm around his neck before his chair could touch the ground. So quickly and quietly he was out again that I chuckled and set him down in his seat, whispering to his deaf ear.
- 1965 "That've been the second time I killed you," I smiled, and as I reached for the whip, "it's by inherent luck that one so easy to sneak up on survives—" But the lash seared as I took hold of it and I threw it down, kicking Trevor out of his chair in retaliation.
- 1970 The house went silent after his weight hit the floor. Quickly, I wrapped the whip in a satchel so I might handle it. On a table right across from my room, just in sight and out of reach the whole time I'd been detained, my captors had lain my armor, boots,
- 1975 gauntlets, virtually all of my personals;

these I snatched up too. Then I was pulling on the boots as I went out the window, and was sprinting away.

I felt myself strengthened, exhilarated actually, as I gained distance from the houses. The natural healing may have actually done me some good also. At last, leaping that river that bordered the sacred grounds, I called out Abel and we hastened to the mystic site that would make the distance between us and Dracula inconsequential.

I found the iytei waiting where I'd left him. He no longer held the dragon-head door. Instead, it lay about in mutilated pieces. I praised him with a ruffle of his fur and plunged into the cavern.

It was more elaborate than I'd realized flying out, but eventually I returned to the underground fissure.

All was as I'd left it, but deathly quiet. No shuffle or cry above. The *Chauve-souris* was still wedged between the fissure walls overhead. The opposing recess still emitted a low light of crimson.

Abel encircled me and we took the narrow sliver of a passage.

We reemerged in a short alcove, but it was gated against the main chamber with a dimensional snare. The exits of this

antechamber would only return one to it, over and over. But I found the trick, and the gate fell away.

2010 The room beyond was deep, flat, and void of any light except two cressets, glowing red in a perpetual way. They sat on a dais at the back wall, on either side of a carved stone pedestal, illuminating no more than a few steps beyond their embers.

2015 My pulse quickened as I crossed the room and found, strewn on the pedestal, an amulet wrought like a six-point star holding a garnet-colored, opal-like gem. It wasn't unfamiliar; I'd seen him wear it constantly and not given it a thought. But now it was here, unattended, on a pedestal, no less; this crimson stone of lore, and of notable importance to my mission.

2025 Why exactly the stone was so favored, as I've said, its own long story, and I have no intention of making it part of mine. I'll only say this: My understanding is that without it, Dracula might have wasted away unexceptionally centuries ago, and may yet waste away, if the stone were by chance destroyed, or to find a new charge; therefore, the stone was favored.

2030 When I slipped my fingers under the thick chain and lifted the amulet, the cressets went out. For an instant the darkness was complete, until the stone began to faintly glow in its own hue.

2040 But then my breath was abruptly stolen, and a shock ran through my spine and expression. A voice, like the muffled, discordant call of every soul ever damned swollen in a singular fey chorus, grated across the room: "*I-i-i-i-s-s-s-a-a-a-a-c-k...!*"

2045 I breathed the absolute worst curse I knew. That abominable vocalization began laughing.

2050 As I turned, from the corner of my eye I could only see that a blackness thicker than nothing had filled the other half of the chamber; it was the sound of the slice and the hair standing up on the back of my neck that told me of the immense, inhuman blade shearing through the air behind me.

2055 The scythe cleaved the room, splitting the pedestal and cressets. I dove up, clearing it, but just barely. For an instant before I hit the ground, his cadaverous face emerged from beyond the shadowy folds of his robe.

2060 I hadn't seen this reunion coming, although I admit, I probably should have. And while Death isn't intent on being a pleasant experience for any of us, I'm afraid he bears a rather special grudge against me.

2065 I had once been known for being his match. For a short time I gave into the temptation to test the old assessment, as it's rare I even find such a challenge, but she, the voice that drove me, entered my head again, for the first time since I'd felt abandoned in Dracula's presence.

She was no admirer of Death, I knew – he spoiled her fun, he should have known better, et cetera – but it was her that put
2075 the urgency in my head to get out. After he nearly cut my legs out from under me, I heeded.

I shouted to Abel that we had to go. He burst through the teeming folds filling the
2080 room and wrapped me in his magic. We coasted out the chamber and the slit of the exit, leaving Death in the wake of Abel’s inferno.

Once back in the open, we burst up into our
2085 earthly forms. There, just inside the mouth of the recess, staring slack-jawed at me, stood Hector and Trevor.

I think they were yet a little too surprised to appreciate that their quarry had just
2090 materialized in front of them.

Before they could react to *me*, a hellish roar issued through the rock from the chamber behind, and the recess wall began to seethe with the ghostly black fabric that bled
2095 through it. This drew their eyes enough for me scramble out into the fissure, snatching Hector’s sword from its sheath as I passed, leaving them to assess these developments.

I felt sure they’d be fine. I threw the sword
2100 into the harness at my shoulder and leapt back and forth up the walls to where the *Chauve-souris* was wedged. Calling on Abel’s assistance, we tried again to free it, but it wouldn’t budge.

2105 Then, with a shout, Belmont appeared below us. Apparently Hector felt fine enough to take on Death alone, sword or no. The Hunter began to climb.

I sneered at him, giving a command to Abel.
2110 He dove at Belmont, but then turned and swooped up toward me, grabbing me and catapulting me into the air. I caught hold of the rock high up the fissure wall. That was a new trick we’d come up with fleeing
2115 Belmont’s land earlier. I had so much less to climb that I gained the upper hall while he still struggled far below.

“Abel,” I called after I pulled myself up and out, “grab it!” He sped back to work on the
2120 *Chauve-souris*.

The hall was now entirely split in two by the fissure. I rushed over to the green slit in in the back wall, arranging the components on the floor just as on I had the altar. The
2125 crimson stone I centered amid these items. The whip I coiled in a circle around them; she screamed in my hands, but I bore it.

Once all was placed, I repeated the verses, supplemented with Belmont’s lore. The
2130 atmosphere of the room began to shift. I held short of the last two lines again. Then I heard a rushing at the brink behind me.

I began to cross the floor, feather sword drawn, but halfway I halted. Hector came
2135 in view, clawing at the edge, but not only him. He was hauled by that dragonish

counterpart to my own fire-breathing crimson devil; his eerie, icy indigo.

The devil had been among his favorites, but
2140 I’d assumed he’d long since parted with it. Perhaps he’d assumed the same.

Once the indigo had Hector perched, it returned to assist Trevor with the rest of his climb. As Hector dragged him over the
2145 brink, Abel soared up from the fissure depths beyond them and turned, darting and veering toward me.

I let the sword fall from my hands. Just as Hector turned to face me, Abel dropped the
2150 *Chauve-souris* into my extended arms. I kicked Hector’s blade over to his feet. He gave me a baffled look – only after snatching it up, of course.

I’d intended to let him in on why such a
2155 smile had filled my face just then, why, when his eyes met mine, the splenetic laugh slipped through my teeth. I really did, but it happened that, in the same instant, a concussive explosion erupted behind me.

The stone wall’s fragments fired across the room toward us. I stumbled forward, pelted with shards of stone and thunder. The indigo dove before a large missile that seemed meant for its master. Hector, seeing
2160 his child crushed, appeared first horrified, and then furiously looked to me, but lastly his eyes moved past me, his ferocity tainting with a weary dismay.

2170 The lingering motes lit up lurid green with
the torchlight now flooding from the recess.
There was a silhouette, recognizable to each
of us, drifting from the vault. He seemed
delighted to find us there, for he laughed.

2175 He bore none of the earthliness he'd worn
when I last encountered him. As his figure
rose, so also did his stature, his presence
emanating a darkness that obscured not
only him, but all near him.

2180 When he lifted a hand toward the relief
plaques of the walls I spun wildly to face
them, but the sculpted stone horrors didn't
so much as shudder. Then I turned back to
Dracula to find his eyes were burning on
me, filled with wrath and accusation.

2185 A column of air began to twist around him,
and he himself to transform: his cape
spreading into a wingspan, fingers growing
into talons, fangs curling, his perfect traits
twisting into that of a monstrous, demonic
2190 incarnate.

"Damn you, Isaac!" I heard Hector shouting
over the tumult.

2195 He started to charge at me, but Trevor
intercepted him, crying "Not you! I'll get
him!" Hector grudgingly nodded, and
darted to the other side of the hall to flank
the evil shape our former Lord was
assuming.

2200 Belmont continued toward me, chucking an
ax blade at me first. I batted this away.

2205 Next came daggers, cast one after another. I
slipped between a few, grinning, "Is that
your best?" Then rolling away, as I came to
my feet I laughed, "Oh, right, you're just a
tied-off bull without your—" But before I
could finish, like an arrow he shot himself
straight into me, wrapped his well-knit
arms around my waist, swooped me aloft
and slammed me back to the ground.

2210 He dropped his knee into my ribs, pinning
that arm, catching the other, and hooking
me across the face. As he knelt, I flung my
leg up and kicked him over the back of his
head, rolling him over. We wrestled more,
2215 but only for a moment.

2220 While he tried to pin me by my throat, I saw
over his shoulder the shadow looming upon
us, and I heard Hector crying out, but these
things were eclipsed by the rushing and the
dark energy that struck Trevor and I
together, abruptly breaking us up.

2225 We both lay stunned to the core, though I
recovered faster, at length pushing him off
me and crawling away while he was still
reeling. But Dracula had by then left us,
drawn to a flash at the far end of the hall.

2230 I staggered to the *Chauve-souris* and scooped
it up, calling a cue to Abel once more. He
swooped and lifted me into the air, hefting
me over Dracula's hovering form. As I
flew past him I swept my spiked blade up,
once tearing into his wing, and again,
severing a piece of his doggish ear. Dracula
reared back and howled. He didn't bleed,

2235 or rather his wounds bled what seemed a
viscous, molten green light.

2240 For an instant I spotted Hector through the
haze that wafted around Dracula. As he'd
watched the reaction of the vampire lord,
the recoiling at my strikes, it were as if
Hector at last somewhat followed me, and
he urged the fresh devil he'd called onto the
monster.

2245 I landed past Dracula in the depths of the
hall near where the wall had blown out,
commanding Abel to stay on him. There, I
found the spell components all scattered,
though apparently the restraints of the
magic were still in place. Then I spotted the
2250 crimson stone on the ground in the green
light just before the open vault, as if the
blast hadn't touched it. I lunged at it, but
stopped short, beholding the recess's
shallow interior as it came into view.

2255 I had been correct about the room, but I
can't say why I failed to anticipate how
unsettling the sight would be.

2260 Lying in an ornate sarcophagus, propped
nearly upright against the vault wall was
the desiccated remains of Dracula. The
cloth seemed perfect, but the hair was
ragged, skin shrunk taut against the bones,
the flesh beneath withered, crumpled
sockets for eyes, and papery gums and lips
2265 peeling back and emphasizing the fangs
that gaped beneath.

I only paused at the sight, then again I jumped at the crimson stone. At once the leathery corpse lurched forward, animated, and though it seemed bound to the coffin, it stretched far, snatching and drawing me in with strength unnatural for its shrunken frame and locking its teeth into my neck.

I struggled in its grip, the fangs gnashing on me. At last I tore myself away, throwing my hand to my throat. I wasn't punctured of course, my collar protecting the rich arteries — as was in part the original point of wearing it, considering where I dwelt — but after such a mauling, one can't help checking.

Hector, I could hear, was struggling against our former Lord... the being himself, not the soulless husk I'd just fought off. I caught another glimpse of him and his devil, a liquid golem composed of delicious, silvery mercury.

They were hard pressed as it was, but then Dracula sent out a powerful ripple of force that crossed the entire room.

Hector leapt forward and out of my sight to evade it as I threw myself down beneath it. On the other side of the hall beyond Dracula, Belmont came into my sight, quick-stepping his landing after tumbling over the deadly wave. He saw me too.

From there on the floor, I also spotted the *Vampire Killer*, lying beneath the dust and fractured stonework. I hooked it up with

2300 my corseque and slung it past Trevor as he bolted toward me. He slid to a stop and scrambled after it.

I tried to use my corseque to snatch up the amulet, but the corpse grabbed hold of the blade and nearly wrestled it away.

Then a sharp groan came from Hector beyond the smog of the evil aura. In the swirl it looked as if Dracula had gotten ahold of him, the clawed feet working just as well as the hands to lift him and draw him by each of his limbs.

Before I could do anything, a crack sped across the room and the *Vampire Killer* split the monster's back down to the ribs. Again and again it whistled and seared. Dracula's wicked hands released Hector's as he wheeled to face the Hunter. As Hector was dragged by the feet, he recovered his sword from the ground and thrust it into the monster from below.

Turning my attention back to the vault, I tried again to scrape the amulet up with my corseque, but the thing wouldn't relent. Finally I attempted to skewer the remains, but as I held them pinned in the coffin and reached for the stone, that mindless, ravenous corpse-demon pushed itself entirely through the spear and blade of the *Chauve-souris* and slid up the pole to wrap its ragged arms around me.

Abel, just then, appeared out of nowhere and fired himself into us. He pushed the

corpse back long enough for me to snatch up the amulet and dart off. He tore my weapon out of the impaled remains and returned it to me once I got my distance.

Dracula hovered ahead, facing the others. They both were in my sight beyond him, Hector to the left and Belmont to the right. I sent Abel back in, but I stayed put, unnoticed at the moment.

My prior audience with Dracula had come back to mind, for at that moment, I felt that same sense of displacement revisiting me.

It was nothing like a demonic possession — I knew, for we'd dabbled in *that* as wards. It was no damned succubus. No, this welled up as naturally as magma while I eyed them, while I clutched the stone; a blind, calm, chaotic rage.

I began to mutter my grievances to each of them, just to hear my voice, just to master my thoughts, but already, I knew I couldn't distinguish my own from the other's. Our spite was settling on Dracula.

Hector slipped in for a stab while Dracula descended to counter Belmont. From there, he saw me slide across the floor with the *Chauve-souris*, and with a pitch I impaled the hovering monster on the spear. I held him there, drilling him, cursing him, until finally he rolled in the air, ripping the corseque from my hands, wheeling to face me.

- 2365 I submitted to the loss of control. I doubt I
even appeared myself just then. I'm not
sure if Dracula noticed it, or Belmont, but I
do believe Hector did. In fact, just as my
eyes went dark I saw him backing away, his
2370 expression, in a word, anticipant.
- I heard my voice as one hears another's
with one's own head held underwater. I
couldn't tell you what language I spoke, but
I know I was delivering a sentence. I didn't
2375 stop until, apparently, I was finished, and
the feeling had begun to leave me.
- As I came back I found myself lifted off my
feet, pinned within the iron grip of
Dracula's talons.
- 2380 The crimson stone was still in my hand,
glowing again, and it was speaking to me.
Then compulsion drowned out all else.
Even as he lifted me to his maw, even as his
claws constricted around me, I attempted to
2385 deliver the last of the ancient binding spell.
- I only got out part of it when Belmont must
have pitched a vial of holy water onto us.
Obviously, to Dracula this might as well
have been acid. I took it only a little better.
- 2390 But next we were pelted by Hector's voice,
although it wasn't quite his voice. Across
the way I could see him, how he'd changed.
Not that I'd be able to *describe* how; not to
those who can't sense such things – other
2395 than his eyes, which were a milky blue
film – and his aura, which swirled lividly in
the air around him – but the difference was
- startling enough that he had nearly finished
by the time I realized he was speaking the
2400 final lines of the ritual.
- Dracula bowed his monstrous head and
squeezed me in his grip, himself afflicted.
He lifted me so his garnet eyes, the only
part of him that remained unchanged, the
2405 only part that could still milk my grief, met
mine, and his voice cut through the turmoil
in my head without so much an utterance:
You'll watch it again, traitor.
- Violently, I was thrown down. Then he
2410 dove at Hector. Though his speed was
great, the lash of Belmont intervened. The
monster flinched, clawing as the whip came
without relent, gradually fighting towards
the wielder.
- 2415 Hector seemed to regain himself and
brought his flashing sword and golem into
the assault.
- Abel continued his fiery battery as well,
though it seemed hardly necessary by then.
2420 Watching the slaughter from the ground, I
called him back once, but he ignored me.
- Though he'd begun to revert to his vampiric
form, Dracula's howls remained beastly as
they each slashed and seared and smashed
2425 away.
- He descended and diminished, and
Belmont's presence seemed to grow, a halo
of golden light emitting from him, trailing
in his swings. Hector's own iridescence,
- 2430 saxe and dreadfully soothing, still emanated
from him as he darted in and out of sight.
- Dracula, for a moment, appeared himself,
though he was bloodied, actually *bleeding*
now, and writhing wrathfully just above the
2435 ground. Then his whole image went black
and empty, and he ceased to retaliate
against them, and the light of the two
warriors seemed drawn into the abyss of his
figure. Only then did I notice the redness of
2440 my own aura seeping into the mixture.
- These energies wove over and around him,
and suddenly a disk appeared above him,
crafted of glowing, unearthly runes.
- Belmont jumped upon Dracula, uttering his
2445 detrimental prayer, the power he channeled
lifting him into the air, barraging the
blackness with a vortex of his gilded light.
Then, as Belmont fell away, Hector lunged
and ran the feather sword through the
2450 vampire lord's chest.
- The disk dropped, forcing Hector back,
seeming to melt over top the jet black
silhouette before suddenly flattening to the
floor, shooting blinding rays in every
2455 direction.
- When the light receded and I looked back,
all that remained was the design of the disk,
the seal, like pitch burned into the stone
floor.

2460 I stood up, and past this seal my eye caught
Hector. He was studying me, his face
cupping comprehension.

“Isaac... you —” he began, but then a stiff
rattling turned our heads to the vault. The
2465 splayed corpse was pulling itself back into
its sarcophagus.

At the same time a rumbling began, and the
stone and dust that had sprayed across the
room in the explosion began to lift and
2470 whip past us, flying back into place. After a
moment the wall had repaired itself as if
we’d never been there to upset it.

Across the fissure that divided the room,
there was a click and a sheathing as the trap
2475 door that had been barring the hall’s exit
dropped into the floor.

I looked back at Hector. He was about to
speak again, but Belmont cut in, as he tends
to do, stepping towards me, inarticulate
2480 with awe, “Where did you...?”

I followed his gaze down to the crimson
stone hanging from my hand. Our eyes
sprang to meet each other’s, and nearly
slavering, he snapped, “Give me that!”

2485 “Bite me.”

“Get over here!”

He lifted his whip, but Abel was on it and
crashed into him. I dashed over, ready now
to bury my wicked blade into his righteous
2490 neck, but Hector’s sword shot through the

air at my feet and tripped me up. As I
rolled away, I gave Abel the command he
enjoyed most, and he covered everything
around us in his devil-fire.

2495 I could hear Hector shouting after me as it
cleared, but I was already crossing the
fissure with my crimson.

When I landed, it looked as if Belmont
might actually attempt the jump after me.
2500 Not that he’d have made it, but I had the
drakeling ignite the air against his passage
anyway.

At the door I called the devil back, and with
one last look and laugh, I took my leave.

2505

They would’ve had to have been on my
heels to retrace my path through the ruins,
which they were not.

I’m sure they’ve found their own way out
2510 by now.

You’d think this would end it; it being done,
we’d just leave each other the hell alone;
that this would be good enough to satisfy
2515 Belmont, or just enough to satisfy Hector,
but I’m sure it won’t. With those types,
nothing ever does.

Still, Dracula is gone — for now. His
demise, to me, comes not without grief...
2520 but fortunately, without much.

It’s his fault. He overstepped. Things
might have been different, if he didn’t need
to rule every last one of us. Even still, at his
core, where a man’s faults seem to reside,
2525 he *is* one of us.

For sure, he never recognized my devotion,
but that wasn’t the issue. In fact, he may
have actually known its depth, and this
abuse was merely an indulgence in the
2530 delight he takes from any our suffering. I
know I should expect no less. I certainly
can’t blame him for it... though, he did
manipulate me. He kept me from myself.
Hector too. So unnecessary.

2535 I simply can’t tolerate the existence of one
who finds my own so dispensable. I don’t
work to keep up *all this* just to see it
squandered. And I doubt I ever had a shot
at blissful eternity. As this is likely the only
2540 time to enjoy myself, I’d prefer to secure it
from such malicious intentions.

That’s not to say such things had anything
to do with how this all turned out, but it’s
my understanding that Lord Dracula’s
2545 intentions are no longer my concern. That
is, unless I choose to pursue a life without
end also; stave off Death and Hell a while...

Not with the crimson stone, of course — ha!
That burden I cast down a pit back into the
2550 ruins of his Castle. There are far more
efficient ways to achieve immortality. And
his own stone, he *will* need it when he
returns, if I’ve opted to stick around.

2555 Once a century only, she said, as his
punishment, which he brought upon
himself.

As I was saying, he's not the only one
despising me... who may yet be of concern.

2560 It probably will be best to lay low for just a
little while, till they've cooled off a bit...

I may find things more fit to my leisure.

2565 That ancient lab, buried beneath the
perpetual black of that old, forgotten forest;
I took a liking to the place immediately. Its
master seems to have been an individual of
worth: professional drive and elite taste,
who thought enough of himself to keep a
fine dwelling, though it rots now. I believe
I can situate here in this neglected corner of
2570 the map for a time.

Perhaps Hector had the right idea. With
Dracula waylaid, the war long lost, to enter
into a sort of retirement... a chance to
explore those more personal interests, to
2575 address the unfinished... might be....

...The thing about an existence like mine...
the new tragedies... they remind you of the
old. You find yourself beholding one loss,
and grieving that same moment for another.
2580 They accumulate.

...No, there's no rest from this fate. I'm an
appointed ambassador; a diplomat, really.

My parents ought to be proud, though
somehow I doubt they would be. Clearly,
2585 the Lord who nourished me isn't.

And then, of course, there are those who
hunt me...

The one who matters... told me these others
may feel as such, and that it'd be fine.

2590 ...A diplomat—ha!

2595 These others; they can't have me running
around, profaning their order of things...
although trying to stop such a force as that
which drives me... could just be the
maddest idea I've ever heard.

But there's no more reason that I should
meet my pursuers head-on.

2600 That *sickening* urgency, that *devouring* panic:
at last, it subsides. I'm left to the mastery of
myself, the completing of a few works, the
defying of the demiurge... that is, until
those who hunt me catch me up.

By then, I'm sure my devils and I will be
quite ready to entertain.

2605

References:

Castlevania: Curse of Darkness

The Game

Produced by Konami

2610 Writer: Koji Igarashi

Prelude to Revenge

A Preorder Bonus Comic

Writer/Artist: Ayami Kojima

2615

Castlevania: Curse of Darkness; Part I & II

A Manga Comic

Writer/Artist: Kou Sasakura

2620 *Castlevania: Dracula's Curse*

Trevor Belmont's Game

Published by Konami

Directed by Hitoshi Akamatsu

2625 *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence*

A Game that Came Before

Produced by Konami

Writer: Koji Igarashi

2630 *Pachislot Akumojō Dracula*

A Game I could have looked into more, but had a hard time finding complete sources in English and then got set in my ways. I'm pretty sure this was an alternate reality anyway.

2635

Published by Konami

<http://castlevania.wikia.com/wiki/Isaac>

2640 *Etc.*