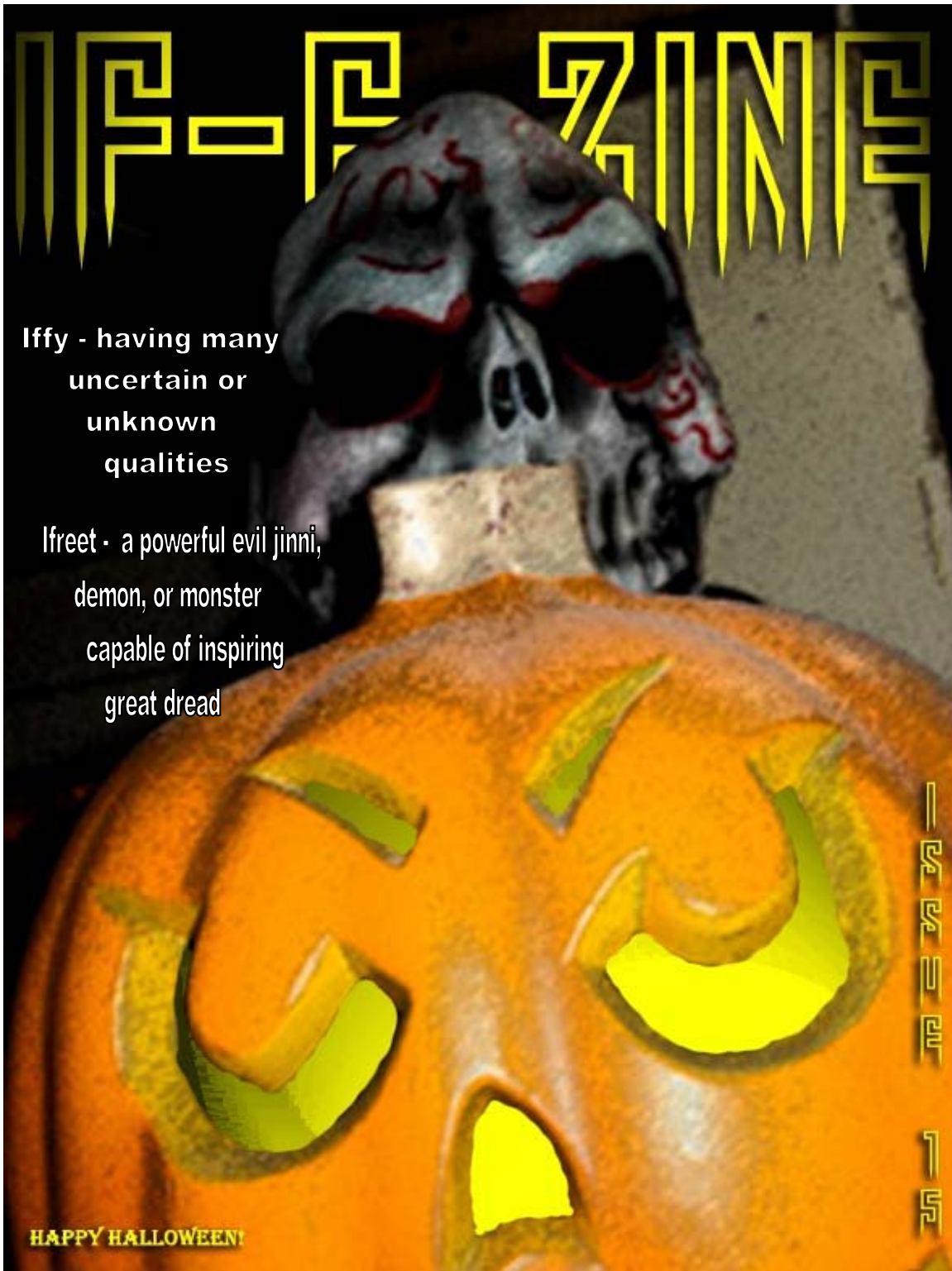


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Editorial by Iffy



HAPPY HALLOWEEN, FOLKS!

It's your horror host with the monstrous most, *Iffy the Ifreet!* I've returned once again for my second year as your Master of **SCARE**-emonies for **If - E - Zine's Halloween Issue.**

This year we see the finale to the serialized tale "**Spidorans Below**", first begun on the *Atomic Swans Serials blog* at <http://lordshen.blogspot.com/>

In the final chapter of "Spidorans Below" we find out if Zalam makes his daring escape with stony pal Olmec from the pursuing Lizarus and the hordes of mechano-men accompanying the vile Norikahn. Man, that Zalam has been on the run for a long time!

And finally we have a three-part tale starring yours truly, your *beloved friend Iffy!* In "**The Gargoyles of Fort Van Raine**", I recount my activities this summer as I traveled the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and ran across Methodius Van Raine - a vampire that's been around since before the time of the Romans!

Have a *hauntingly* good Halloween!

Your pal,

Iffy the Ifreet



“Spidorans Below”

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Moisture dripped from the craggy walls of the underground tunnel. Zalam’s tall frame and the tunnel’s smallness forced him into a crouch. Olmec followed behind, walking sideways in the dark. Ahead of them, leading them, were the three part-mechanical, part-organic spidorans.

“I’m yet uncertain that I can trust you,” Zalam’s voice trailed down the dark tunnel, echoing off ancient limestone. Only the red glow of a sphere carried by one of the spidorans lit the way for them.

Zalam’s hand felt at the hilt of his tri-blade.

*click*clack* “It would make sense for you to distrust us,” spoke the one nearest the derderoid. “Yet allow me to remind you: we are the eldest race in the world. We existed when derderoids were yet cubs in caves discovering fire. When the golems first took shape from their mystic Mana Rani, we were rebuilding ourselves anew so that we may survive forever more. Where mysticism rules the Overworld and has recently been invaded by mechanical men, we have always been half-machines.” *click*

“Which serves as further reason for you to lead us into the maw of Norikahn and his army,” Zalam challenged.

*click*click*clack* The spidoran’s mandible claws worked nervously. “Were that our intent, we would not have felt ourselves forced into the Overworld. Were that our intent, we would have remained below to observe through our glass your fate as Norikahn surrounded you. Again I remind you: we are the eldest race, yet we rarely show ourselves. Here we are now, leading you from Norikahn’s reach. Therein lies the proof of our intent.”

The spidoran and the derderoid allowed the conversation to fall flat. They pressed on through the tunnel, lead by red glow.

* * * * *

Three dozen purple-clad mechano-men surrounded Lizarus at the base of the Argonian Mountains. Lizarus ceased his hunt, eyeing the mechano-men and their human leader Norikahn now standing atop a hovering platform.

“Where has Zalam gone?” demanded Norikahn.

“I do not know,” hissed Lizarus. “I hunt Zalam and his foul companion.”

Norikahn considered this. He said, “What’s your name, lizard?”

“I am Lizarus of the Lizarans and every moment you stall me here is another moment Zalam and Olmec have to nurture distance between them and I. Let me pass,” demanded the lizard.

“They have disappeared before our very eyes,” said Norikahn. “We had them surrounded and they simply dropped out of sight, as though they had dropped directly into the ground.”

Lizarus thought on this. He said, “Perhaps they have.”

“What is your meaning?”

“There are old tales, very old tales, of an ancient race that lives below soil and stone. It is said they show themselves rarely and when they do it is to aid or hinder in world affairs.”

“And you think this race has aided Zalam?”

Lizarus nodded. “It could be so.”

Norikahn eyed Lizarus’ trident where once he had had a hand. “What happened there? A result of combat?”

Lizarus nodded. “A result of Zalam.”

“Then am I to understand you are a soldier?”

“I am a warrior to my people,” Lizarus said with pride.

Norikahn encouraged his steel stallion to move forward. It moved silently closer to Lizarus. Norikahn looked down on the lizard and said, “You seek vengeance, then?”

Lizarus nodded yet again.

“And I seek Zalam. As long as he remains alive, my rule over your world is threatened. I must have him killed or kill him myself.” Norikahn stared at Lizarus a long moment before adding, “Would you aid me in this? I could provide you with resources the likes of which I’m certain you’ve no other access to.”

“And in return?” asked Lizarus.

“And in return, you will be my counselor about this world. We’ve just met and already you’ve educated me in another race I did not know existed. Serve at my side and when the time comes, I’ll allow you to taste Zalam’s blood.”

“I want the golem he is with, as well.”

“It is a small request,” Norikahn considered. “Small enough to be granted. We will also hunt this ally to Zalam.”

Lizarus smiled greedily, flashing his jagged wicked teeth.

* * * * *

“What is Mana Rani?” Zalam asked Olmec as they continued to follow the three spiders.

“A god to my people,” said Olmec. “And a way of life. It is through his wisdom I am able to heal and others are able to bend the world about their will. It is his wife, Marjus, for whom we named this world.”

“I have never known another name for our world.”

“There are many,” Olmec grunted as he passed between two outcroppings of rock. “How did your people come to call it Protuculus?”

“Protuculus was a mighty warrior that led the derderoid charge resulting in our rule of the world. He was also our first king. His soul is now a star in the nighttime sky, a star that merely appeared upon the night of his death.”

“Your first king? Then you are his relation?”

“No,” Zalam shook his head despite knowing Olmec would not see the gesture in the dark tunnel. “He was assassinated eight nights after his indoctrination. His best friend and general of the army, Derodis Arkur, rightfully took the throne in his stead. I am Arkur’s great- great- great- great-grandson.”

The spidorans gathered round at the end of a tiny tunnel. Zalam nearly had to crawl here and found it quite difficult to carry his tri-blade and pack in his hands and navigate the tunnel at the same time.

Olmec had a far tougher time. His chest and back scraped the walls, causing scars on himself and the tunnel.

“I hope we come to a cavern soon,” said Olmec. “A nice, wide cavern.”

click “We are at our destination,” said one of the spidorans.

Another held up the red orb and allowed it to light up the bottom of a massive boulder.

clack “Move this one,” said the spidorans. “It leads to the Overworld.”

Zalam looked at the boulder. “Will we be safe?”

*click*clack* “Safer than when we found you, derderoid. Though you will remain hunted.”

Zalam handed his tri-blade to Olmec, who took it gingerly despite his hefty, dense body.

Zalam set down his pack, then first tested the boulder with his hands, all four of them, then braced the boulder with his back. With a tremendous groan followed by a cry of pain and force of will he moved the boulder to the side. Daylight flooded down on them.

click “Remember to replace the boulder.” *clack*

“I will,” said Zalam as he stood and climbed out of the hole with his pack. He reached down and helped Olmec climb out. Once out, Olmec returned the tri-blade to Zalam.

Zalam looked down the hole at the spidorans.

“I thank you for your help, friends. When I regain rule, I will remember this day.”

click “Rule well,” said one.

Zalam moved the boulder back in place.

“Zalam,” Olmec whispered. “Look where we are.”

Zalam looked. They stood amidst a thick jungle.

“It is hot here. I would assume we are near the center of the world. Am I to assume we are in the jungles of your homeland?”

Olmec nodded and exclaimed, “We are in the Bahktah!”

Zalam stared in awe. Though hot and uncomfortable, he admitted the jungles had a certain beauty. He then said, “It is a wonder we came here so quickly. The spidorans have granted us two day’s travel over our enemies. I thank them once more for the use of their tunnels.”

Olmec nodded. He said, “I am uncertain of direction. We will wait until nightfall when the stars come out, then head for a clearing to get our bearings. We will then be able to find our way toward my tribe. That is, if they remain after the constant wars with the lizarans.”

Zalam looked to his golem friend. He said, “I hope they remain, as well.”



“The Gargoyles of Fort Van Raine”

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It was early May and I was cruising mid-Michigan with Charles, the creator of If – E – Zine, when we came upon an estate sale outside of Standish in a little burg called Omer. I guess Omer’s real claim to fame is being the home of a yeti, but all anyone ever sees or hears of the creature is odd screaming and howling at night.

Anyways, we came upon this estate sale at an old stone house that had once been home to a large farming family, but during the ‘60s and ‘70s the children all moved away with jobs in the auto industry, leaving the parents to struggle on the farm. By the time I came along, the parents had recently died and the kids were selling off everything, house included.

They didn’t seem to know much about what they were doing or what they were selling. Standing in the corner of an old barn, not even put out to be sold, was the frame of an old 1953 Indian Chief Road Master. I approached the eldest son overseeing the sale and he nearly pissed himself simply gazing upon me. So I had a little chat with Charles and made like a leaf and blew.

Charles, in my place, asked for a price for the old motorcycle. Charles isn’t worth much to me most days, but he’s got his uses. This was one of them. I can’t always talk to the people here on Earth without freaking them out. The eldest son wasn’t certain what to charge and hadn’t thought to sell it. Truth was, the frame was battered quite a bit and showed signs of having once been in an accident and there was rust everywhere, the engine wasn’t entirely there and but in the end the guy asked for only a hundred bucks. Charles found me hiding behind an old oak and – long story short – I coughed up the hundred and got a fine summer project to keep myself busy and out of trouble.

The summer here in Michigan was mild and made for great weather to rebuild a bike. I scoured the Internet for old parts, found new parts and tricked it out. I painted it the traditional black and yellow. The Indian Chief head had been busted on the fender and I could find replacements easily, so I carved my own out of white ash to look like a skull with a headdress. It seemed more fitting considering my boney structure. One of the black leather bags needed replacing, but I got one. By the second week of August I had a refinished, chromed out and roaring Road Master that hauled some serious ass.

As anyone that loves a bike will tell you, you can’t own a bike and not go anywhere on it. I hopped on, pointed the ol’ girl north and headed for da UP (that’s the Upper Peninsula of Michigan for those of you that don’t know).

I had a good time cruising Michigan on the old machine and da UP is gorgeous.

There were times I rode for an hour or more and never saw another vehicle on the road. I stopped in the Soo; checked out a few waterfalls; saw a bear crossing the road with her cubs and stayed way, WAY back; ate at this place filled with antlers and stuffed animals... I did it all. But at one point I got myself just the least little bit lost. I kept riding, hoping I wouldn’t run out of gas before I found the next station. I passed by this place that looked like an abandoned log village nestled back in the woods a little ways. I was surprised I even saw the damn thing. I drove right on by it, realized the day was getting on towards night and that I should be stopping for some rest in the very least. So I turned back to check out the ol’ village.

There was no longer any path to the decrepit wooden buildings. I guessed the place had been left unused for at least a hundred years. I carefully rode off the road into the woods towards the structures. The smells of wet and rotted wood filled the air, mixing with pine sap and damp ground and, oddly, the air chilled here. That was the first sign that something was odd here. I took note of the chill and slowly made my way between the trees until I came upon the structures.

As I approached, I realized the area had once been a wooden fort. A few its buildings were collapsing, a tall wooden wall surrounded it and – this is what struck me as curious and was my second sign of something being odd – there were three gargoyles placed on two corners of the walls and a third, giant gargoyle place upon the ground before one of the corners.

I pulled the bike to the front gate, shut it off and looked around. Everything was dead quiet here. I got off the bike and strolled the compound of the fort.

“Hello?” I called out. “Is anybody here?”

There’s a lot of forts in Michigan and the state has a rich military and merchant history, both of which required forts at one time. Many have been restored and remade into tourist spots. I thought perhaps this fort, too, may be in the process of restoration and someone may be present.

“Hello?” I called.

No one answered... at first.

As I stepped into what looked like a mess hall, I called out again, “Hello?”

A seething, raspy voice answered, “Shhhh! Make yourself silent.”

The man that stepped out of the darkness was poorly clothed. My immediate thought was that he was a gypsy like me, homeless and on the road or squatting here permanently.

“Hey,” I said. “I’m looking for a place to bed down for the night. Is there room here?”

The man closed the distance between us. He didn’t reel from my looks, but then not everyone does. A few are even attracted to my uniqueness.

Am I right ladies? Eh? *Eh?*

The man approached and I saw he was filled with weariness. He was gaunt – supermodel gaunt. His hair was raggedy and knotted. The rags he wore for clothing stunk and I was certain there was a tinge of death about him.

“Are you a ghoul?” I asked.

As the man spoke, I saw his sharp teeth and I knew he probably was.

He answered, “I am a servant to the master.”

That’s something a ghoul would typically say. Ghouls have also been called blood dolls, human familiars, servants of the Devil. If you’ve ever read or seen a good version of Dracula, then you know more or less what a ghoul is. Reinfield, Count Dracula’s faithful servant that ate bugs, would have been something like a ghoul. In the end, a ghoul is a person that has become subservient to an undead creature. I knew then an intelligent undead was nearby.

“So, uh... who’s yer daddy?” I asked not so subtly.

“Master Van Raine oversees me. He is good to me and if you wake him he will refuse my ration of blood tonight.”

“Ration of blood, eh?” I asked.

“Yes,” the man nearly hissed.

“So we have a ghoul, blood and an undead master... Van Raine is a vampire, isn't he?”

The man hissed again. “He is our master and he is good to us!”

“Alright, alright. Chill out, 'lil buddy. So where's Van Raine?”

“He sleeps until dusk. You may speak with him then, but not until he has had his breakfast. Master Van Raine is difficult until he has had his breakfast.”

I chuckled, “Yeah, I'm the same way. So what's your name?”

The ghoul was hesitant to speak. He said, “I am called Abel.”

“Abel,” I said. “How very religious of you. And a 'lil eerie.”

“It was given to me.”

“Cool. So do you think Van Raine will let me stay here for the night?”

At this the ghoul smiled. He said, “I doubt you'll be allowed to leave.”

I didn't like hearing that.

Night came on pretty quickly in da UP and I didn't have to wait long to see Van Raine. I realized Abel wasn't the lone ghoul here. A half dozen more strode out at dusk to hunt fresh meat for their master. They returned a half hour later with a platter filled with fly-encrusted raccoons. It was after he had eaten that Van Raine met with me in the compound of the fort.

He was a tall man and – dare I admit – a gorgeous man. I've met a few other vampires (tales to be told another time) and most of them are either monstrous or plain-looking. It is rare to find one so old and powerful that he can alter his appearance to one of beauty. Unless, of course, he looked that way to begin with prior to being bitten. He was clean shaven and had long, straight black hair that almost glowed blue in the moonlight. His brow and cheek bones were strong and well defined, and his skin was somewhat tan, telling me he possibly was part Spanish or Moorish though he had the build of an Eastern European. His shoulders were square. He wore an old red waistcoat with gold accents, a light purple dress shirt with ruffle and black slacks. On his feet was a pair of nice, newer biker boots.

He had the presence of power and, despite his large frame, gave an air of elegance and refinement and grace.

“I am told you are called Iffy,” he said in an old German accent.

“That I am. I like your boots.”

“Thank you. I am Methodius Van Raine.”

As we shook hands, we each felt the cold in one another's hands. This seemed to please Van Raine. He smiled and said, “It is good to have such a refined guest. May I ask, what manner of creature are you?”

“I'm an ifreet.”

“Ah! A demon! How wonderful! Are you hungry?”

“I could use a hot dog or something,” I said, knowing he most likely did not have any food here for me.

Van Raine smiled. “Perhaps we can *dig* something up for you.”

I chuckled at this. “I'm fine,” I said. “Thanks. I have a couple beers in my bike's bag, though. Would you join me?”

“I cannot drink such things. They cause much me to be ill,” he said. “But feel free to drink.”

I grabbed three beers from my bike and drank one as he gave me a tour of his fort. “Welcome to Fort Van Raine. We’ve plans to rebuild, but I fear I may not be able to do so.”

“Why not?”

“Doing so may cause us undue attention. We can’t have the villagers visiting us in the day, carrying torches and pitchforks and stakes.”

“Gotcha.”

He showed me around a bit. The buildings were old and falling apart and, in many cases, dangerous to be near as they threatened to fall down around us. The tour complete, Van Raine called for two chairs to be brought forth and we sat in the courtyard sharing stories. Eying the gargoyles again, I asked, “What’s the story behind those things?”

“The gargoyles?”

“Yeah. If you don’t mind my sayin’ so, they look a little out of place. Stone gargoyles aren’t usually placed atop rotted wooden fences.”

“Oh, they have a purpose. You see, Mr. Iffy—”

“It’s just Iffy.”

Van Raine smiled and said, “Iffy, I have quite a few enemies and have had some powerful ones over the years. Yet none have been as powerful as the enemy that currently plagues me.”

“And who would that be?”

“An elderly Native American gentleman haunts me. His name is Ahnung and he has made it his purpose to come here to harangue me and my ghouls, to pester me without end. And, worst of all, whenever I step foot or wing or paw beyond the boundary of this old fort he comes as a changling, shifting into the form of a yeti or a raven to fight with me. He has made me a virtual prisoner here.

“When first I came here more than a half century ago, he learned of my presence and was the first to discover my true identity. I was, at that time, passing as a mortal merchant living here as a member of this community. He, one day, charged at me with a rather wicked looking knife only to be put down by my hands. I drained him there and then and refused him eternal life.

“Alas,” said Van Raine rather dramatically, “he returned as a vengeful spirit to haunt me, chasing me into this fort and has kept me a prisoner here since. I have had to drain the countryside to survive and now have moved on to having my servants hunt my blood for me. And all that’s left in this region are animals whose blood is much too strong in nature to be tasty, being instead pungent to my tongue and tainted with good will. I cannot even enjoy the hunt myself.

“What is needed is a foul person. Or, better yet, a clean and decent person. You see, Iffy, it is the capacity for evil in Man that gives blood its taste. Animals do not always have this. A wicked man tastes good to me. And yet, the oddest thing of all, is that the sweetest blood is that of a good man. It is my understanding that this is because the blood of a good man is indeed rich, but also because when I hunt and drain a good man I am robbing the world of greatness, therefore his blood is a delicacy to me.”

“Well, don’t look at me,” I said, “I haven’t got a single drop of blood in me.”

Van Raine smiled. “I don’t know that should a demon have blood I’d much enjoy it.”

“I’m lucky your ghouls didn’t think I was this Ahnung and attack me.”

“You don’t have his stench,” explained Van Raine.

“So what’s this all have to do with the gargoyles?” I asked, still curious.

“They ward off Ahnung. He had taken to haunting me by day while I slept, stirring me and trying to lure me into attacking him only to draw me into the sun.” At this Van Raine lifted the sleeve of his right arm to show a burn there upon his forearm. “It almost worked the first time. Since, his pesterings have been a nuisance.”

“I’m surprised you were able to get gargoyles way up here,” I admitted.

“Oh, I didn’t buy or steal them, my demonic friend... I *made* them. And they were with me when I came to this part of the world. But I had them stored away until I was chased here by Ahnung, then my servants brought them here and set them up.”

I looked at the gargoyles, wondering. As I was about to mention the fine craftsmanship of his carving skills, it came to me he had not made the creatures as a sculptor might. I asked, “You can turn the living to stone?”

Van Raine smiled slyly. “I can turn any creature, living or dead, to stone. It is a skill I learned from a young man more than two centuries ago.”

“You’re like a gorgon,” I joked. “So these are all creatures you’ve turned to stone then?”

“Indeed they are,” he confirmed. “And I’m not quite a gorgon. Each gargoyle has its own interesting tale. Would you like to know them?”

I shrugged. “Sure, I’ve got the time.”

Van Raine nodded. He called for a glass of blood to be brought to him. This was done by Abel.

As he drank from the glass, he began to weave the tales of the three creatures posted at the corners of the fort.

Franzl the Butcher

Darkness descended upon the hamlet of Freiburg. The hamlet was small, out of the way. It had been settled far from the Rhine long ago by hunters and trappers looking for respite from the expanding, growing cities of the medieval world. It was a hamlet for those that did not appreciate much companionship. And though it had grown in its own, in small ways, the hamlet remained neither more nor less than 360 inhabitants large.

On a harvest night, after the day’s work had been done, the men of the hamlet would gather at the Drunken Pony – a local pub and one-time brothel. They would carouse, tell tall tales, sing old songs and largely drink the fine spirits and especially the thick German and Belgian ales the keeper stored.

On this night came a stranger into the Drunken Pony. He was refined, young, and bookish. He was tall and his skin fair. The regulars of the pub eyed him suspiciously as he entered and ordered a light wine.

It was Ado Mallard, the oldest and drunkest man at the Drunken Pony, that approached this stranger.

“Excuse me, kind stranger,” slurred Ado. “For a mere refill of my mug, I would tell you directions to whichever destination you head.”

The stranger smiled politely, amiably. “I need not your directions, sir. But I’ll refill your mug just the same... in the name of a new friendship. You see, I intend to go

no farther in my travels. I have come exactly to the place I intend. I have meant to come to Freiburg.”

“Come to Freiburg?” Mel Jagerhaus scoffed from his seat at the bar. “No man sane or otherwise comes to Freiburg. We all have our heritage here, our roots. Each in of us was born here. Never has another come here. Only do our children ever leave or, more rarely, remain.”

“Well, good sir, you have had a man come to your fine hamlet as of now.”

The bar stirred with curiosity.

Mel Jagerhaus came from off his seat at the bar to join Ado and the stranger at a table. “And what business brings you here?” he asked.

The stranger smiled. He said, “My name is Franzl Freick and I am a butcher. I have learned that many of you have put down the gun to pick up the plow, that many of you now raise cattle and other livestock and that you have, on occasion, had difficulty selling your animals for you haven’t any good butcher. I would like to offer your fine hamlet my services.

“I have been apprenticed for the last three years in Berlin with a butcher there named Hans Heiber. If you wish, you are welcome to send forth a letter questioning my abilities and my tale, but I’ve my letter of marque from my one-time mentor there, should you like to see it.”

At this, Franzl produced from his baggage a letter of marque. None within the Drunken Pony could know it to be a forgery and that one Hans Heiber did not actually exist.

Mel Jagerhaus took the letter, eyed it with his mind that knew too little words to completely understand the thing word-for-word, but was satisfied when he was finished.

He handed it back to Franzl with a smile. “I have quite a few cattle and have had the troubles you speak of. The merchants that come through Freiburg have no way to carry off the livestock alive as it hinders their travels. Having a butcher within the hamlet would be useful.

“I welcome you, Butcher Franzl, to Freiburg. Allow me to buy you a drink.”

“Please,” spoke Franzl, “allow me to buy the first round for my newfound friends. I will gladly accept a drink from you thereafter.”

The bar closed in round Franzl the Butcher, befriending him instantly.

* * * * *

“So you’re from Germany?”

Van Raine looked at me, smiled and said, “Actually, Iffy, I was there before Germany was. Have you heard of the barbarian hordes? I was a part of them, I was a Visigoth more specifically. I served Alaric the First and was present during the sacking of Rome. When we settled Gaul, I met with my maker, an Egyptian, who blessed me with my present state of being.”

“This is all alien to me,” I admitted. “This isn’t my world.”

“It matters not. You need not know any of my past to appreciate my gargoyles. Shall I continue?”

I sipped at my beer. “Go on.”

* * * * *

Franzl the Butcher went about his merry way, setting up shop the best he could. He boarded with the Jagerhuas family for a time until he was able to take on a building from one of the locals on credit. There he set up his store, ordered some equipment and cutting boards and made for himself a small quarter in the back room in which to live.

About three months after he had come to Freiburg, he took on the young Lark Fenkre as an apprentice. Lark was a local boy and didn't much care to be a butcher, but was forced into apprenticeship by his father and Franzl. No one suspected Franzl's adamant behavior to take on the boy.

Days later, the hamlet found one of their young ladies horribly mauled. Much wasn't thought of the matter. The woods about Freiburg were yet wild with animals and a young lady out on the night of a full moon was a dangerous prospect. It was thought she had fallen victim to a pack of wolves. A few questioned this, wondering why no one had heard any howling or growling or the girl's cries for help, but most accepted the idea of a pack of wolves had done the malicious deed.

Lark, at this time, grew more distant and shy than he had ever been. Two more young people were similarly killed by wolves.

It was then the hamlet was once more visited upon by a stranger. This time it was Van Raine that had come. He was a hunter, he said, and when the people of the hamlet heard this, they asked him to keep an eye out for the wild wolves.

Weeks went by. Franzl's business boomed as people spoke of his specialty sausages – the recipes to which he swore he would never share except with his apprentice. Van Raine was boarded at the Drunken Pony.

At last Van Raine learned of Franzl, of his newness to the hamlet. He paid a visit to his sausage store and butchery.

As Van Raine entered, Franzl – who had been instructing Lark on the proper ways to butcher meat – grew silent. He spoke only in minimal.

“May I help you?”

“I'm visiting and I've heard so much about your specialty sausages,” said Van Raine.

Franzl smiled uncomfortably.

Van Raine approached Lark. He quietly smelled at the air, scenting, knowing instantly the meat in nearby was not animal. He looked at Franzl and asked, “Have you any *blood* sausage?”

Franzl, too, smelled the air and knew instantly Van Raine was death. And with his question, Franzl suspected a vampire.

“We have,” he answered.

“I'll take a few.”

Van Raine paid for the sausage, eyed the apprentice and left the butcher's shop.

The two did not meet again for two weeks. There were no killings during that time. Van Raine ate his sausages raw and knew the blood within to be human.

Yet Franzl could not go much longer without fresh meat for himself and word began to spread that his sausages had changed in taste.

On a moonless night, Franzl ushered his apprentice into the woods and waited.

“Where will she come?” he asked.

Hesitant, Lark said, "I told her to meet me for a dip in the river near midnight. She will be here shortly."

Together they hid in a stand of trees.

* * * * *

"I thought werewolves only changed on the night of a full moon."

Van Raine, somewhat impatient with Iffy, calmed himself and explained, "I see you've guessed Franzl's true nature. Most do change only during the night of a full moon, but within the heritage of werewolves there are Were Alphas – that's a slang term used by the hip young werewolves today. The Were Alphas are the oldest of all werewolves and there are, or were, only twenty at one time. There are now no more than a dozen, Franzl having been one of them. These Were Alphas have the capacity to change at will."

"Is Ahnung one of these Were Alphas?"

"No, not at all, though he is a shape changer."

"So he's like a distant cousin to these Were Alphas?"

"There's no real relation there except in that both are shape changers. May I return to my story?"

"Of course, sorry."

Van Raine smiled. "Now you know Franzl was a werewolf, a Were Alpha specifically. And you also know I was at that time already a vampire. What you don't know is something Franzl discovered quite accidentally – Lark was a quiet, sad little boy that was often made fun of. Out of his desire for vengeance, he had taught himself a few things that many would call the Dark Arts."

* * * * *

The young Fraulina came to the riverside. She had been coaxed there by Lark with a particular enchantment. He hated Fraulina for she was, of all the girls in the hamlet that had ever teased him, the most vicious. And yet she was so beautiful that Lark deeply loved her. He wanted to love her, but her wickedness had pushed him to drawing her into the claws of Franzl.

"There she is," whispered Lark.

"I see her. Now go to her and use your mystic arts."

Lark stepped from the stand of trees. Fraulina saw him, wondering why she had come here to see the horribly quiet and plain Lark.

"Good evening," said Fraulina.

Lark said nothing in return. Instead, he chanted. His face soon changed, becoming horrifying ugly and old, worn with wrinkles and his cheekbones protruding from the flesh of his face. His hair grew long and curly until it bound into strands that changed into hissing serpents, each eying Fraulina wickedly.

Fraulina tried to scream, but as she opened her mouth Lark's eyes glowed yellow and she was bound to where she was, her flesh becoming stone, her form becoming as a statue.

Lark's face altered back to his plain, normal looks once more.

Franzl stepped from behind the trees, a roll of canvas housing butcher's knives and tools in his hand. Lark called off the enchantment with a simple word and the girl fell unconscious – a side effect of the process of being turned to stone. It left her defenseless and an easy victim.

Together Franzl and Lark cut her to pieces, storing the meat in a bag Lark had brought. Franzl then shifted into the form of a wolf and tore at her body, effectively leaving behind evidence of a wolf's attack.

Franzl shifted back and as he and his apprentice left the riverside, he caught the smell of death on the air.

* * * * *

“You were there.”

“I was,” said Van Raine.

“Didn't you feel you should try to rescue the girl?”

“For what reason? I would only have killed her myself eventually. Do you know why I came to Freiburg, Iffy? For the very reason Franzl had: we both came to Freiburg looking for new victims. He needed flesh to quell his hunger. I needed the blood. Remember: he came to Freiburg to become a butcher and I to be a hunter.”

* * * * *

Fraulina's murder was once more accepted as a wolf's attack, though more people now questioned supernatural motives. A week after her few remains were laid to rest, Van Raine returned to the butcher's shop. The smell of fresh killings was yet in the sausages there.

Van Raine looked to Lark, then to Franzl.

“Can he leave us alone for a moment?” asked Van Raine.

Franzl nodded. “Lark, go into the back and sharpen the knives against the wheel.”

Lark acted as he was told, but instead he hid in the back room, listening.

Van Raine eyed Franzl when he thought they were alone. He said, “Thus far I've left your business alone and, truthfully, I still would rather not interrupt it. You've a good and proper thing going here. The people may begin to suspect matters, but I doubt they'll ever be able to prove any of their suspicions. And you've got a good tool in that young apprentice. He's mighty... *valuable*.”

Franzl considered Van Raine for a moment before asking, “What is it that you want, corpse?”

Van Raine smiled at this. “What I want is the blood. That's all I want. If you pay me in the blood of the victims you take, I'll keep quiet about everything. I'll even help you hide matters, claiming a rash band of wolves is doing the wicked deeds and I'll hunt the elusive creatures, perhaps bringing in an actual wolf or wild dog every so often to show I'm slowly whittling away at a rather large pack. What say you?”

Franzl scowled. “I'll suppose if I am disagreeable to anything you say, you'll out me to everyone that will listen?”

Van Raine smiled, laughed a little and said, “And I'll help them hunt you down.”

“I suppose then, we've a deal betwixt us.”

But in the shadows of the back room, Lark gave birth to a new conspiracy.

When the time came for Franzl to take yet another victim. He sent Lark to deliver word to Van Raine to meet with them on a night of a full moon.

A new victim was brought forth through Lark's treachery into the woods.

Van Raine excused himself from the Drunken Pony under the premise he was off to hunt the ravaging beasts with a musket, a one-shot pistol and a sword.

Franzl and Van Raine hid in the distance as Lark worked his mysticism. They stepped forth when a young lady was put to stone. As they approached, Lark turned on Van Raine, his ghastly face grimacing, his serpentine hair snapping wildly with venomous fangs as he said, "You'll not take advantage of me and my mentor! Die! Die!"

Van Raine recognized the trap immediately and knew the boy had either been listening when he and Franzl struck their deal or had been told of the deal by his mentor. He forced blood and dark apeiron through his body, giving him supernatural swiftness. He drew his sword as a Visigoth warrior of old, lashing out angrily, lopping off the head of the boy with a clean, quick stroke of the blade. The head lay on the ground, forever frozen in its wicked form.

"You've tricked me!" Van Raine accused Franzl.

"I promise you, the boy's actions were his own!" defended Franzl. "But there was no need to kill him! You said yourself how valuable he was to us. Now how are we to conduct ourselves within Freiburg? How are we to find new victims?"

"You damnable devil dog! You will not need to concern yourself with such matters! I will have your head this night for your treachery!"

Seeing there was no discourse to be had with Van Raine, Franzl instantly shifted into his werewolf form – half-man and half-wolf. He leapt at Van Raine.

Van Raine dodged the werewolf's claws by a fraction of an inch. He struck out with his sword, digging it deep into Franzl's chest, piercing the left lung.

Franzl could not help but yelp in pain. He turned on Van Raine, taking with him the sword buried in his chest. He lashed out, growling, salivating, his eyes red and bloodshot with anger and rage and ancient power. He grabbed hold of Van Raine about the arms, his claws digging deep into his bloodless flesh and lifted him high. There was no pain for Van Raine, but there was certainly the fear of destruction as the werewolf's immense strength caused his grip to loosen on his musket and drop it.

Franzl growled, sniffed, considering eating the dead flesh of the vampire.

Van Raine reached to the holster at his waist and with great difficulty pricked the pistol there. He wiggled it a bit to get it in his grip firmly. He raised it as Franzl bared his teeth and fired.

Franzl yelped and reeled, letting go of Van Raine. The vampire fell to the ground.

As he stood, he was already loading new powder into the pistol.

Franzl went to one knee. He had never been harmed so severely in all the hours he had been a werewolf.

Van Raine approached, standing over the bleeding and wounded Franzl. The werewolf caught sight of the silver ball he then loaded into the pistol followed by a patch and a few tamps from a rod.

Van Raine smiled, "Shall I give unto the gift and curse I was given so long ago? Shall we make a raksasha? Or shall I simply use this final bullet of pure silver to end this here and now and rule over all of Freiburg alone?"

Franzl growled, leaning at Van Raine with ferocity to attack.
Van Raine drew up his pistol but it was knocked away by a blow from Franzl's clawed hand.
Franzl stood.
Van Raine looked for his pistol but it had been thrown wide by Franzl's blow. He looked for another weapon and found it. He dove at the head of the decapitated apprentice.
Franzl lunged at him, grabbing at his feet.
Van Raine grabbed up the head, rolled onto his back on the ground and spoke the chant he had heard Lark say twice before.
The boy's head came to life; its eyes glowed yellow; its serpentine hair wriggled to life.
Franzl growled before turning to stone.
The head returned to its dead, frozen state.
Van Raine stood. He tapped at the stone figure of Franzl. He deftly wrapped the head of the apprentice and hid it. He then returned to Freiburg, rousing the people there, claiming that Franzl had been a werewolf and that he had been the one killing the young people of the hamlet. He then claimed that Lark had come to him with the information and had helped him hunt the beast and when they witnessed the death of the latest victim, Lark had charged the werewolf only to be backhanded by the creature and have his head torn off so that it flew into the neighboring countryside where it most likely would remain lost for generations. Finally he lied and said he had shot the werewolf with a silver bullet, the effect of which had turned the beast to stone.

* * * * *

“And that's how I came to get my first gargoyle,” Van Raine pointed at the werewolf statue resting upon one corner of the fort in a pose as though about to attack. “I soon learned Franzl's stone visage repelled other creatures, so I kept him.”
“And you've kept the head as a weapon. But how'd you transport Franzl around all this years?” I asked.
Van Raine laughed a little, saying, “That's another story entirely. Wouldn't you rather hear how I obtained the second gargoyle?”
I drank some of my beer and said, “Yeah, sure.”
Van Raine took a moment to collect his thoughts before saying, “On the 28th of June in 1914, Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand. A month later, on the 28th of July, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. What came after was not only the First World War, but the first mechanized war in human history. We saw the use of airplanes and tanks for the first time and, most of all, the first time we saw chemistry used to create toxins for use in chemical warfare. Beyond that, however, the world also saw the inklings of the occult that would become so prevalent to the Third Reich in the Second World War.
“I was a member of Young Bosnia then and of the Black Hand and therefore have firsthand knowledge as to a lot of what happened.”

Gerrard the Flying Ace

Gerrard du Monde was an affable young man and mechanic in northern France. He had been forced into school in 1913 by his parents only to drop out with poor grades. By the time the Great War came to the world in the summer of 1914, he had been a nomadic mechanic taking work wherever he could, including with airmen. In March of 1914, he had taken a job at a small airport and by April had made friends with a young pilot named Pere Picalo that had begun teaching him to pilot aircraft.

When war came to the country, Gerrard did not see it in poor light. Rather, he saw it as an opportunity to finally make his way in the world. He immediately signed on with Pere as a pilot and by 1915 they were in the thickest parts of aerial fighting. By June of that same year, Gerrard had become an Ace – being a fighter pilot with at least five confirmed kills.

The group called Young Bosnia and its affiliates were soon subject to infiltration and betrayal. In an effort to rid himself of such treachery, Van Raine became a Slav soldier fighting in the trenches, the unending smog of war providing perfect cover from the sun for a vampire and the tragedies and death of war all about kept him replenished with fresh blood.

On one particular day, as Van Raine and several others stopped to watch an aerial dogfight overhead, a cannon was fired and the shot knocked one of the planes from the sky. The biplane crashed nearby and Van Raine followed his captain to collect the salvage and prisoner. The pilot was none other than Gerrard du Monde.

Van Raine was put to the task of guarding Gerrard and acting as his translator as Van Raine could speak French. He found the pilot to be genial and likeable.

“Van Raine!” came his captain with orders, “You’re to go with the Frenchman to headquarters. They say they’ll need a translator!”

Van Raine did as he was told and soon both he and Gerrard were being driven off away from the trenches of warfare. The vampire – and not one of his comrades knew him as such, though a few thought him a little odd – translated for Gerrard and his superiors that very day. The day after, however, Van Raine was told Gerrard was taken away for security purposes.

“You will remain here as translator for us,” he was told. “However, we must brief you on what you are about to witness. Your things have been sent for.”

Van Raine was worried that whomever transported his affects would, accidentally at least, discover the head of the boy named Lark that he traveled with. But his affects were delivered undisturbed and well stored.

He was taken to a building that had once been, so he supposed, an opera house or theater. It had been appropriated by the military and was now being used as a house of research and torture. He was escorted into the theater by a Major Markolis. They sat together several rows back from the stage. The theater sat in darkness. The curtains on the stage had been removed and upon the stage a makeshift laboratory had been set up. Van Raine was uncertain if this was all staged, or if the laboratory was genuine.

At last, the Major called out, “Begin!”

The center of the stage was alight with candles and fires contained in steel drums. At the very center sat a black tub like a cauldron with an array of wires and mechanisms springing forth from it.

“What is this?” asked Van Raine.

“Quiet, soldier. You will understand best if you witness,” was all the explanation the Major gave.

Gerrard was escorted out onto the stage by five soldiers. He squinted out into the darkness, seeing two dark forms seated in the theater but could not recognize either of them as they were draped in shadows. He was no longer shackled though he remained in his national uniform.

“Watch closely,” Major Markolis whispered in Van Raine’s ear.

Van Raine did so.

The soldiers instructed Gerrard to get into the cauldron. He did not at once understand. At last he said, “Oh, you want me to get in? That’s a little unusual, isn’t it?” in French. He did as he was commanded, however.

He was further instructed to kneel down.

Gerrard complied.

A large, heavy lid was placed over the cauldron by three of the soldiers. Soon the cauldron creaked and popped as the mechanisms upon the stage crackled with electric life. The tub jiggled some as though boiling from within as if filled with stew. At last the lid flew off, flipping over and over as though made of cheap tin instead of heavy iron, and from out of the cauldron crawled a gigantic grisly, gory skeleton yet clothed in Gerrard’s clothing. It began immediately to attack the soldiers of the stage.

* * * * *

“Heh... a skeleton, eh? I like it,” I said.

Van Raine smiled at me. “You would.”

* * * * *

“What manner of mysticism is this?” demanded Van Raine.

“Ancient practices coupled with modern scientific know-how,” explained the Major. “That cauldron has given us a chance at creating a vast, undying, undead army.”

The skeleton punched one of the soldiers, knocking him across the stage.

“Obviously,” said the major, “there are problems. They attack anything within range. We have had to put down every other one we have created thus far, but with some difficulty. Fifteen of our men have given their lives to defending against these beasts. What we need from you is this: every one we make speaks some odd language. Since we have used nothing but captured soldiers to create these creatures, we have assumed they are speaking in their native national tongue, but deformed. That is why you are here.

“Now, tell me, as that beast rants upon the stage... what does it say?”

Van Raine listened. He recognized the language and frowned.

“It does not speak French,” said Van Raine.

“Isn’t it? Then am I wrong to think it is speaking at all?”

“No. It’s speaking.”

“What is it speaking then?”

“It is speaking in a *dead* language; an undead language; a language of hate and betrayal and fury. It is speaking in the language of demons: it speaks in Tongues.”

Major Markolis considered this. "You know of these things?"

Van Raine lied. "My family has had some dealings with the church."

"I see," said the major. "Now we must consider how to control such a creature."

Van Raine shook his head. "You can't, unless you are a demon of hate. Only hate can control a cauldron-born."

The skeleton formerly Gerrard plunged his skeletal fist into a soldier's stomach and ripped from him the intestines there. He then wheeled about and cracked the skull of another soldier with his fist. Both soldiers fell dead. Two more ran off.

"We must contain him!" cried Major Markolis.

The skeleton bit at the face of the final soldier and tore flesh from his face.

Major Markolis stood, crying for help, calling attention to himself.

With unnatural power, the skeleton leaped from the stage to stand on the seats before Major Markolis, towering over him. The Major cried out as the skeleton reached down, grabbed at his neck and squeezed. Van Raine stood, ran from the theater, the sound of popping and cracking bones chasing after him.

Van Raine burst from the theater into the sunlight. A rain had been previously falling, providing cover for him to walk about in the day, but had since melted away into a sunny afternoon. He cried out in pain as his flesh bubbled and boiled. He lurched at a nearby officer, swiftly taking the sword from his sheath and spinning him about to remove his face mask at his waist. Van Raine donned the mask to cover his face and pulled his hands up into his long sleeves. The officer protested and Van Raine sunk the blade of the sword into his neck, holding onto its hilt through his sleeve, pulling the blade sideways and out of the now dead officer's body.

He ran onward towards his sleeping quarters.

The skeleton came running out of the theater only to be distracted by nearby soldiers as they cried out in fear. He turned on them and left Van Raine to run away.

It slaughtered eight or more soldiers by the time Van Raine returned. The vampire called out to the skeleton, "Gerrard!"

The skeleton, recognizing its former name, turned on him and scowled.

Van Raine lifted a bag before him and, almost ceremoniously, untied it to let the bag fall to the ground. He now held in his hand the bag's contents: the head of Lark. He chanted and soon the skeleton was turned to stone.

* * * * *

"I killed forty-eight people that day," said Van Raine. "I had to. They had seen me for what I truly am. Or, if they had not, they would soon guess it."

"War is Hell," I told him, somewhat jokingly.

"Yes. I suppose it is."

I looked to one of the other corners of the fort and found the skeletal statue standing outside on the ground.

"That explains the skeleton gargoyle," I said, then looked to the final gargoyle and asked, "so what about the big dog? What about the final gargoyle?"

Van Raine turned to consider the giant stone dog that looked like a snarling, wicked wolf. "That," he said with some softness in his voice, "was the hardest one to put down."

“He looks like he’d give up a good fight.”

“That he did, Iffy. But his ferocity wasn’t what was so hard about the matter.

“I have been to the Americas twice in my existence. The first time I was with the settlement on Roanoke. The final time was after the First World War when much of the West was still wild, yet untamed and one could easily lose himself in the vastness of the United States. It was the end of the cowboy era and machines were becoming commonplace on farms and in homes. It was one of the few times I’ve ever made a friend – a true friend. And it was the only time I ever had a son, that I ever made another vampire.”

Cordijo, el Perro Negro

Cordijo was a tall man, a strong man. He had come to New Mexico by way of Central America. His ruddy, reddish-brown skin bespoke of his Aztec heritage. He had come to the expanding United States looking for opportunity that his homeland simply didn’t provide.

He met Van Raine late in the night in a rough bar outside of the area that would become grow to become a major city many decades later. Van Raine was an immigrant miner looking for silver and gold. Cordijo convinced him over a few beers to let him in on the operation, selling the fact his strength would provide a lot of help.

“I am quite strong enough on my own,” supplied Van Raine.

“But you can’t work all day and night,” said the unknowing Cordijo. “We can work in shifts and carry more gold than a single man.”

Van Raine was unsure, but finally agreed to cut Cordijo in on the share of profits if he did a full share of the work. He thought he could handle himself well against this lone man, powerful as he was.

Together they staked a claim. Cordijo found Van Raine’s desire to work in the night bothersome, but not overly much. “The land here is cooler at night,” Van Raine explained.

“But the animals come out at night,” advised Cordijo.

“All manner of wickedness comes in the night, this I already know.”

Cordijo let the matter fall to the side. He worked during the day as Van Raine worked at night.

Then on one occasion Van Raine started, not fully asleep for vampires need no sleep, but resting and not fully aware, to the sounds of Cordijo crying for help outside the cave where they worked.

Night had just come. Van Raine peeked out to check for the sun, saw that it was hidden, grabbed his six-gun and ran to Cordijo’s side.

A pack of rabid coyotes was circling Cordijo, slowly closing in. They whimpered and grew angry as Van Raine approached and they scented the air to taste his death.

“Get!” cried Van Raine as he raised his revolver.

A single coyote turned to nip at him.

Van Raine fired. The shot struck the coyote in the chest and flung him backwards into the dusty ground. The rest of the coyotes ran off, afraid.

“Thank you, señor,” said Cordijo. “They came upon me. I’ve never seen such an angry pack of coyotes and did not know they travel together.”

“It is an omen,” Van Raine’s words chilled Cordijo’s spine. “Are you hurt?”

“No, señor. Thank you.”

“Get some rest then. I’ll get to work.”

* * * * *

“That’s no coyote,” I said as I pointed to the stone statue of the wolfish dog at the fort’s corner.

“No,” Van Raine spoke with some impatience, “it is not.”

“Sorry. Go on.”

“Thank you.”

* * * * *

Time passed. The vampire and the Aztec found many veins of gold, but never enough to quite make them rich. The money they made from it, however, kept them going and staking other claims.

“We should hire others to help as we expand,” suggested Cordijo.

“No, we’ll be fine.”

“Don’t be greedy, Señor Van Raine. We could use the help.”

The two sat at a campfire just after dusk. Cordijo was eating before turning in for the night. He realized then that he had never seen his partner eat.

“Have some food, consider what I’ve said.”

“No. We don’t need any more help and it’s not out of greed.”

Cordijo sighed and ate his meal.

He was awakened later that night to the sounds of Van Raine grunting. He looked up to see Van Raine drinking the blood from a dead jackrabbit.

“Señor Van Raine!” Cordijo stood from his bedroll.

Van Raine jerked with fright, hissing wildly at Cordijo. He then grabbed control of himself and stood, wiping the blood from his face onto the sleeve of his shirt. He approached Cordijo, “How much did you see?”

Cordijo wasn’t certain how to answer.

“How much did you see!” demanded Van Raine.

“Nothing! Nothing!”

Van Raine growled.

Hesitant, Cordijo asked, “Señor... what *are* you?”

Van Raine walked to pick up the dead jackrabbit. He skinned the corpse in a fell motion and threw the skin into the fire where it crackled and burned. He tossed the dead animal to Cordijo, who caught it.

“I am a vampire,” answered Van Raine. “And I have been one since before the time of the Romans.”

Cordijo eyed Van Raine. “Is that why I never see you eat? Or truly sleep? Or work in the day? And why you don’t want to hire other people to help us?”

“It is. Now, are we going to have problems or am I going to have to kill you?”

“Me? Problems? Oh no! I wish I had known long before now. I wouldn’t have troubled you with certain things. In truth, I feel honored to be working with you.”

* * * * *

“Honored?” I asked.

“Mortals can be... *odd*. When the whole world wants you dead because of what you represent, you’ll find the one that thinks it’s cool that you’re undead.”

“Ha! Yeah, one time I met this chick in Ann Arbor—” I looked at Van Raine who did not seem at all interested in my story, rather he seemed interested in only finishing his, so I said, “Well, I guess I can tell that story later. Go on.”

* * * * *

Van Raine and Cordijo got along much better once Cordijo had learned Van Raine’s secret. But bad luck befell Cordijo once more, or so Van Raine thought. He woke Van Raine on another occasion, tears in his eyes, saying, “Señor Cordijo, I have been bitten! I had taken off my boot to rest my foot a moment and the snake crawled into my boot! When I put it back on, it bit me! Please! Please help me!”

Van Raine said, “Let me get you to a doctor.”

“No! I’ll never make it!” said Cordijo.

“Then I’ll go for one right away.”

“No, no... there is but one way to help me,” Cordijo’s eyes grew pleadingly. He said, “Please... please Señor Van Raine... save me with your gift.”

Van Raine squinted. “You want me to turn you into a vampire?”

“Sí, señor. Please?”

“But... I’ve never made another vampire. It is not a life to wish for. It is not a life at all.”

“I have no life as I lay here in the desert, dying,” said Cordijo.

Van Raine sighed. He felt sorry for Cordijo; he felt a friendship with him. He paused only a moment before saying, “I will do this thing for you.”

Slowly, slowly Van Raine lowered his head. He bit into Cordijo’s neck, draining the blood of the body.

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“An hour later he awoke to the world anew. I had to teach him everything about being a vampire: avoiding the sun, avoiding telling mortals for their strength outweighs a vampires in sheer numbers, how to shift into the forms of beasts and into mist. It took weeks away from our work.”

“How did Cordijo do?”

“He took well to being a vampire. He loved, above all else, the ability to change his form into that of a giant black wolf.”

“Ah, I see! Cordijo is the wolf statue!”

“Indeed he is.”

“But how did your vampiric child come to be a statue?”

Van Raine glowered, saying, "He betrayed me. And he had made a fool of me. There was never any snake, he had never been bitten. He had never been dying! IT WAS ALL A RUSE TO CONVINCING ME TO TURN HIM INTO A VAMPIRE!"

* * * * *

Tension grew between Cordijo and Van Raine after Cordijo's secret had been confessed. Cordijo had hoped to confess to save his own conscious. It caused a rift between the two friends. They hardly spoke as they continued to work in their mines.

Finally, they really blew up at one another one night.

"How do I know your treachery won't reach into our mine dealings?" accused Van Raine. "You've betrayed everything and now you plot to steal my half of the operation!"

"I wanted eternal life only! What need have I to mine gold any more? It is stupid to carry on the way we do! We should live as kings and rulers over all mankind!"

"I told you to forget that line of thought! Humanity is far more dangerous to us than you know!"

"But the local towns could be ours. Come with me tonight and raid their homes for blood and entertainment."

"Absolutely not! And I won't allow you to go about it!"

"Stop me!"

The two vampire tackled one another to the ground, biting and howling with anger and pain. Each blow was horrific and of superhuman strength, sending the victim flying into the night.

Van Raine punched Cordijo.

Cordijo flew back.

Van Raine transformed into a half-man, half-bat creature and flew after him.

Cordijo transformed into a large vampire bat.

They circled one another.

Cordijo drew closed faster. As he reached out with his maw to bite at his maker, he transformed into a demonic black dog with a larger muzzle and powerful teeth.

Van Raine screeched out in a blood-curdling shriek of pain as Cordijo bit into his wing. He swiftly became a small vampire bat and slipped from the dog's muzzle to fly into the cave.

Cordijo gave chase.

As Van Raine came upon his personal goods, he transformed back into his human shape and grabbed up the head of the decapitated Lark, but Cordijo was quickly upon him, pinning Van Raine to the ground. Over and over again Cordijo bit at his maker's back, tearing the undead flesh there.

Finally, Van Raine was able to roll over and hold the head between himself and Cordijo's massive wolfish form. He quickly chanted the words he had heard so long ago and Cordijo was turned to stone.

He crawled out from under his vampiric son and frowned.

* * * * *

“That sucks,” I said. “Pardon the pun.”

“The pun is pardoned. It was a difficult matter for me, but I’ve since gotten over it. And those are the tales of each of the gargoyles.”

“Cool. But shouldn’t you have a fourth gargoyle on that final corner? I mean, this Ahnung guy could still get through that final corner. Am I right?”

“Of course you’re right,” said Van Raine as he reached to grab a bag from his servant Abel. “And I believe I’ve found one.”

“Woah, woah, woah!” I jumped to my feet and ran towards my bike, only to have my path blocked by a dozen ghouls. I was pretty sure I could take them all in a fight, but I was also certain they’d detain me long enough for Van Raine to get at me. I ducked into a building, looking for an escape.

“Come out here, Iffy. You haven’t anything to fear. You’ll be serving a purpose for a great and mighty vampire.”

Then a thought struck me.

“Wait!” I called. “Van Raine! Hear me out. If you turn me to stone, you’ll keep Ahnung out of the fort, but you’ll never rid yourself of him. What if I help you capture him with that stone face thingy? Then you’d be free to leave the fort all together without fear of being chased by Ahnung.”

Van Raine stopped his pursuit. He called out into the dark building, “I’m not certain it can be done.”

“I’ll help you try. Is it a deal?”

“It’s worth a try.”

Just then Ahnung entered the fort and howled for Van Raine.

“He has come,” Van Raine said with some sorrow. “Come, Iffy. I’ll need your help.”

I came out to the door of the building, looking out into the common area of the fort. Ahnung was a spirit, to be sure, but a spirit in the form of a white-furred werewolf. I said, “I’ll distract him, tell him I’m trapped here and need his help. You can come in and do the voodoo that you do with the head.”

I didn’t wait for an answer as to whether or not he thought it was a worthy idea. I entered the common area and called out for Ahnung.

The spirit turned on me. I circled round so he would have his back to Van Raine. Truthfully, I was willing to fight in any direction the course of events took me. If I was able to rid myself of Van Raine and escape the fort, I would’ve been happy. If I could’ve helped defeat Ahnung and, by Van Raine’s word, freely leave the fort, I would still have been happy.

“Who are you?” asked the spirit.

“I’m Iffy the Ifreet and I’ve been trapped here by that bastard Van Raine. Please, help me flee from this place! He intends to turn me to stone!”

“I will not help a demon!”

“Then you’ll die by the hands of one!” cried Van Raine as he leapt from the doorway he had been hiding behind. He held out the head of Lark and recited the chant as he flew through the air, the head coming to life with glowing yellow eyes and wriggling snakes atop the head.

Ahnung turned to see and threw his arm up over his eyes to shield them from the head.

I jumped at him, grabbing the spirit's arms and pulling them down and away from his eyes. He gazed upon the head, Van Raine now hovering in the air. Ahnung slowly, painfully turned to stone.

I let go his arms.

Van Raine landed at my side, the head going dead once more.

I huffed with the effort. I said, "Want me to help you move it to the fourth corner?"

Van Raine shook his head. "No, I'll deal with it myself."

"Can I leave, then?"

"You may, though you don't have to. You would be a welcomed guest."

"No offense, but I think I should hightail it outta Dodge while I've still got the chance. This whole night's kinda given me the willies."

Van Raine smiled. "Go on, Iffy. Enjoy the rest of your evening."

"Thanks."

I hurriedly got on my motorcycle, started it up and rode on out of the fort and into the night, wandering what Van Raine would do next; wondering if he would chase after me; wondering if I had just set his evil upon the world.



Reviews

Count Dracula and His Vampire Bride aka The Satanic Rites of Dracula –

Christopher Lee is often touted, in my experience, as one of the best Draculas. This movie, however, hurts that image. Most of the movie sees Peter Cushing as Van Helsing and a few others trying to determine they have a vampire on their hands. Once determined, Dracula hardly stands a chance against them. For a legendary character of evil such as Dracula, he fell quickly and easily. The script does him no justice. Skip this one entirely.

Terminator Salvation – I did not think this movie was nearly as bad as everyone said it was when it came out. It's better than T3 and the godawful TV series. It's worth a rental.

Haunted History of Halloween – The History Channel's documentary. A must for any lover of Halloween.

Hauntings – A small documentary about, well, hauntings from The History Channel. Decent, but not great. I don't think they brought anything new to the table to discuss that Unsolved Mysteries or the original In Search Of... didn't already cover, and better.

Poltergeists– I found this to be a very boring single show from A&E. Skip it.

The Day the Earth Stood Still (2008) – What a horrid piece of crap. I didn't expect much going in, so you would think I'd at least be entertained. I wasn't. There was no sense of danger and Keanu's acting, or lack thereof, made him more alien and distant, unable to pull at the audience's heartstrings. The lame digital "Klaatu barada nikto" was not worth the wait. Skip this. Please, skip this.

Drag Me to Hell – A very good return to horror for Raimi. It had a lot of cheese, especially in the effects towards the end, but a solid story and likable characters drove you forward. Definitely a rental.

The Wraith – If you like '80s movies that are so bad they're good, you'll LOVE The Wraith. The Dodge M4S is to die for. Literally. A crew member died during filming. This is a great movie for cheesy horror-movies or '80s-movies nights.

The Machine Girl – Let's see... cute Asian girls. Check. Full of Power Rangers-like action. Check. Tons of over-the-top violence. Check, check and check. And a girl whose hand is cut off only to be replaced by a giant gun. CHECK! SEE THIS MOVIE, NOW! Haha.

"The Fog Horn" – A Ray Bradbury classic and the basis for his script for the movie The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms. It's a great short story and reminded me of growing up in Long Beach, sans the giant monster rising from the sea.

“The April Witch” – A cute love story by Ray Bradbury. A witch wants to experience love and life as a ‘normal’ girl, so she possesses the body of an innocent peer. The end is sad yet eloquent.

“The Wilderness” – Another of Bradbury’s short stories. I must admit, this one did not grab hold of me. It was completely forgettable.

“The Golden Kite, The Silver Wind” – One of the better short stories I’ve ever read from Bradbury. And poignant in any age. Definitely worth the read.

Maniac Cop – Growing up, I always saw the box for the VHS tape (yes, I’m THAT old) at the video store and it creeped me out. The cover wasn’t so much scary as the idea that a cop could also be a killer, which of course is the point. Bruce Campbell as Jack Forrest is great. It’s not a very scary movie, but a decent one. If you’re a Campbell or horror fan, you might want to see it. If not, then skip it.

Boondock Saints – I also finally saw Boondock Saints this year. After all these years of having people tell me how great it is, how it changed their life, how solid the story is, the acting is, the movie left me... wanting for more. Not in a good way. The writers used a lot the power of coincidence overly much. The action was good, but not great. I love the idea of working-class heroes taking charge, but there’s no proper repercussions which left it unbelievable. In the end, I felt it to be a shallow version of a Tarantino or Oliver Stone film. It’s good. But it’s not THAT good. Rent it.

“Golden Apples of the Sun” – This has to be one of Ray Bradbury’s best short stories. I absolutely love it. Read it.

Our Town – I’ve never seen the play in action, I simply read the play over the summer. It’s good and characters are strong and I see the love it generates from fans, but I can’t say I’m a fan. In the interest of reading all things classic, read it. Otherwise, skip it.

Soldier – When this movie came out, I thought it looked bad. I finally got the chance to watch it and, well, it was slightly better than I expected. Kurt Russell is a badass. In the end, it’s a futuristic re-telling of John Henry, which isn’t a strike against it. It’s merely a comparison and it has a valid place if science fiction. It’s okay, but far from great. Mostly, I’d suggest to skip it.

Wild Hogs – I thought I would hate this movie. In the end, I laughed and was entertained. The story is simple... very simple. It can be difficult to understand why Travolta did what he did at the biker bar (couldn’t he have just flattened a few tires and run off?), which kills the premise of the bad guys chasing the aging good guys. The obvious and mandatory appearance of Peter Fonda was expected and, truthfully, needed as the movie began to drag. In the end, it’s a nice movie. Rent it.

Let the Right One In – Is it the best vampire movie ever made, as the cover states? I laugh at that notion, but not in a demeaning way towards the movie. Rather, I laugh at the

audacity of those that would like to believe that. This is far from the best vampire movie ever made. That said, it's an incredibly good vampire movie. You soon realize you're not watching a traditional horror movie featuring the undead. Rather, you're watching a touching coming-of-age movie featuring the undead. And just when you get caught up in the love story, here comes some gore to masterfully slap you across the face and make you say, "Oh, yeah! It's a vampire movie!" Absolutely worth seeing by anyone that loves horror, vampires or love stories. For my money, I'll be buying it some day.

30 Days of Night – So we go from a movie that claims being the best vampire movie ever to a movie that is, simply stated, the absolutely worst vampire movie ever made. The premise is beautiful. The execution is stupid and completely unbelievable. I expected a giant boa to rise out of the sewers to fight a giant anaconda. See, there I was making fun of the lack of quality of the movie by comparing it to the trash Sci Fi Channel (now Sy Fy... really?!) is wont to make. But, truthfully, if some kaiju entered the scene it would only make the movie better. I'll STAKE an invisible fortune on it: 30 Days of Night is the WORST vampire movie ever made. EVER.

A Cat in the Brain – I love Lucio Fulci, but often his movies leave me feeling a bit disoriented, which is sometimes the point. A Cat in the Brain is his most autobiographical work, even starring him as himself, and left me scratching my head more than any of his other movies. I love you Mr. Fulci; and if you do, too, you'll need to see this one. If you don't love him or don't even know his name, skip this entirely.

Christmas Unwrapped – The History Channel's documentary about the Christmas holiday. I felt it short and left out a few points, but in all it was decent.

Apocalypse Nerd – A graphic novel that poses the question: "What would happen to all the nerds if the apocalypse happened?" In the end, the story fell a little flat but was largely entertaining. Worth picking up for nerds, g33ks and dweebs.

Your Momma Thinks Square Roots Are Vegetables – A pretty decent collection of Fox Trot comic strips. Worth more than a few laughs.

Gargoyles – This movie from 1972 is about, well, gargoyles. It's a horror movie turned monster movie. All in all, it's pretty good. Far from great, but if you like your monster with some cheese, it's cool. Think Maximum Overdrive with gargoyles. Okay, maybe not as good as Maximum Overdrive.

Creepy Issues 1 & 2 – The classic horror comic from 1964. Any self-respecting horror lover should read this!

District 9 – One of the best movies of 2009. End of discussion. Worth owning.

Natural Born Killers – I finally got to see this movie. It's been a long time coming. It didn't deliver anything new to my that's not already been in common discourse for some time, perhaps due to this movie, but it's a very well stylized movie. The one drawback I

found is that I felt it dragged a little here and there. At one point I thought to myself, “Man, this should be almost over! (not that I WANTED it to be over) I think I’ve been watching it for about two hours!” I checked... only an hour and fifteen minutes passed. A must-see.

Robot Jox – One of the worst movies ever made. Almost as bad as The Beast of Yucca Flats and Evil’s City.

Fats Domino: Walkin' Back to New Orleans – This PBS documentary is a wonderful story about Fats Domino and his role in helping heal Katrina-ravaged New Orleans. It’s touching here and there, but mostly the music rocks! Watch it!

Animal Farm – A classic from Orwell. I read it this summer and loved it. Better than I expected and better than everyone had said. A must-read.

Controversy Creates Cash – Eric Bischoff’s book about his life and times in professional wrestling. At times he speculates overly much, but makes certain he says he’s speculating. Other times I feel he’s defending himself overly much, but then maybe he has to for some people’s sake. Mostly, I feel he was trying to be honest. It was an interesting read. Good for any pro wrestling fan.

I Luv Halloween Volumes 2 & 3 – This series of sick, demented, twisted graphic novels is spectacular. If you have a love for Halloween and a strong stomach (there’s some disturbing stuff here and there, especially in Volume 3), you should love this.

To Be The Man – Ric Flair’s autobiography. I found the book very entertaining and mostly he stuck to re-telling details from his career. As the book went on, however, it became more passionate and less critical. It didn’t take away too much from the book, though slightly. It was a very good and entertaining read and I learned TONS, especially about old school pro wrestling. A must-read for wrestling fans, unless you have some unnatural hatred for The Man himself.

Idle Hands – I went in thinking this movie would be stupid. So did the creators behind it, but they had fun with it. In the end, the movie was a funny and gruesome romp. It’s not great, but worth a chuckle here an there. Rent it if you want a light-hearted horror movie this Halloween.

