

Die! Vampire! Die!

Hal Duncan

Ah, Thomas, come in. I trust you had a comfortable journey?

Good. Good.

Yes... Rolls Royce Silver Shadow.

Mostly original. Glad you like it. A bit more stylish, bit more modern than a hearse, eh?

Quite. You know how I feel about all the coffin nonsense.

Yes, that's a little something of my own design. Can't very well spoil a car like that with black paint on the windows. It would be an absolute sin.

Well, I'm sure that can be organised. The modifications aren't that difficult; it's just the manufacturing of the glass.

Well, you'd think so, wouldn't you, but you know what the elders are like.

Yes? In a crate? Oh, that's rich! Talk about pathetic.

Anyway, have a seat. Can I get you a drink? I have a nice Californian blonde at the moment, special import, exquisite bouquet and you can almost taste the sunlight.

Him? Oh, Thomas, you're as bad as ever, the original sucker for a pretty face. Never could keep you away from the help. No, I'm afraid he's one of us already, aren't you, Jack. Well, not one of *us*, obviously. Not Chosen. I'm not looking for a brood anytime soon. No, no; he's just a shabti.

Quite tame. Don't want to risk ending up like the old man, after all.

Yes, honestly. He's a shabti.

I know. Quite remarkable really, bit of a freak. Come here a second, Jack. Show Master Thomas your trick...

Bravo, Jack. Bravo. Very graceful. Thought you'd appreciate that, Thomas. Yes, I think it's called *capoeira*.

You can go see to the experiments now, Jack. I'll page you if I need you.

Yes, it's quite remarkable, as I say.

No idea. Presumably he had the skill before, but... no. Just showed up in one of the shipments. Didn't seem to be anything special. A bit strong-willed but nothing extraordinary; fought like a tiger when I let him out of the cage, punched, kicked, scratched, but after the first few feedings he was quite compliant.

No -- I mean yes, I did *use* him in an experiment but it was quite unrelated. I've repeated it since and, well, the other subjects just... well, you know what shabtis are like. Most of them you're lucky if they can shuffle without drooling, never mind -- actually, I'm running it again at the moment; you may find it quite interesting. So, no, I wish I could take the credit but he just sort of turned out that way. I'm tempted to do some work on him, but I find him terribly useful. There's some things you just can't use humans for. You'll see. I'll give you the grand tour in a minute.

The old man? Oh, he's fine. Safe and sound as always. He was asking after you, you know... but then you always were his favourite.

Well, OK. Not so much asking after you as cursing your name.

God, no. Why would I want to do that? The vault's sound-proofed and who's going to hear him anyway?

Oh no. Jack's under express orders to stay away from there. He's smart but he's still a shabti. Does exactly what he's told.

Well, *obviously* I take precautions, but he does have to be fed.

Yes, I blind them.

Yes, I puncture their eardrums.
Handcuffs.

Well, I cuff them behind their backs obviously; I'm not that foolish.

Oh, really, Thomas, I think hamstringing is taking it a bit far. I have no intention of carrying them to him and holding them up while he feeds. Look, even if he did use the Hold on them, I can snap their necks at any time. Honestly, I have it all under control. You can see for yourself.

Well, it amuses me to hear him going on.

Oh, don't be such an old maid, Thomas. It doesn't suit you. Leave that to the bloody elders with their coffins and their crypts and their ridiculous-

Nonsense! They can't hear us, you know. They may be immortal but they're not omniscient.

Oh, please! I thought you of all people would be-

Oh. You had me going for a minute there, damn you. Thought you'd lost it completely. Thought maybe you'd spent so long hanging around with Malik and his little clique that you'd actually started to believe his overblown claptrap.

Well, I'm glad to hear that.

So how *is* the project going? Any closer to the truth? Any hints about who sired who?

Really? Not *another* one. How many secret origins of the Chosen can there be? What is it this time? Another Egyptian pharaoh feeding on the blood of slaves? A Phoenician sorcerer making some dark deal with terrible demonic forces?

Oh, Mesopotamia... *again*. Funny how that one only started popping up in their interminable stories fifty years ago or so just after Kramer published his book on the Sumerians. Curious coincidence, that. Honestly, Thomas, I don't know how you put up with all the pseudohistorical, self-mythologising, self-important hokum.

Heh. Quite. Yes, I can just picture you playing the wide-eyed young newblood eager for tales of ancient times. You should have been on stage, you know. Who wouldn't trust a face like that? Oh! Do you remember the look on the old man's face when he realised you were in on it as well? I mean, *me* he expected, but *you*...

Oh, yes, that too! It was, wasn't it? Ah, those were the days. Poor old Reynard.

But no clues yet about his sire? Malik hasn't let anything slip amongst all the flim-flam about what did you say it was the Blood of Ishtar?

Whatever.

Is that so? I thought the old leech had to be in the bloodline somewhere.

You're not sure? What exactly did he say?

Hmm. Yes, I see what you mean. It's not quite proof, is it? Damn it. You could be hanging off his every word for centuries and still not be any the wiser. Well, no matter. You have your methods; I have mine. Science, Thomas, science. It's the way of the future. No... correction: it's the way of the *present*.

Well, yes, I have made quite a bit of progress, actually.

No, I'm afraid, not that much progress. It would be nice, though, wouldn't it? Some sort of DNA test so you could track your bloodline back and make sure they're all... safe and secure, so to speak. Unfortunately not. I did look into it but the lack of, well, DNA rather put a damper on that line of inquiry.

No. No DNA at all.

Yes. Didn't I tell you? Didn't Malik pass on my-

You hadn't heard at all? Bloody Malik! Bloody luddite I don't believe he I told him this is just too much.

What else has he just decided to keep to himself? I mean, he did at least tell everyone about the rain, yes?

Well, that's at least something. God, Thomas, sometimes I feel like Galileo. They're worse than the bloody Vatican. I mean, I

took the blood to get away from that sort of nonsense; I thought we were supposed to be the faithless, the unbound, the free. And we're worse than them. It's the bloody 21st Century and they're still tell me, is Malik still having his Black Masses every Sunday? God, it's like a bunch of O.A.P's all toddling off to church on their zimmers: Nearer My Satan To Thee; and our sermon today comes from the Maleus Maleficorum; and would you like a peppermint sweetie, deary? Cretins!

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It just drives me crazy, all their spiritualist nonsense. They're not living in the 20th Century, never mind the 21st. Here I am, working on saving the race and they're dithering around, making sacrifices to Beelzebub. You know, if they really dated back to Mesopotamia, you might at least expect them to know that their great elder god was only called Beelzebub in the Bible as an insult. It's a corruption of the original Baal-ze-Baal, Prince-of-Princes, applied to half the deities across the Middle East.

Yes, it's quite true. Well it's not hard to find. A little reading is a wonderful thing, Thomas. Stops you from looking like a blithering fool.

No, I don't know. I mean, it's possible that it's all part of their shell-game, just another way of keeping the newbloods under the thumb, awestruck and obedient. But, I don't know. Sometimes I think the elders are just so... senile that they've actually started to believe their own nonsense.

Well, it would be funny, but this is our survival at stake here. Sorry, no pun intended.

Damn it, where was I?

Yes, my research. Well, obviously Malik has been happily burying everything I've sent him under the nearest stone. Actually, he probably burned it, knowing him. No matter. You and I, Thomas. You and I. We're men of the modern era. We're not afraid to step out in the rain. That's what umbrellas are for. Technology, Thomas. Science and technology. That's what's

going to save us. Not some mediaeval gibberish chanted to a horn-headed lump of stone in the basement.

Come with me. Yes, I'm glad you're here, old friend. What do you say we pay a visit to the old man and I'll show you what I've been up to on the way?

Follow me.



Through here, yes. After you. Yes. Ah, hello, Jack. How's everything running? Good. Good. No more suicides amongst the humans? Good.

Yes, it is quite impressive. Ex-army facility. Wartime crisis shelter for the government.

Oh, a few here and there. A couple of cabinet ministers, a general or two. You know what they say: keep one shabti right beside you, and a thousand slaves around the world.

Quite, quite. Actually, that is one of the things I've been studying. You know how we've never been quite sure how long you can sustain a human in the pre-death stage? You know, just a small feed here, a little nibble there, let them recover for a week or so, then same again. Well. Short answer: indefinitely. And the longer you do it, the more loyal they become. You'll see.

But as I was saying, the first, most obvious question has to be, just what are we? What exactly *are* the Chosen? Yes, I know the clichés, the euphemisms and the nicknames. Vampire, virulac, nosferatu, the risen dead, the undead, creatures of the night, and on, and on, and on, and on. These aren't answers. These aren't explanations. These are just... words. Trite, tired, banal. And *wrong*.

Yes, wrong. Well, take 'undead', for example. What does that mean? How empty and pointless can a word be? What's that table over there? Oh, that's an untree. It was a tree, but it's been mysteriously transformed into something else, some dark,

unnatural thing that can only be an abomination in the eyes of God because it is not tree. The horror of it! And look, is that a bookcase? My God, it's also untree! It's an untree bookcase.

Undead. What rot. What utter - No, Jack, I don't want you to kill the bookcase. The bookcase is not a threat to us. I was merely illustrating a... why on earth am I explaining myself to a shabti? Just get on with your work. Have you fed the humans today? Well, go and feed them then. And I said, feed them. Not feed on them. You understand? Good. And stop biting your nails. It's a filthy habit.

What was I saying? Yes. Undead. Tell me, Thomas, do you remember dying at any point? Did you, or I, or any of the Chosen actually die and rise from the grave?

Exactly. We're not bloody shabtis. Oh, the humans might not make any distinctions between Chosen and shabti, but then you don't expect them to be any more than ignorant animals. But you and I know. All the Chosen know. There's a world of difference between the what was it you used to call them... shamblies, yes... very droll between them and us-

Well, you have a point there.

Yes, I can see where you're going. Carry on.

Well, yes, that's all very well. Yes, I do remember my heart stopping. No, I don't have a pulse. But let me put it this way... I don't suppose you keep up with the latest medical journals, no? I like to keep my eye open for new developments. Well, you probably won't have heard but a short while ago, maybe last year or the year before, they developed a new artificial heart. Now up until this point most artificial hearts have been modelled on the natural organ... four chambers, a rhythmic pumping action. But this tends to make them somewhat large and unwieldy. So someone took a lateral step. He thought, all this heart needs to do is push the blood round the body. It doesn't *actually* have to beat. It doesn't *actually* have to pound like a little metronome in the chest. Why not just use the sort of pump you get in, say, a

washing machine? A whirring, buzzing pump like you would get in a washing machine. You can make them much smaller, they're far less complicated, less prone to breaking down. And one small side-effect of the artificial heart that he developed – which, I understand, works quite perfectly – is that the recipient has a steady flow of blood... no pulse, no heartbeat. Now, I ask you, is that person dead? Is that person undead?

Isn't it? I think it's exactly the same thing.

No, no, let's just leave the shabtis to one side for the moment. Let's look at you and I. Let's look at the Chosen.

We didn't die. Yes, our hearts stopped beating at the first taste of blood. Yes, I remember it well. But do you remember the hunger, the agonising excruciating hunger that just built up and built up after that first taste of Reynard's blood? Do you remember the taste of your first kill in your mouth? Do you remember the sheer ecstasy of it? The way you sucked in a breath and you could feel it in your chest, holding it there, and you could feel your heart beating in your chest with the excitement, and it's just like everything inside you freezes in that perfect, orgasmic moment? Do you remember? Do you remember looking down at the body on the ground in front of you and realising that you were still holding that breath, that your heart hadn't just skipped a beat – it had stopped entirely? Do you remember?

And that's my point. You remember.

You were aware the whole time. You never stopped being aware.

You never stopped being alive.

Crazy? No, Thomas, it's called science.

You see, I believe in taking a logical approach to these matters, a *rational* approach. I suppose, underneath it all, I'm just a man of my time. I remember the Enlightenment. Malik and the others spent most of it, as I recall, hiding in their cellars, waiting for humans to go back to burning each other at the stake for

witchcraft, petrified that this ‘atheism stuff’ might make humans more resistant to the Hold.

No, science is not our enemy, Thomas. Knowledge is not our enemy. Logic. Reason. Remember that argument I had with Malik just before the Prague incident? You remember?

No, you were there.

No, no, you were *definitely* there.

Honestly.

Yes. Definitely, take my word for it.

Anyway, I remember Malik said something that day that got me thinking. What was it? *Surely we ourselves are proof enough of God’s existence. You cannot have Absolute Evil without Absolute Good.*

And I remember thinking that was rather presumptuous of him. You know? Grandiose.

It doesn’t, by the way. Atheism. It doesn’t affect resistance. I mean logically speaking it’s a specious argument, anyway. You might equally suppose that atheists would be *less* resistant, having less faith to bolster their weak wills. In reality, it makes not one jot of difference. I have done substantial work – and I do mean, substantial – on natural variations in human resistance to the Hold. Come here, I can show you. Yes, this way.

Yes, you see, these are the induction rooms.

Induction.

Not personally, but, yes, pretty much all of the test subjects. You have to get their personal details -- religion, class, physical conditions, mental health issues. You have to take all these things into account in order to be sure you’ve got a representative sample.

Questionnaires, mainly.

Oh, I got one of these market research companies involved.

Yes, that’s one of Jack’s helper shabtis; they’re quite capable of reading questions and ticking boxes.

Well, they don’t have much choice, do they? They can be a bit reticent at first – the youngsters particularly – some of them could scream for England – but it’s amazing how co-operative

these humans can be with a little persuasion. We try to avoid using the Hold and generally — as you can see here — physical methods are quite sufficient. We -- excuse me a second.

Hello. Yes, yes, the master is pleased. But you may want to loosen that a little. That's better. Don't want to kill the poor girl. Very good. As you were.

Sorry about that. You know me. I've never been good at delegation; always had a hands-on sort of approach. But when you're working on this sort of scale, you just don't have any choice. But you do have to step in occasionally.

Anyway, so we build up pretty thorough files on all our test subjects; that way we can cross-reference various environmental factors with their behaviour in our little studies. So I can tell you with absolute certainty: atheist, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, bloody Zoroastrian — it doesn't matter a bit. There's a standard bell curve distribution across all sections of the population. Some people will fall at your feet if you give them a nod across a crowded room; others will spit in your face even after you've been feeding on them for a week. It's-

Yes, that's where we put them when they first come in. I call it the Tank. Ah, the door's open. Jack must be in already.

Oh, only about a hundred or so at a time. Any more than that and it would be just unmanageable.

Mostly the Middle East, ex-Soviet countries, some from Latin America. All over, really.

Prisons, orphanages, refugee centres. These new refugee camps are ideal actually. Or asylum centres, or whatever they're called.

I know, but you've got to expect that; the poor things are petrified. You get used to the smell after a while. Actually, it's the ones that don't soil themselves that you have to look out for. Feisty.

No, surprisingly easy. I mean, not as easy as it was under Stalin, but, to be honest, in this day and age, you don't have to be

stuck in some god-forsaken gulag in the middle of Siberia. When you're living in the global village, your castle can be pretty much anywhere.

Well, it's not as if it's my money, eh? God, no. That's what slaves are for. I mean, with all their pet industrialists and pocket dictators, you'd think the elders would be doing more things on this sort of scale. Capitalise on your resources, that's what I say. But no, they can't think further than a luxury crypt with a temple to Ashtaroth in the basement and a larder full of Filipinos.

Yes, well, Malik would say that, wouldn't he. Honestly, Thomas, nobody cares. What's a few refugees here and there? Read the papers. Nobody wants them, anyway.

I'm just telling it like it is, old boy. The humans are no different to us, really. They talk about sympathy and caring but-

Ah, good man, Jack. No casualties? Good. Well, you know what to do. Just pick the first ten and take them downstairs.

Well, do that afterwards.

No initiative, you see. A shabti's a shabti, no matter how intelligent they are.

Talking of which, if you'll just follow me. We'll take the stairs; it's quicker.

Yes, this is where I keep the shabtis.



... basic consciousness and brute appetites motivating them. I mean, they're really little more than animals, loyal to a fault but, well, the lights are on but nobody's home. We mustn't let this stop us studying them though. That's the mistake we've been making, I think. Some of us don't seem to want to delve too deeply into either our natures or the shabtis' just in case we were to find out that, horror of horrors, we're actually the same. We're not, of course. There are fundamental differences, but the elders would rather live in total ignorance than even run the risk of

learning something that made them feel uncomfortable. It's all this undead nonsense again, is what it is.

No, of course that's not what I'm saying. But there's more to these creatures than just a corpse that's risen from the grave. Here, for instance.

Yes, these ones are actually still alive, still human. In fact, they're completely untouched. This is one of the mesmerism experiments I was telling you about. We measure their resistance to the Hold by having them administer electric shocks to themselves. I try to do this with all the subjects before they go into the experiments with more... permanent effects. Obviously there's *so* many factors to take into consideration, you really need to do this sort of thing over and over again, if you want to know whether resistance is an innate or a learned behaviour.

Well, from what we're getting back, it does seem to be innate; there's no obvious correlation between this or that belief-system, personality types or what-not. Pretty much standard deviation

Yes, what we do is we repeat this experiment each time the subject's fed on.

These cages over here.

Yes, you can see it, can't you. Their whole demeanour changes. You can actually see the Hold in progress. I mean this one – come out of the corner, yes, come to me – this one you can see is in the early stages. Three feeds, I believe. Look at him shaking like a leaf. This one, on the other hand... five – yes, five feeds and already he's stopped crying.

Well, yes, you'll know yourself from practical experience. Give me a child for seven nights and I'll give you the slave, as they say.

And this one here. Ten feeds, I think. Totally submissive, totally subservient and – Silence! Yes, that's one of the things we've found. After eight or so feeds on consecutive nights they start to get a bit too submi-- I said, *Silence!* – a bit *too* submissive.

The death fixation kicks in and you get all the endless whining and begging to be killed. *Master* this. *Master* that. It really gets quite tiresome. So... needy.

Oh, a week or so recovery period. Just leave them for a week – even two – then move on to a fortnightly feeding schedule just to keep them happy. This one's due for total draining though. I have plenty of slaves out there at the moment. Don't need any more.

Yes, that's right, the master is going to kill you. Yes, I thought that would make you happy, you pathetic little creature.

Oh, God no. I don't feed on them myself. I don't think I could if I wanted to. I mean, do you realise how many of these creatures we go through here? This experiment for example. I'm looking to graph the relationship of exposure to the consciousness level of the resultant shabti. So we have a set of, say, ten subjects. We terminate them in a series of feeds. Drain one in a single feed. Do the next one over two nights, the next again over three. And so on. What we're basically looking for is any relationship between time spent with the sire and mental development of the shabti. We all know some shabtis are worse than others. Well, we can measure this. We can look at linguistic ability, mental and manual dexterity; we can use IQ tests; there's all sorts of things we can look at here.

But we do need to run this basic experiment many, many times to get any meaningful data. You need to repeat the exposure patterns, vary them – I think, yes, this one's an exponential series, doubling the feeding period with each subject – one, two, four, eight, sixteen and so on up to one thousand and twenty-four, believe it or not. Oh, you should see the humans after a thousand nights of feeding on them, by the way. The devotion! Honestly, if you think this one's servile...

Honestly, yes, a thousand nights. Well, it's all in the name of science, after all.

Anyway, after the exponential exposure pattern, there's linear exposure patterns — one, two, three, four, five, etc. — and, of course, those you have to vary to run over different scales and cover different areas. Ten to twenty. Thirty to fifty in steps of two.

There is a link actually, by the way. If you look at total desanguination in one or two feeds the shabti that you end up with is mute, bestial at best — lucky if it can put on its own shoes never mind tie the laces. As you increase the exposure, you do get limited comprehension displayed, minimal linguistic skills... still, little or no independent thought. I was wondering if we might see a direct correlation between exposure and intelligence, the one increasing along with the other. That's what's *supposed* to happen, if you listen to the so-called experts. But the truth is, there appears to be a sort of consciousness ceiling. Things level out after sixteen feeds or so and after that exposure doesn't make much difference.

Yes, I feel we've pretty much proven it as is. You can never have too much test data, though.

Exactly! You see, it's exactly like I was saying, there's so much we have to learn about these creatures, and instead we'd rather run around with this foolish notion that shabtis are — let me see — invested with their master's life essence, extension's of their master's, um, aura of darkness or whatever. So of course the longer the master feeds on them the more like him they become.

So Malik still has his famous ten-year shabti? Does he still go on about it the same way? Ten years! It doesn't make a blind bit of difference, you know. He could have sired it over twenty and it still wouldn't be able to think without moving its lips.

Anyway the point I'm making is, well, I couldn't possibly do all that feeding on my own. I do need shabtis for my later experiments, anyway, so... These humans over here, for example, are earmarked for a study on reiterative siring I'm running at the moment. You feed one of the humans to a shabti, wait for the body to rise, feed it a human, wait for that body to rise as a

shabti, feed it a human and so on. So only the initial feeding needs to be carried out by myself. Actually Jack does most of the initial sirings these days.

Oh, the results were a little inconclusive to begin with. We had real problems getting any of the shabtis to feed without draining the next subject dry right there and then -- we're not exactly talking about masters of delayed gratification, you know -- so obviously, you end up with these one-feed shabtis which are little use to anyone. It's very hard to test for decline of mental faculties over successive generations when your starting point is a grunting imbecile that sits in the corner playing with itself.

Oh, yes, we've got the problems ironed out now, though. I mean, you'll never get a shabti to tear itself away from its meal once its started, no matter how much of a Hold you have over it. And they just chew through most types of harness or leash. We ended up coming up with a sort of case thing. Looks like one of those boxes the stage magician puts his assistant in before sawing her in half. Jack usually has a team of his helpers to hold the creature to the subject's neck while it feeds. Yes, it is something of a sight... quite droll, actually.

Oh, yes, the results. Clear deterioration. I mean, after five generations or so the shabti's incapable of basic motor functions, just lies there in a vegetative state, moaning.

Anyway, look at the state of them. I mean, look at this one. Would you want to eat that night after night? No, I keep my food supply quite separate from the lab specimens.

Yes, Jack does do a lot of the feeding himself. Insatiable appetite, that boy. I really don't know where he puts it all. No, I wouldn't touch these filthy things. Ugh. The thought of it.

Oh, really Thomas. That's disgusting. You're not serious. A bit of rough is one thing but you might as well be sucking on a wino in an alleyway. Honestly, I have some lovely imports just come in, much classier, well-fed and healthy... clean.

Well, OK, if you want him, you can have him. At least let me have him scrubbed up for you.

Oh, you have vile tastes, Thomas, vile. But... go ahead.

Yes, here, let me get the door for you. Do you want me to hold your coat?

No bother at all.

Ugh, really that is quite grotesque.

Well, each to his own.

I'll wait over here.

Yes, Jack, you know where they go. Just a second. You see Master Thomas with the human? After you've put them away, be a good boy and have one of the shabtis put the body in storage. Tag it for use in one of the garlic experiments.

OK.

Tum te tum.

Ugh.

Ah, Thomas. All done?

Don't be silly; no need to apologise. Would you like to yes, of course just down there. I'll tell you what. Jack! Jack, come here a minute. No, close the cage door first. Good boy. OK. Yes. Be a dear and show Master Thomas to my office.

Yes, you'll find a toilet in the back. You can wash up there.

Well, I have a couple of things to attend to here but if you just wait for me there, I'll be down in a couple of minutes. OK.



... learned about the shabtis. It just goes to show what a little research can do.

That's the thing. I really have no idea. No. You'd think that, wouldn't you. But he was really just another test subject. Just a common-or-garden, run-of-the-mill eight-feed shabti. But it's not just the dancing... Jack, what's six times two?

Good. And what's twelve divided by three?

No, actually Jack it's four, but good try. Good try.

Did you see that? He actually tried to think about it. He can count pretty well. He can even recite the twelve times table. It's just division that stumps him. Doesn't seem to be able to do the same simple calculation backwards. I do find that fascinating. You know I'm so tempted to take him apart at times, just to see what makes him tick, but-

No, Jack. I do not wish to dissect you. You're more useful to me as you are, for the moment, thank you.

And would it matter if you *did* mind? Quite right.

Now that's what I find really remarkable. *Jack doesn't mind*. As if... as if it actually wanted to... reassure me. As I say, quite remarkable. Never known a shabti to be-

Yes, I suppose you're right. I wasn't thinking of it as *questioning* my decision. I'm sure it wasn't intended that way. But I suppose that's one way of putting it.

Well, yes, but I have other reasons, you see. Take a look around you. All these shabtis you see -- they were all sired by Jack, directly or indirectly. Provides a failsafe, you see. It's inconceivable that anything could go wrong here, but just in case I *did* need to shut down the operation at short notice, well, Jack's my 'self-destruct button', so to speak. Kill him and they all die.

Loyalty?

Oh, come now. You don't think I've thought of that? No, I carried out some quite thorough experiments on precedence before I decided on-

Sorry? Well, actually I can give you a simple demonstration if you want.

Jack, we need you over here for a second. Oh, and you there. Here. Thank you, Jack. I believe this one has its sire around here somewhere, doesn't it. Can you point him out for us. Yes, good. Get him over here, will you?

You see, it did occur to me. We all know shabtis have a knee-jerk fawning reaction to any Chosen. We know they're loyal

to their master and to their master's master. With shabtis sired by shabtis, to all intents and purposes, there should be no difference. These ones sired by Jack are utterly subservient to him and Jack is, of course, utterly subservient to me. But what if there were a conflict of imperatives? Let's just suppose that Jack here decided that he wanted to be master of his own life. Better yet, let's just imagine that this shabti here, one of Jack's brood, decided that he wanted to take Jack's place at the top of the pecking order. Obviously, he's not actually capable of thinking like that, but let's just *imagine* that this shabti is some sort of threat to Jack.

Jack, I want you to tell the girl to kill her sire. Tell her to use this.

Watch. She'll kill her own sire because *his* sire tells her to... even though it means her own death. No question. Here we go.

Wonderful. Ah, Jack. Could you get someone to clear that up? Thank you.

So you see?

No, no, no. That's not the point at all, Thomas. No, you've completely missed the point of the whole exercise. She only killed her sire because Jack ordered her to, because her sire's sire told her to. I could have done it myself. I could have picked any one of these shabtis and ordered them to kill Jack. Why, I could have told them all to tear him limb from limb, and they'd have done it happily, even though they would have all ended up... well, like that. The point is these shabtis may have been sired by Jack but they're loyal to me, as Jack's sire. And before you say it, that's why I have old Reynard in a sound-proof vault, and that's why Jack is on express orders to never go down there, never under any circumstances. Or what will happen to you, Jack?

That's right.

But think about it, Thomas. It wouldn't have to be the old man. Anyone higher up in the bloodline could tell one of our shabtis to stake us in our sleep. Bear that in mind next time Malik

drops in on you for a visit. If he *is* Reynard's sire, or grandsire for that matter, one word from him and your own shabtis would rip your head off, tear your heart out and stick it in a pickle-jar full of holy water while they had the rest of you hoisted on a cross in the midday sun.

That's the thing. They *do* know. At least, they seem to. I don't know how, but they seem to recognise it automatically. I've had Jack sire a whole brood that's never laid eyes on me, never heard my name mentioned; I walk into the room and, bang, they're grovelling on their knees in front of me before I can get a word out.

I don't know. Scent is all I can think of at the moment. Some sort of family scent. I don't understand it, but believe me, when I do you'll be the first to know. Because when I know how it works, I'll know how we can track down dear old Reynard's sire... and *his* sire, and *his*, and so on, all the way back to the First.

In the meantime, I'll just carry on with what does Malik call it again? my tinkering.

Tinkering, indeed. This way.

Oh, this is just one level of one wing. There's two more wings to the complex. Actually some of them are set up on an automated production-line model just to generate basic shabtis for the *real* experiments.

Ha ha. Army of darkness. I like that. No, no, nothing like that. I leave the darkness to the elders. It's the light of reason I'm interested in, Thomas. The light of reason.



... what I call the Elizabeth Bathory Wing. Heh. I used to do most of the surgical work here on my own, but in recent years, I've had to expand. Most of this whole level's taken up with the experiments these days. I've had the place taken apart and put

back together again. You'll see. Some of the equipment we've got here, you'd be amazed; I don't know how they got it down here at all.

Anyway, there's four key areas to investigate if you want to know what makes us all tick, four things that mark us out from the humans: one, preservation of youthful vitality; two, degeneration, slow or sudden, depending on what it results from; three, regeneration of severed limbs, removed organs... head excepted, obviously; and four, anaerobic sustenance

Anaerobic? It means without respiration. Without breathing, Thomas.

Safe to say, I've been looking mainly at degeneration and preservation -- what kills us and what keeps us alive -- since those are rather more immediate. I'll show you some of the work I've done on cardiac penetration and decapitation in a minute, but, first -- I don't suppose Malik passed on any of the data I sent him on garlic-toxicity and photosensitivity?

I might have known. Well, you know how all the elders go on? *Don't touch it. Garlic's bad for you. It'll kill you. Poison. Bad. Stay away.* As if they had to tell us not to eat something that smells like... well, garlic. Ugh.

The thing is... OK, have a look at these chaps strapped down over here. Yes, what I've been doing with these fellows is injecting them with various chemical compounds I've extracted from the raw root, or *combinations* of the various chemicals I've isolated. Anyway, they're injected with them -- or made to ingest them, but that can be quite difficult.

Yes, they are quite noisy, aren't they? And Stop that! Thank you.

And the thing is: for all the fuss they make, it doesn't do them the slightest bit of harm. Oh, some specific combinations of this chemical and that cause discomfort -- well, you can see that, I suppose -- but not disintegration. No it's not even comparable to, say, anaphylactic shock. More like a child throwing a tantrum

because it doesn't like the cod liver oil it's been forced to swallow. No, there's no long-term damage to the creatures whatsoever.

Well, I'm not sure why it should cause such an adverse reaction, but it may be linked to this next experiment. Yes, over here. Through this door.

You see, I was curious about one particular human legend. It's quite obscure, but you may have heard of it. Supposedly one way to prevent the corpse of one of our poor pathetic victims from rising from the grave involves stuffing their mouth with garlic and sewing their lips shut. I believe they would usually cut the head off and drive a stake through the heart anyway, which would of course be quite sufficient -- but still, when I heard this story I was curious. So...

We have three subjects. The first, here, is a shabti, mouth stuffed with garlic and sewn shut. As you can see, they do rather protest, but this one's been like this for a week now and, aside from the thrashing and wailing, there's no noticeable signs of any real negative effect. That's pretty much as you'd expect given... well how would *you* like it?

So. Next we have a human subject, again with his mouth stuffed with garlic bulbs, sewn shut. Yes. Hush now. It'll all be over soon. We feed these to the shabtis to see the effects.

No. The shabti has to be forced to eat; they're quite repelled by the smell. It is quite rank, isn't it. You can smell it easily, even over the urine and the-

It's an idea. Do you even get them in adult sizes?

You mean for incontinence, I take it, or...

Really? That's humans for you. They do think up some remarkable fetishes. Have you heard about the, ahem, 'vampires'. They have societies, you know?

Yes, that's what I thought.

No, anyway, you have to order the shabtis to eat and even then, some of them just -- well -- go mad. They can't disobey their master but they just can't bring themselves to bite the

poisoned apple, so to speak. Sort of an irresistible force, immovable object thing, leads to total breakdown. The worst usually end up just drivelling in the corner. It's actually put me in mind of an interesting experiment in its own right. I want to measure the influence of different imperatives, the natural repulsion of the noxious weed versus the absolute authority of his master's voice. I suspect there may be a strong correlation between mental development and the ability to override the repulsion. Jack managed to feed on one of them with his very first try. Of course, he was absolutely useless for three days -- *Jack tummy hurt, Master... Jack no feel good, Master* -- but... as I say, I have to do some more experiments on that.

So. Finally we have a normal human corpse, garlic-free until after desanguination. This one's a week old.

Well, yes I suppose it is obvious. As with the living specimens, we've stuffed the mouth with garlic and sewn it shut. And it seems to be quite effective. Normal rate of decomposition. The maggots are happily stripping it down. No sign of animation whatsoever. I've repeated this experiment a few times, by the way. Tried removing the garlic after different periods of time -- hours, days, weeks. It varies but generally speaking the garlic has to be in there for a day or two to be successful. Any less and what you get is... well, it's not pleasant. Necrosis sets in quite quickly, you know. The things smell quite foul and, really, they're worse than fifth-generation shabtis. Not so much risen from the grave as floundering in it like a fish out of water. They sort of... flop... and gasp a lot.

Anyway, at the moment, I'm trying to isolate whatever it is that interferes with the reanimation process. I'm working on the assumption that it's the same chemical or combination of chemicals that makes the stuff so damned noxious to us. These rooms over here, this is where I'm trialling the various concoctions. I've had some success with liquidised root, although injection into the bloodstream seems to be less successful than

injecting into the spine at the base of the skull. Yes, same set-up. Shabti, pre-mortem human and post-mortem human. Base of the skull.

Well, no. I don't suppose they *do*.

I've tried various individual extracts in isolation and combination. No result so far, but I think I'm on the right track in looking for a cocktail.

Well, I'll get onto that. Thought you might like a little bit of a son-et-lumiere.

Over this way then.



Photosensitivity — one of the great banes of our lives. How many times have you felt that nostalgic longing to just sit and watch a sunset or a sunrise?

No, spontaneous combustion isn't my idea of a good time either. But, why, Thomas, why? Why do we react that way.

That's rather putting the cart before the horse — we're creatures of the night because sunlight kills us, not the other way round. More idiotic superstition. Here, these are what I call the light chambers.

Yes, same glass that was in the Rolls. Means you can actually watch what happens. Initially these were black box experiments, but once I'd developed the glass, I thought I may as well have a look at the fireworks displays. Quite spectacular.

Oh, it depends on the chamber. This one has a shaft that goes all the way up to the surface. All sorts of mirrors and gears inside it — really quite ingenious, if I do say so myself.

No, no, come in, come in. It's quite safe, locked tight at the moment; you can't open the shutter with the door open. You can see where I fit the various filters.

Yes, I've done experiments with standard sunlight, reflected sunlight, moonlight, starlight, diffuse sunlight, focused sunlight, focused moonlight, filtered sunlight, of all sorts -

Yes, moonlight. Well, it is just reflected sunlight, after all.

Oh, for crying out loud, Thomas. Where did you *think* the light came from?

Only over the long term, you'll be glad to know. I'll get to that.

Next door here is where I use artificial illuminants. It seemed a fair question. Could we simulate the effect of sunlight on a shabti? Tell you what - hold on a second. You. Yes, you. Come here. In you go. That's right.

Yes, completely artificial. This one's called D65; it's an industrial illuminant, closest thing you get to natural light, used all over the place these days, mostly for matching colours, by clothing manufacturers and suchlike.

Yes, these are the controls over here. Do you want to flick the switch or shall I?

No, I don't mind at all.

You see what I mean by *spectacular*? Messy, right enough. Yes, as you can see, it's not quite combustion so much as detonation. More extreme than staking, but it's the same thing, really - catastrophic integrity loss leading to complete tissue breakdown. It's a mix of light frequencies that causes it. I thought it might be a specific component... ultraviolet perhaps... but no, ultraviolet on its own is harmless, as are most other individual frequencies.

Yes, you have to have a critical level to cause degeneration. Low levels can be tolerated, although they do cause damage over time. If you have the level low enough, you can sort of melt a shabti. This one in this chamber here, for instance.

Yes, he's been in there for a couple of days.

Yes. The mental deterioration sets in fairly quickly; incoherent speech, stereotyped behaviour, alternating between

manic and catatonic states. This one's well advanced. The tremors have started, so that means the motor control is starting to break down. This one over here's even further on. The convulsions are less frequent, less regular but more dramatic when they come. Oh, there's one now. Did you see the way his whole head just seemed to... *ripple*?

Jelly, yes. The liquefaction of the organism is usually complete after four days at this light level.

I'm not entirely sure but I do find the mental effects quite intriguing; its almost as if the light is interfering with its thought patterns, breaking them up the way it disintegrates the body. Integrity of form... yes, integrity of form. Interference. That's got to be the key...

Sorry. Terribly sorry. My mind was quite away there for a second. What were you saying again?

Well, I tried exposing tissue samples to various levels and frequencies, and mixes of frequencies of electromagnetic radiation, looking for changes on the microscopic level. Other than D65, or natural sunlight, nothing really has any effect.

Mind you, it did prove quite revealing in other ways. Quite revealing.

Come through to the lab. I have some slides to show you.



... know the old ectoplasm story? Well, it's not so far from the truth. Oh, there's nothing spiritual about it. So the cellular structure of the body is replaced by a sort of granular plasma formed by ripping apart haemoglobin and putting it back together; it's really not the same thing as 'ethereal evil incarnate'.

Oh, tosh and nonsense. The only way you'd see one of the elders transform into a spectral mist is if you put them in a blender with a few litres of holy water. We're every bit as material as the humans.

Anyway, I call it ichor. Once introduced into the human vessel, the ichor replicates, you see, until it permeates and actually replaces all the biological organs.

No, not 'icky', Thomas, ichor. Blood of the gods. Greek mythology, Thomas. Honestly, I thought you went to public school.

Well, yes, after they've been in the light chamber, 'icky' is a somewhat more appropriate term.

It's only an hypothesis at the moment, I'm afraid, but I think the coherence of the organism is dependent on some sort of electromagnetic signal exchange between granules, something that's interfered with by light.

Well that's exactly what *I* thought, but, no, you can't trace lineage by it as far as I can see; it's not like human blood. As I say, no DNA, so there's no variation between subjects. But I did find one interesting thing...

Yes, those are all tissue samples.

Oh, Chosen as well as shabtis -- proto-Chosen and proto-shabtis too, even a few human.

It is rather cramped; I'll have to get Jack to put another shelf up, I think. But one does need a range of specimens; all the pre-mortem and post-mortem stages have to be examined thoroughly.

What was I saying? Yes. Different patterns of infection. What I've found is that there's two quite different types of ichor.

Well, its quite fascinating, really. The Chosen have active granules -- agents, I call them -- that replicate astoundingly quickly, replacing all the organs, as I say.

Astoundingly. Let's see. After your first taste of the old man's blood, how long was it with you before the hunger kicked in?

OK. I'll put it this way: by the time the hunger kicks in, every single part of your body would have already been replaced.

Yes, that quick.

But what I've found is that the majority of ichor is made up of these much smaller granules -- drones -- and while you and I have these in abundance along with the agent ichor, the shabtis only have these smaller granules, and they're rather... turgid. They replicate through the neural system, but they only really become fully active when the risen shabti begins feeding. You can actually watch the process, you know -- take a sample of ichor from a new shabti before it feeds, add a drop of human blood; you can see the stuff just bursting into action.

That's the thing. We Chosen have the agents, and they replicate from day one.

It's obvious, surely. Don't you see? All those differences in mental abilities -- it's all down to the ichor. In both shabtis and Chosen, infection results in neural transformation, but the drone ichor can only replicate basic autonomic functions; it kicks into action at the crisis point of the host's death and jumpstarts the host corpse with a single imperative, the urge to feed. The longer the shabti's been exposed, the more pervasive the drones are, so there's more of a chance of replicating slightly more complex neural behaviour, but the host corpse is essentially brain dead until it feeds.

Well, sometimes it does seem that way, but no, there is brain activity; it just depends on the level of necrosis. The less drones, the more decay sets in between desanguination and resanguination. There's certainly no personality left, though. With the Chosen, of course, there's no brain death, so we retain our personality.

Sort of. I think it's not so much that the shabti is dependent on its sire, as that the drones are dependent on the agents. It's like there's some sort of communication going on, between the Chosen's agents and the shabti's drones. You kill the shabti's sire and it doesn't just wander around aimlessly like a lost puppy because it doesn't have anyone to tell it what to do. It

damn well -- well, you've seen the results splattered over the floor upstairs.

OK, think of them as like humans -- you know, no initiative, no individuality. They need their leaders to tell them what to do. Kill one little archduke, or a president, or a princess, and whole nation of them becomes completely irrational. Wars, conspiracy theories, grown men crying like women. Utterly insane. What's the phrase? Headless chickens. That's it, yes. You cut off the head and the body, well, runs around for a bit, flapping its wings then falls over and dies. Destroy the sire, you see, and you destroy the agents. Destroy the agents and the drones just... fall apart. Literally.

Oh, I know, I know. We have our own agents, so theoretically we shouldn't be dependent on our sires. If only; dear old Reynard could have been put out of his misery a long time ago. Don't worry though; I'll get to the heart of it yet.

But I think of it as like the branches and leaves of a tree; the branches are the Chosen and the shabtis are the leaves. A branch may have other branches sprouting from it; both may have their own leaves. Either way, if you cut off the original branch, you kill all the branches and leaves that depend on it.

Think about it, Thomas. Our immortality is a somewhat precarious thing. All it would take is one woodsman with a large enough axe...

Oh, no, actually there's rather a large range of weaponry that can kill us.

Actually, that's the next stop on our little tour.



So, what I've been doing mainly in this area is trying out different materials. You know: organic; inorganic; wood, obviously; bone; stone; metal; plastic. Even with wood alone, there's all the various types -- hardwoods, softwoods. Does the material have to come

into direct contact? I mean what if your staking implement has a wooden core but a thin coating of titanium-alloy steel, or just lacquer, or varnish for that matter? Imagine the look on that vampire-hunter's face when he pounds his prized stake into your heart only to find that he's varnished it one too many times.

Yes, it's a standard industrial drill, sort of thing you'd get in

I don't know – maybe an automobile factory. We have the shabti clamped in directly below it and, yes, it's adjustable, programmable so you can line the drill up with the heart. To be honest, it's a bit beyond me, all this – what's it called – CAD stuff. Jack, is this all set up?

Good.

Yes, you can put that in as part of the program. I think this one is set to just push straight through, but if you want to you can run a program to drop the drill at, say, a millimetre a minute, so you can measure quite precisely at what point degeneration occurs.

No, no wood. Well, wait and see. As I say, though, this one's just a straightforward skewering.

Oh no, I'm not expecting to learn anything from this. You need to have control experiments, though. Fundamental principle of science.

Yes, just push this red button here and...

Here it comes and...

Ooh. Spectacular, eh?

No, no wood at all. Diamond-tipped drill-bit. Graphite has the same effect. Actually there's a few things that are pretty damned lethal – basically anything with a sufficient concentration of carbon in it. And it took me – what? – a few months to find that out. The elders still think the worst they have to worry about is some mad Hun with a sharpened table-leg. Oh no. It wouldn't take some fearless vampire-hunter to bring down the great and powerful Malik. Any bloody idiot with a bunch of graphite ball-bearings loaded in a shotgun could do it. Believe me, Thomas,

I've done the tests. You know the minimum thickness of carbon-rich material required to cause complete degeneration? Four millimetres. God, you could kill us with a sharpened chopstick, Thomas.

OK. What's next?

This? Well, this is actually my own design. I'm rather proud of it, actually. Based on the sort of thing they use to take core samples of ice or earth or whatnot. Well, I wanted to see what happens if you remove the heart completely, as part of a core.

Yes, I suppose it is sort of funny, being able to see right through the -- yes, OK, Thomas, you can take your hand out of there now. Very droll.

No, no effect on him at all, unless, well, watch this. Yes, this is the thing's heart. It does look rather different doesn't it? I'm not at all sure what it does, but it's clearly serving some other purpose entirely now. Let's see... can you hand me that pencil, old boy. Thank you. And if I just...

And another one bites the dust, as they say.

Hand me that cloth, would you?

Thank you.

They're not toys, Thomas. They're scientific instruments.

Oh, yes. This is one of my favourites.

Well, this one's a bit more of a delicate operation, you might say. Scalpels, kitchen knives, anything steel is so much easier, but, you know, you do want to be thorough so I've had these sort of *saw* things manufactured out of the hardest wood available. It's still a little like trying to cut steak with a butter knife, but, as I say, one wants to cover all avenues of investigation. Thankfully, I've pretty much exhausted all the various types of incisions, penetrations, dissections and other assorted traumas you can impose on a subject with wood so I'm moving onto steel in some of the-

Well, there is carbon in steel, you know.

You didn't? You're joking?

Honestly? Sometimes you worry me, Thomas, really, you do.

Anyway, there's a sort of critical threshold of trauma. You can do a lot of damage to the heart before it completely fails but go just that little bit too deep and that's it. Immediate onset of degeneration.

Well, it takes a while to set up. I can show you this one in action if you want. Over here.

Yes. From a sawmill.

Indeed. I used to use this on whole subjects before I started removing the hearts. Very large, very messy, and it takes absolutely *ages* of slicing before you even get to the heart... if you start with the feet, anyway. No, I rather quickly realised it was more sensible to remove the entire lower body first and just work from, say, the solar plexus up. Or from the top of the skull down. Like this fellow here.

Well, I wanted to know exactly where the critical points are, you see. We all know what decapitation does, but what if you just slice off the top quarter of the brain matter, the top half, three quarters? Or, if you take the heart off in wafer thin slices?

Well, no the buzzsaw's too crude an instrument for that. As I say, I tend to remove the hearts now.

One of those meat slicers you get in a butcher's. You can do it really quite gradually. Again, there's a sort of critical threshold reached then -- *bang* -- immediate onset of degeneration.

Watch.



... one's quite interesting because it does rather contradict some of the other results. As you've seen we can remove the heart intact and the subject doesn't degenerate. But you can't do the same with the head. I've tried -- God knows I've tried -- with all sorts of pure metals, alloys, whatever -- no carbon at all. Doesn't

matter whether it's organic or inorganic implements you use, wood, steel, or a bloody plastic fork; if you sever the connection between head and body, yes, you guessed it -- immediate onset of degeneration. Anyway, as you can see here I've removed the soft tissue of the neck to expose the spine. As long as the spine is intact it seems, the subject retains integrity. What I've actually managed to do with these subjects is remove the vertebrae themselves, leave just the nerves.

Well, that's why his head's in the vice, obviously.

But, anyway, it seems that the degeneration happens when you sever too many of the nerves running down the spinal column. I don't know if it's this or that particular nerve, though, or if it's just down to numbers.

I can tell you this, though. You don't even need full decapitation.

Yes, I was doing an impalement, you see -- full body, Vlad the impaler kind of thing.

Well, I wanted to look at angles of impalement. Anyway, this one shabti came down on the stake at quite the wrong angle, so I'm looking at him flopping there and I can see that it's missed his heart entirely; however I look closer and realise I can see the point of the stake coming out through his spinal column just at the base of the skull. That's where it exits the body. And as I'm watching him he wriggles a bit, I hear the vertebrae crack and suddenly he's just ooze running down the stick.

The point is, his head was not 'cleanly severed from his body with cold steel'.

Well, that's just it. If you take the heart out there's no neural link to the body. It's all really quite confusing. That's what's exciting about science, though, Thomas. These challenges.

Yes, overall, the results are conflicting, but look at what we now know. The shabti clearly cannot function without both its heart and its head at least largely intact. Neither organ appears to carry out any known anatomical function, but critical damage to

either is utterly fatal. Common steel is quite capable of causing this damage, contrary to what the elders would have you believe, and even using non-carbon-based inorganic alloys of this metal or that, you can cause quite sufficient damage, if you so desire, as to render any of us unmistakeably and quite permanently dead. Put one of the Chosen through a meat grinder and, believe me, what comes out the other end is not going to dissipate into mist and coalesce again with a mocking laugh. It is going to lie there on the floor in a lumpen puddle. Whether the ichor maintains integrity by biological connections or some sort of energy -- and I'm yet to find any sign of an electromagnetic field or anything similar -- this integrity can be suddenly and fatally interrupted by any number of pointy, edged, blunt, grinding or slicing, bullets, blades, spikes, saws or bloody cheese graters.

All such instruments have the rather unwelcome effect of turning us into sticky, icky, red goo, for want of a better term.

Needless to say, this is a matter of some concern to us. All it would take is for some senile old leech who happens to be our great-great-grandsire to meet with an unfortunate accident and you and I -- along with countless others - would be history.

Yes, very droll. But this is serious. This is our survival.

I don't care if they take good care of themselves. All it takes is *one*. How long is the chain? How many Chosen are there who would take us with them if they died?

Well, no, I'm sure I'm not the only one to chain his old man up in the basement for safe-keeping. I don't think I'm the only one with a skeleton in the closet, so to speak. Who knows what some of the elders have in their vaults? The question is, do any of them have the First?

No, I haven't lost my senses. I know the First is a myth. A legend told to upstart broodlings to keep them in check. But think about it. Be logical. There has to be a First. You don't have branches without a trunk. And if he dies, we all die. No, I think one of the elders has the First tucked away safe and sound. They

would find that rather amusing, don't you think? The broodling's bogeyman, the First of all Chosen, the Ancient prime vampire who sired a race, stuck in some nice padded cell where he can't come to any harm. Quite pathetic, really.

My *problem* is that, as far as I can see, every one of the elders is a geriatric cretin still stuck in the century they were sired, scared of television sets because they might have sunlight inside them, whining about how humans have too much garlic in their diet these days, afraid to go out in case it rains.

Grateful for their caution? Yes, but-

But how long do we have?

We'll think about it. We can't go out in the rain, anymore. Can't drink the tap water. The rivers, the oceans, all polluted with two thousand years of holy water evaporated into the atmosphere. Oh, it's minimal amounts but it's enough to make us cower in our little airtight sanctums like... like some human with hayfever. The world isn't going to get any more comfortable. Every time a font is blessed. Every bottle sold at Lourdes. It's absurd. We're the masters of this world and we're all... housebound victims of a ridiculous allergy. Holy water. You know I've been measuring the increased levels over the last twenty years or so. Put a shabti or two out on the roof during a shower, measure their deterioration against the amount of rainfall. It's a slow climb but in a couple of centuries -- maybe three or four -- we'll probably need to live in bubbles. Haven't you noticed that blood doesn't taste quite as sweet as it used to?

That's right. It's contaminated. They bless the water, it evaporates, comes down as rain, gets into their water supply, they drink it and it ends up in their bloodstreams. It seems to be less toxic in blood, but, you understand, we're an endangered species. Four centuries and the rain will be like sulphuric acid to us. Five or six and their blood will be poison. We have to take action now. We have to understand these weaknesses so we can

counteract them, safeguard ourselves, survive. The elders? They're too busy pining for the Dark Ages.

Six centuries is imminent doom if you think in terms of millennia. If we're going to be immortal, let's start thinking about the long-term.

I'll show you.



Absolutely. We just blather on about "spiritual toxicity" with no idea what we're talking about, while the humans poison our world with their holy water.

No, not at all. There's no place for that in science.

Oh, Thomas. I point blank refuse to believe this Christian mumbo-jumbo.

Nonsense. I met someone who was in Jerusalem at the time never heard of the man. Oh, there was no shortage of wandering prophets and madmen claiming to be the messiah. Zealots, sicarii, essenes. It's entirely possible that one of these upstart demagogues claimed to be the son of God and got himself crucified for it, but is there any *record* of these miracles? Resurrection, indeed. Not unless he was one of us, and the scriptures don't say anything about him travelling at night. No. Jumped-up cult leader that's all he was. But some people will believe anything you tell them. Some people believe Elvis is still alive.

Crosses, yes. But it's not what you think.

See -- right, come here -- what I've done here is taken subjects from other cultures. We turn them, then expose them to all these various "spiritual toxins", holy water, crosses, and so on. Yes, this one's Muslim or something. They're in plentiful supply these days, as I was saying. Watch.

It's OK. I've got the rubber gloves.

Oh, don't be such a girl, Thomas. I won't get any on your face. Just watch.

Well, that's just it. The holy water has no effect whatsoever. Crucifixes are the same. But look at this.

Yes, it's Arabic. It means Allah, I believe. Doesn't mean a thing to you or I but you can see the way she's reacting. And if I just press it on her forehead here.

Now, now, dear. You've been told about the noise.

So as you can see -- and smell -- there's rather an adverse reaction to religious artefacts but it's entirely related to the subject's background. I'd find it rather amusing actually if it weren't so bloody inconvenient. As I say, the rain is not exactly a pleasant and refreshing experience these days. But it's all in the head.

I'm sure of it. We'd all be much better off without this God nonsense.

I don't know. Guilt? Angst? But, Thomas, we think of ourselves as supernatural, creatures of the night. We think God hates us, reviles us. So what if there *is* no God, there *is* no soul, there *is* no damnation. Perhaps we only believe in these nonsenses because they validate our absurd idea of what we are, damned souls, demons that walk the world. Think about it. Maybe we're not afraid of them because they burn us. Maybe they burn us because we're afraid of them.

Well, of course it's drastic, of course it's physical, but -- look at the evidence -- it has to be psychosomatic. Environmental conditioning, Thomas. Irrational reactions.

There are people with phobias about baked beans, Thomas, people who vomit at the sight of an unopened can.

That would be the eventual aim, yes. I mean, here's a subject I've raised in total isolation from religion. This Arabic thing has absolutely no effect on it. It would be the same with a Star of David or a crucifix. Absolutely no effect. You or I, though...

No, unfortunately I haven't really managed to get that far. It's most infuriating but... well, I was force-fed that clap-trap myself as a child and much as I understand the psychoanalytic theory, well, I've tried various forms of therapy but...

No, I can't quite overcome that feeling of dread, that crawling skin feeling of, ugh, just thinking about it makes me feel quite ill. And I must admit... well, this is rather shameful to admit but the shabtis seem to be better at it than us.

Really. I think it's because they're so... simple. You can just gradually increase their tolerance by exposing them for short periods at a time, build up their resistance until they eventually... forget to hiss and spit. They just don't bother. A cross becomes just another lump of metal, pretty much. Jack, he actually wears a crucifix around his neck. Under his shirt of course; God knows, I don't want to *see* one of those floating around in front of my face while I'm trying to eat.

Yes, that would have been his chest-hairs. You do get that charred pork, burning dog fur smell every so often, but he doesn't seem to notice. But shabtis are less aware, you see, so obviously they'll be less affected.

No, it's not perfect, but, don't you see how important this is now? The rain, the bloody rain is killing us, and it doesn't have to be that way.

Three or four centuries.

Well, yes you'd think a good analyst could cure any neurosis in that time, but these are the elders we're talking about. I think Freud himself would have his work cut out curing those demented pea-brains. With the shabtis it's just basic behaviourism. Conditioning. The Chosen are too bloody intelligent for their own good.

Um, well... yes. How else can-

But you can't just run these experiments on humans and shabtis, Thomas. Sooner or later you have to work with Chosen subjects.

I really don't care what Malik would think. Frankly, he'd be the first on the dissection slab if I had my way, with the rest of the Elders following close behind.

Obviously.

No, I wouldn't keep any of them up here; it's not secure enough. They're on the next level down. My high security section, so to speak. Follow me. The stairs are over here.



... from this fiery, wilful human resisting the Hold, to the initiate of stage two drunk on their sire's blood. Clearly there's a superior will here. The spawn behaves quite differently to the slave. Far less servile, far more... defiant. well we both remember what it's like don't we?

Anyway, I try not to leave them too long in stage three, wild with the Hunger; they're far too unpredictable during that period what with the blood lust. You have to give them enough time for the transformation to be complete but I try to fast-track them, as they say. So finally we end up with the stage fours, those who've tasted their first human blood, carried out their first kill. Fully-fledged Chosen.

Yes, this is the only way in or out, so it should be relatively safe. Wouldn't want any of these chaps getting loose and kicking up a stink.

Oh, they're all terminated eventually, one way or another.

Oh, hang the Law, Thomas. You and I both know that even the elders only really pay lip-service to the Law. The only reason Chosen don't kill Chosen is that bloody chain of dependence. You think Malik hasn't killed the odd newblood here and there when they got too uppity? You think Reynard wouldn't have killed us both if he'd known what we were planning? Law! Law is for the humans, Thomas. If we want to advance our scientific knowledge, there's no room for this "dark brethren" nonsense.

Answer me honestly, Thomas. Do you really care about anyone other than yourself? Do you really give a damn about Malik, or Reynard, or me for that matter? Do you have even the slightest hint of sympathy for these "dark brethren" of yours. I mean, look at them. Look at them in their chains and muzzles. Doesn't it just fill you with exactly the same contempt you feel about the shabtis, about the humans?

And I feel exactly the same way. We all do. It's our nature. None of us really, truly care.

I know. I know exactly what Malik would do if he found out that I was experimenting on Chosen. But that's never going to happen, is it, Thomas? There's only you and I that know about this part of my research, in the same way that there's only you and I who know what happened to Reynard, or what you did to Malik's beloved little Basquait.

Well now *that* wouldn't be very sensible. Oh, I know exactly where you're coming from. The look on his face would be delicious but... well, maybe someday you'll be able to tell him -- you'd *have* to let me be there though, really you'd *have* to -- if and when we find a way around the chain of dependence.

Talking of which...

Hang on a second. I want to get Jack down here to set something up.

A pager. He'll be down in a minute. Wait and see.

No need. He always finds me, no matter where I am. I think it's related to the recognition of other Chosen, the-

Well, I'm not entirely sure. Scent is just an hypothesis.

Hmm. I'm rather loathe to buy into the whole psychic connection thing. Smacks a little of the supernatural, don't you think?

Well, the Mongols drank blood too -- OK, it was their horses', but still-

I think it's rather evident that we *can* be killed.

Mirrors. All in good time, Thomas. All in good time. Anyway, where was I?

Yes, the chain of dependence. Did you realise that the degree of independence doesn't relate directly to resistance to the Hold?

That's what we all thought. But it's quite wrong. It would be nice to think that you and I ganged up on old Reynard because we're both naturally stronger-willed than some of the simpering lackeys that the elders call their spawn. Sadly, no. There is a quite mechanical explanation for it, I'm afraid to say. The independence of the spawned newblood is inversely proportional to the quantity of the sire's blood consumed during the transformation. Feed them well and they're fundamentally loyal. Skimp on the portions and you end up... well, you're liable to end up in your own basement, in chains, with a gag around your mouth and a blindfold on your eyes.

Of course. I wasn't saying that. The physical dependence is quite another thing entirely.

Good question. Let me put it this way. We have a simple thesis: all Chosen are dependent on their sire, yes? You kill the sire and the spawn dies. This is pretty much the first thing a newblood learns. You are, like it or lump it, entirely dependent on the continuing existence of the Chosen whose blood runs in your veins.

Well here's a conjecture, a thought experiment. What would happen if one of us were to drink the blood of our *sire's* sire? If, for example, we were able to establish that old Malik was Reynard's sire, and we managed to steal a few sips of his substance, would we remain dependant on Reynard, dying if he dies, or would we, perhaps, cease to be dependent on him entirely, transferring our dependence to dear old Malik?

It is, isn't it? And I have the answer.

Ah, Jack. Perfect timing. Remember yesterday's experiment?

Yes, well, we're going to repeat it for Mr Thomas's education and entertainment. Be a good shabti and fetch me the gun.



So, yes. We begin with one that we've already sired. Call him A. Yes, this is A over here. And this one here -- we'll call him B -- is one of his brood. We then have a third Chosen, this female -- C -- sired from B. Simple, yes?

OK, so what we're going to do is feed C a little blood from A.

God, no. If we took the gag off she'd bring the house down, the little bitchbrood. And then there's always the chance, you know, if they weren't gagged... I mean Jack's the only shabti allowed down here and he's one hundred percent loyal. But even so, even the smartest shabti can be tricked. Some of these are spawned direct from my own blood, after all, and I'm not about to bleed myself dry for test subjects, so they're not exactly devoted disciples. No when I say "feed", I don't mean it literally. The syringe, Thomas. One of the wonders of modern technology. I've no time for all the mess and noise involved in-

Hang on a second, I'm just trying to find a vein.

Now, now. There's no point struggling, my friend. You'll only make me use you in one of the slower and more painful experiments. Aha. OK.

And voila. One syringe of Chosen blood which we take over here to Ms. C and -- yes, you're about to be promoted, my dear. It's your lucky day.

Keen? Yes, one might say she's gagging for it.

Sorry. I know, I know. Right, just a moment.

OK, that's that. We just have to wait for a few minutes.

You'll see. Bring the gun over here, Jack.

Good boy, Jack.

Yes, this really *is* a toy, I must admit. Simple principle, D65 bulb, mirrors and lenses inside to focus the beam, more of a flashlight than a laser gun really, but it's bloody lethal all the same.

If you want. Here.

Be careful where you point it, will you?

Ha ha. Death by Duracell. I like that, Thomas. Very good.

Well, of course. It is rather fun to use. Just another minute.

Oh, nothing much. You know me. Work, work and more work.

Really? Sounds exciting.

With his *face*? Oh, Thomas, you are awful.

Oh. That should be time enough now. Just point it at B and -- no, the middle one, the one in the middle. B, Thomas, B -- yes. A, B, C. Were you even paying attention? Honestly-

OK. Well, just point it at B and pull the trigger.

Not the most eloquent comment, but, yes, it is, as you say "pretty fucking cool". But, do you notice anything strange here? Remember the purpose of this little experiment?

Exactly. Ms. C is still with us. Ms. C was sired by B. B is dead. She is *not*. What you're looking at, my boy, is probably the most important scientific discovery in the whole history of the Chosen. This could be revolutionary, Thomas. Literally. Ms. C has broken the chain of dependence, leapfrogged her own sire and bumped herself up to a position of much more security. Of course, she will still die if -- can I see the gun for a second? -- if we -- you might want to stand back, Thomas -- terminate A. But you can see how important this is, surely?

Exactly. Find out who has the First and we're free from those bloody elders forever. They're old and they're soft and complacent now, Thomas, and I know exactly how much damage you can inflict on one of the Chosen without killing them. Find the First and -- just a few cc's of his blood and we're free of them.

Why would I do *that*? I can always use some fresh subjects, Thomas. There's a lot of work still to be done. Jack, put this somewhere safe, will you? So what do you say we stop by and pay a visit to the old man now? See his new accommodation. I know how much he enjoys your little visits.

Ha ha ha ha.



Yes, it is something of a rabbit warren. A veritable labyrinth. Once you get to know your way around though...

Well, there are a couple of ways to get to the office but you can only get into the vault from the office itself, so I don't see what you're worried about.

Yes, it's basically a bank vault with some major high-tech add-ons, nuclear style decontamination unit in the airlock, climate control systems.

Oh, the sort of thing you get in zoos, museums, botanic gardens. Humidity, you see. I like to keep a constant humidity. This is us here.

Oh, but it's not normal water, Thomas. I keep old Reynard boxed up in an atmosphere that's absolutely rank with holy water. Actually, I have him on a drip of the stuff, with a few extracts of garlic thrown in for good measure. Nobody's going to be skipping the chain of dependence over me. So it's not just a matter of lock and key, old boy.

Clean suit. I keep a couple in a locker in the office that's coded to my thumbprint. And any shabti or Chosen walking into the vault without one, well let's just say they're not going to be doing much apart from writhing on the floor and squealing like a baby in an acid bath.

Yes, there is a bit of a smell. Sorry, I was in there yesterday and even with the airlock and the air conditioning -- I think there's something wrong with the decontamination unit. Well the

showers weren't really designed to spray blood and even with the dilutants and the anti-coagulants -- I just don't think it's as effective as it should be. I've had Jack taking a look at it, but I'm going to have to get someone in, I think.

Well, no, the original architect is... unavailable now.

But, yes, there was something else I wanted to show you first.

Well you were asking about mirrors, about the good old lack of reflection.

Quite. It *was* a bit of a puzzler.

Yes. The Chosen have no souls so they have no reflections. That is the current wisdom on the topic, isn't it? Or perhaps it's that, as supernatural apparitions, we're not really there in a physical sense. Oh, we're there in a physical sense in so far as if you drive a wooden stake through our hearts we die. But we're not really there. In a physical sense. Except that we can stick our pointy little teeth into their soft, smooth necks and drink every last fluid ounce of blood out of them. But we're not really there. In a physical sense.

Oh, yes, that's a wonderfully rational view on the subject. Reminds me of those savages who think that cameras steal people's souls. The Chosen have no souls so they have no reflections. So why do *humans* have reflections? No, I think it's fairly easy to settle this one. You might find this rather surprising though.

Yes, just hang on a second... here we go.

My photograph album.

Let's see. Who do we have here? Well, that's me. And that's me, too. And that's Jack.

Yes, he does look rather like a trained chimp trying to smile. That's shabtis for you.

Well, yes I know it's common knowledge. I just wanted to... approach this logically. I mean, what are the obvious questions to ask here? Other than 'why'?

Yes, well, we know the answer to that one. Photographs, film, video tape. We show up on them all. It's just mirrors. What other obvious question is there?

Come on, Thomas.

No?

OK, I have a mirror over here. Over here. Look. What do you see?

That's right, nothing. You can't imagine how often I stood, well, right here, looking at this mirror and wondering why I couldn't see myself. I meant to ask, by the way, is that Armani? Yes, I thought so. You look good in it. Pity you can't see yourself in the mirror, eh?

I'm getting to it. Don't be impatient. Wait here a second.

Digital camera. Wonders of modern technology. No, quite cheap, actually. Just stay there a second. You don't mind, do you? Not worried that I'm going to steal your soul, are you? Ha ha. Please, humour me.

OK. Smile for the camera. Go on. Show me those teeth. That's us. Now where was I? Oh, yes. Armani. Well, correct me if I'm wrong, but Armani haven't brought out a special line of Chosen-friendly non-reflected suits recently. No? And you don't find that a little curious? Or perhaps the suit doesn't show up in the mirror because it also happens to be a soulless, satanic creature of the night, damned for all eternity and blah blah blah.

Yes, that old chestnut. The touch of evil. Please. Touched in the head, more like.

Here we go. Have a look. Yes, you can see the picture in this little window.

Yes, you do, don't you. But that's not what I wanted to show you.

You don't see anything remarkable there? Take a closer look. What do you see in the background? Oh, for God's sake, Thomas, look at the bloody mirror. Look at the bloody mirror on the wall.

In the viewscreen, Thomas.

And the light dawns.

Yes. The reflection is there, Thomas. It's just that nobody sees it.

I have no idea. I presume it's something to do with our mesmeric abilities, an extension of the Hold. A particular side-effect. Quite useful, I should think -- so much easier to sneak up behind some young virgin at her dresser if she can't see you in the mirror. I mean, think about it, Thomas. We've all heard these tales about the most powerful of the elders being able to change shape, to become a bat or a wolf, even a cloud of mist. Ludicrous, of course, but you listen to them wittering on about it, about the good old days, and you realise they actually believe it.

And they're *almost* right. An ability we have and we don't even know it. Not unnatural, at all, though. Not supernatural. No. It's so bloody natural, we do it without even thinking. And we're so good at this hypnosis trick, we even fool ourselves.

I have no idea. I suppose line of sight is too direct, too immediate, but as I say maybe some of us could become, for want of a better term, invisible, once upon a time... and maybe cameras are just, well, a mechanical thing we don't have the ability to deal with. Too removed, too distant. But I wouldn't like to speculate. I'm a man of science, Thomas. Empirical observation. Experimentation. Hypothesis, extrapolation, validation. I'm not interested in speculation, in fabricating some spurious rationale. I don't pluck theories out of the air, Thomas. That's how you end up with ideas like, let's see, the Chosen have no souls, so they have no reflections. Utter and complete bunkum.

Anyway, this is the door here. As you'll see the old man is quite safe. Where's the key? Ah, yes.

Ah. Well, no, that's not meant to be open, but-

Now, Thomas, there's no need for that language. So I forgot to lock the door. It's not as if the shabtis will come down here.

They know what I'd do to them. No. Nothing gets in or out apart from me, nobody, not without my word, not even-

Jack?

Jack, I told you to put the gun somewhere safe.

Jack, what do you think you're-

Oh.



Aaah!

Aaah, Jesus, no.

No, I don't know where the First is. I don't.

Aaah! Not the -- *aah*, Jesus Christ!

I don't know. I swear to God. I don't know.

Maybe Malik or one of the other elders, but you'll never get near them, Jack. Not without-

What?

Thomas? You -- you wouldn't *dare*.

Are you *insane*? Do you have any idea what they'll do to you.

You're *both* insane. You can't touch them. For all you know, one of them is our own grandsire. It would be suicide.

But you don't know where the First is. You don't know who has him. You-

Oh.

You lying, conniving, scheming, little, faggot of a -- *aaaaah!*

Thomas, for the love of God, man. You're going to throw your lot in with this -- this animal? *Aaah!* No, I didn't mean that, Jack. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You're not an animal. You're one of us now. You're Chosen. You're one of us. I don't know how, but-

Yes, I remember. But you only fought that first time. You submitted. You surrendered. You were mine. You *are* mine. You belong to me. My shabti, my -- *aaah!*

What? When?

I can't remember my exact words. Something about fighting like a tiger.

That you kicked and punched and... scratched.

Ha ha ha ha ha. No? Ha ha ha ha ha. I don't believe it. Blood under the fingernails. My blood under your fingernails and you cowering in your cage and biting at them and... all this time?

Oh God. But wait, you're still bound to me. Kill me and-

Oh. Oh dear.

But wait, wait, don't you see? That's why you have to listen to me. You're just like us. I didn't know, Jack. I'm sorry for the way I treated you, but I didn't know. But think about it, Jack. You're one of us. Surely you should appreciate the work I'm doing. Surely - *aaaah!*

Please, Jack. Thomas, tell him. Please, I'm sorry. *Aaaah!*

Please. Don't kill me. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. *Thomas*, don't let him kill me. Tell him not to kill me. Tell him if he doesn't kill me, then you'll help him find the First. Then we can drink his blood and we'll all be safe -- only one link in the chain. Only one. He's the only one that matters. If he dies we *all* die. If he's safe -- that's what you want, isn't it? Then you can put him in a vault somewhere and keep him safe. That's what you...

That's not what you want. Oh, my God. That's not...

Thomas! Thomas, you bloody moron, don't trust him! For the love of God, he's mad. He doesn't care. He just wants to kill us *aaaaaa* -

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