

Castle in the Desert: Anno Dracula 1977
by Kim Newman

The man who had married my wife cried when he told me how she died. Junior-Smith Ohlrig, Jr., of the oil and copper Ohlrigs-hadn't held on to Linda much longer than I had, but their marriage had gone one better than ours by producing a daughter.

Whatever relation you are to a person who was once married to one of your parents, Racquel Loring Ohlrig was to me. In Southern California, it's such a common family tie you'd think there'd be a neat little name for it, pre-father or potential-parent. The last time I'd seen her was at the Poodle Springs bungalow her mother had given me in lieu of alimony. Thirteen or fourteen going on a hundred and eight, with a micro-halter top and frayed jean shorts, stretch of still-chubby tummy in between, honey-colored hair past the small of her back, an underlip that couldn't stop pouting without surgery, binary star sunglasses and a leather headband with Aztec symbols. She looked like a pre-schooler dressed up as a squaw for a costume party, but had the vocabulary of a sailor in Tijuana and the glittery eyes of a magpie with three convictions for aggravated burglary. She'd asked for money, to gas up her boyfriend's "sickle," and took my television (no great loss) while I was in the atrium telephoning her mother. In parting, she scrawled "fuck you, piggy-dad" in red lipstick on a Spanish mirror. Piggy-dad, that was me. She still had prep-school penmanship, with curly-tails on her ys and a star over the i.

Last I'd heard, the boyfriend was gone with the rest of the Wild Angels and Racquel was back with Linda, taking penicillin shots and going with someone in a rock band.

Now things were serious.

"My little girl," Junior kept repeating, "my little girl ..."

He meant Racquel.

"They took her away from me," he said. "The vipers."

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All our lives, we've known about the vampires, if only from books and movies. Los Angeles was the last place they were likely to settle. After all, California is famous for sunshine. Vipers would frazzle like burgers on a grill. Now, it was changing. And not just because of affordable prescription sunglasses.

The dam broke in 1959, about the time Linda was serving me papers, when someone in Europe finally destroyed Dracula. Apparently, all vipers remembered who they were biting when they heard the news. It was down to the Count that so many of them lived openly in the world, but his continued unlife-and acknowledged position as King of the Cats-kept them in the coffin, confined to joyless regions of the old world like Transylvania and England. With the wicked old witch dead, they didn't have to stay on the plantation any longer. They spread.

The first vipers in California were elegant European predators, flush with centuried fortunes and keen with red thirsts. In the early '60s, they bought up real estate, movie studios, talent agencies (cue lots of gags), orange groves, restaurant franchises, ocean-front properties, parent companies. Then their get began to appear: American vampires, new-borns with wild streaks. Just as I quit the private detective business for the second time, bled-dry bodies turned up all over town as turf wars erupted and were settled out of court. For some reason, drained corpses were often dumped on golf courses. Vipers made more vipers, but they also made viper-killers-including such noted humanitarians as Charles Manson-and created new segments of the entertainment and produce industries. Vampire dietary requirements opened up whole new possibilities for butchers and hookers.

As the Vietnam War escalated, things went quiet on the viper front. Word was that the elders of the community began ruthless policing of their own kind. Besides, the cops were more worried about

draft dodgers and peace-freak protesters. Now, vampires were just another variety of Los Angeles fruitcake. Hundred-coffin mausolea were opening up along the Strip, peddling shelter from the sun at five bucks a day. A swathe of Bay City, bounded by dried-up canals, was starting to be called Little Carpathia, a ghetto for the poor suckers who didn't make it up to castles and estates in Beverly Hills. I had nothing real against vipers, apart from a deep-in-the-gut crawly distrust it was impossible for anyone of my generation—the WWII guys—to quell entirely. Linda's death, though, hit me harder than I thought I could be hit, a full-force ulcer-bursting right to the gut. Ten years into my latest retirement, I was at war.

To celebrate the bicentennial year, I'd moved from Poodle Springs back into my old Los Angeles apartment. I was nearer the bartenders and medical practitioners to whom I was sole support. These days, I knocked about, boring youngsters in the profession with the Sternwood case or the Lady in the Lake, doing light sub-contract work for Lew Archer—digging up family records at county courthouses—or Jim Rockford. All the cops I knew were retired, dead or purged by Chief Exley, and I hadn't had any pull with the D.A.'s office since Bernie Ohls's final stroke. I admitted I was a relic, but so long as my lungs and liver behaved at least eight hours a day I was determined not to be a shambling relic.

I was seriously trying to cut down on the Camels, but the damage was done back in the puff-happy '40s when no one outside the cigarette industry knew nicotine was worse for you than heroin. I told people I was drinking less, but never really kept score. There were times, like now, when Scotch was the only soldier that could complete the mission.

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Junior, as he talked, drank faster than I did. His light tan suit was the worse for a soaking, and had been worn until dry, wrinkling and staining around the saggy shape of its owner. His shirtfront had ragged tears where he had caught on something.

Since his remarriage to a woman nearer Racquel's age than Linda's, Junior had been a fading presence in the lives of his ex-wife and daughter (ex-daughter?). I couldn't tell how much of his story was from experience and how much filtered through what others had told him. It was no news that Racquel was running with another bad crowd, the Anti-Life Equation. They weren't all vipers, Junior said, but some, the ringleaders, were. Racquel, it appears, got off on being bitten. Not something I wanted to know, but it hardly came as a surprise. With the motorcycle boy, who went by the name of Heavenly Blues but liked his friends to address him as "Mr. President," she was sporting a selection of bruises that didn't look like they'd come from taking a bad spill off the pillion of his hog. For tax purposes, the Anti-Life Equation was somewhere between religious and political. I had never heard of them, but it's impossible to keep up with all the latest cults.

Two days ago, at his office—Junior made a pretense of still running the company, though he had to clear every paper clip purchase with Riyadh and Tokyo—he'd taken a phone call from his daughter. Racquel sounded agitated and terrified, and claimed she'd made a break with the ALE, who wanted to sacrifice her to some elder vampire. She needed money—that same old refrain, haunting me again—to make a dash for Hawaii or, oddly, the Philippines (she thought she'd be safe in a Catholic country, which suggested she'd never been to one). Junior, tower of flab, had written a check, but his new wife, smart doll, talked him out of sending it. Last night, at home, he had gotten another call from Racquel, hysterical this time, with screaming and other background effects. They were coming for her, she said. The call was cut off.

To his credit, Junior ignored his lawfully-married flight attendant and drove over to Linda's place in Poodle Springs, the big house where I'd been uncomfortable. He found the doors open, the house extensively trashed and no sign of Racquel. Linda was at the bottom of the kidney-shaped swimming pool, bitten all over, eyes white. To set a seal on the killing, someone had driven an iron spike through her forehead. A croquet mallet floated above her. I realized he had gone into the pool fully-dressed and hauled Linda out. Strictly speaking, that was violating the crime scene but I would be the last person to complain.

He had called the cops, who were very concerned. Then, he'd driven to the city to see me. It's not up to me to say whether that qualified as a smart move or not.

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"This Anti-Life Equation?" I asked Junior, feeling like a shamus again. "Did it come with any names?"

"I'm not even sure it's called that. Racquel mostly used just the initials, ALE. I think it was Anti-Life Element once. Or Anti-Love. Their guru or nabob or whatever he calls himself is some kind of hippie Rasputin. He's one of them, a viper. His name is Khorda. Someone over at one of the studios—Traeger or Mill or one of those kids, maybe Bruckheimer—fed this Khorda some money on an option, but it was never-never stuff. So far as I know, they never killed anyone before."

Junior cried again and put his arms around me. I smelled chlorine on his ragged shirt. I felt all his weight bearing me down, and was afraid I'd break, be no use to him at all. My bones are brittle these days. I patted his back, which made neither of us feel any better. At last, he let me go and wiped his face on a wet handkerchief.

"The police are fine people," he said. He got no argument from me. "Poodle Springs has the lowest crime rate in the state. Every contact I've had with the PSPD has been cordial, and I've always been impressed with their efficiency and courtesy."

The Poodle Springs Police Department were real tigers when it came to finding lost kittens and discreetly removing drunken ex-spouses from floodlit front lawns. You can trust me on this.

"But they aren't good with murder," I said. "Or vipers."

Junior nodded. "That's just it. They aren't. I know you're retired. God, you must be I don't know how old. But you used to be connected. Linda told me how you met, about the Wade-Lennox case. I can't even begin to imagine how you could've figured out that tangle. For her, you've got to help. Racquel is still alive. They didn't kill her when they killed her mother. They just took her. I want my little girl back safe and sound. The police don't know Racquel. Well, they do ... and that's the problem. They said they were taking the kidnap seriously, but I saw in their eyes that they knew about Racquel and the bikers and the hippies. They think she's run off with another bunch of freaks. It's only my word that Racquel was even at the house. I keep thinking of my little girl, of sands running out. Desert sands. You've got to help us. You've just got to."

I didn't make promises, but I asked questions.

"Racquel said the ALE wanted to sacrifice her? As in tossed into a volcano to appease the Gods?"

"She used a bunch of words. 'Elevate' was one. They all meant 'kill.' Blood sacrifice, that's what she was afraid of. Those vipers want my little girl's blood."

"Junior, I have to ask, so don't explode. You're sure Racquel isn't a part of this?"

Junior made fists, like a big boy about to get whipped by someone half his size. Then it got through to the back of his brain. I wasn't making assumptions like the PSPD, I was asking an important question, forcing him to prove himself to me.

"If you'd heard her on the phone, you'd know. She was terrified. Remember when she wanted to be an actress? Set her heart on it, nagged for lessons and screen tests. She was—what?—eleven or twelve? Cute as a bug, but froze under the lights. She's no actress. She can't fake anything. She can't tell a lie without it being written all over her. You know that as well as anyone else. My daughter isn't a perfect person, but she's a kid. She'll straighten out. She's got her Mom's iron in her."

I followed his reasoning. It made sense. The only person Racquel had ever fooled was her father, and him only because he let himself be fooled out of guilt. She'd never have come to me for gas money if Junior were still giving in to his princess's every whim. And he was right— I'd seen Racquel Ohlrig (who had wanted to call herself Amber Valentine) act, and she was on the Sonny Tufts side of plain rotten.

"Khorda," I said, more to myself than Junior. "That's a start. I'll do what I can."

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Mojave Wells could hardly claim to come to life after dark, but when the blonde viper slid out of the desert dusk, all four living people in the diner—Mom and Pop behind the counter, a trucker and me on stools—turned to look. She smiled as if used to the attention but deeming herself unworthy of it, and walked between the empty tables.

The girl wore a white silk minidress belted on her hips with interlocking steel rings, a blue scarf that kept her hair out of the way, and square black sunglasses. Passing from purple twilight to fizzing blue-white neon, her skin was white to the point of colorlessness, her lips naturally scarlet, her hair pale blonde. She might have been Racquel's age or God's.

I had come to the desert to find vampires. Here was one.

She sat at the end of the counter, by herself. I sneaked a look. She was framed against the "No Vipers" sign lettered on the window. Mom and Pop—probably younger than me, I admit—made no move to throw her out on her behind, but also didn't ask for her order.

"Get the little lady whatever she wants and put it on my check," said the trucker. The few square inches of his face not covered by salt-and-pepper beard were worn leather, the texture and color of his cowboy hat.

"Thank you very much, but I'll pay for myself."

Her voice was soft and clear, with a long-ago ghost of an accent. Italian or Spanish or French.

"R.D., you know we don't accommodate vipers," said Mom. "No offense, ma'am, you look nice enough, but we've had bad ones through here. And out at the castle."

Mom nodded at the sign and the girl swivelled on her stool. She genuinely noticed it for the first time and the tiniest flush came to her cheeks.

Almost apologetically, she suggested, "You probably don't have the fare I need?"

"No, ma'am, we don't."

She slipped off her stool and stood up. Relief poured out of Mom like sweat.

R.D., the trucker, reached out for the viper's slender, bare arm, for a reason I doubt he could explain. He was a big man, not slow on the draw. However, when his fingers got to where the girl had been when his brain sparked the impulse to touch, she was somewhere else.

"Touchy," commented R.D.

"No offence," she said.

"I've got the fare you need," said the trucker, standing up. He scratched his throat through beard.

"I'm not that thirsty."

"A man might take that unkindly."

"If you know such a man, give him my condolences."

"R.D.," said Mom. "Take this outside. I don't want my place busted up."

"I'm leaving," said R.D., dropping dollars by his coffee cup and cleaned plate. "I'll be honored to see you in the parking lot, Missy Touchy."

"My name is Geneviève," she said, "accent grave on the third e."

R.D. put on his cowboy hat. The viper darted close to him and lightning-touched his forehead. The effect was something like the Vulcan nerve pinch. The light in his eyes went out. She deftly sat him down at a table, like a floppy rag doll. A yellow toy duck squirted out of the top pocket of his denim jacket and thumped against a plastic ketchup tomato in an unheard-of mating ritual.

"I am sorry," she said to the room. "I have been driving for a long time and could not face having to cripple this man. I hope you will explain this to him when he wakes up. He'll ache for a few days, but an icepack will help."

Mom nodded. Pop had his hands out of sight, presumably on a shotgun or a baseball bat.

"For whatever offense my kind has given you in the past, you have my apologies. One thing, though: your sign—the word 'viper.'" I hear it more and more as I travel west, and it strikes me as insulting. 'No Vampire Fare on Offer' will convey your message, without provoking less gentle vipers than myself." She looked mock-sternly at the couple, with a hint of fang. Pop pulled his hold-out pacifier and I tensed, expecting fireworks. He raised a gaudy Day of the Dead crucifix on a lamp-flex, a glowing-eyed Christ crowned by thorny lightbulbs.

"Hello, Jesus," said Geneviève, then added, to Pop: "Sorry, sir, but I'm not that kind of girl."

She did the fast-flit thing again and was at the door.

"Aren't you going to take your trophy?" I asked.

She turned, looked at me for the first time, and lowered her glasses. Green-red eyes like neons. I could see why she kept on the lens caps. Otherwise, she'd pick up a train of mesmerised conquests.

I held up the toy and squeezed. It gave a quack.

"Rubber Duck," said Mom, with reverence. "That's his CB handle."

"He'll need new initials," I said.

I flew the duck across the room and Geneviève took it out of the air, an angel in the outfield. She made it quack, experimentally. When she laughed, she looked the way Racquel ought to have looked. Not just innocent, but solemn and funny at the same time.

R.D. began moaning in his sleep.

"May I walk you to your car?" I asked.

She thought a moment, sizing me up as a potential geriatric Duckman, and made a snap decision in my favor, the most encouragement I'd had since Kennedy was in the White House.

I made it across the diner to her without collapsing.

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I had never had a conversation with a vampire before. She told me straight off she was over five hundred and fifty years old. She had lived in the human world for hundreds of years before Dracula changed the rules. From her face, I'd have believed her if she said she was born under the shadow of Sputnik and that her ambition was to become one of Roger Vadim's ex-wives.

We stood on Main Street, where her fire-engine-red Plymouth Fury was parked by my Chrysler. The few stores and homes in sight were shuttered up tight, as if an air raid was due. The only place to go in town was the diner and that seemed on the point of closing. I noticed more of those ornamental crucifixes, attached above every door as if it were a religious holiday. Mojave Wells was wary of its new neighbors.

Geneviève was coming from the East and going to the West. Meager as it was, this was the first place she'd hit in hours that wasn't a government proving ground. She knew nothing about the Anti-Life Equation, Manderley, Castle or a viper named Khorda, let alone Racquel Ohlrig.

But she was a vampire and this was all about vampires.

"Why all the questions?" she asked.

I told her I was a detective. I showed my license, kept up so I could at least do the sub-contract work, and she asked to see my gun. I opened my jacket to show the shoulder holster. It was the first time I'd worn it in years, and the weight of the Smith & Wesson .38 special had pulled an ache in my shoulder.

"You are a private eye? Like in the movies."

Everyone said that. She was no different.

"We have movies in Europe, you know," she said. The desert wind was trying to get under her scarf, and she was doing things about it with her hands. "You can't tell me why you're asking questions because you have a client. Is that not so?"

"Not so," I said. "I have a man who might think he's a client, but I'm doing this for myself. And a woman who's dead. Really dead."

I told the whole story, including me and Linda. It was almost confessional. She listened well, asking only the smart questions.

"Why are you here? In ... what is the name of this village?"

"Mojave Wells. It calls itself a town."

We looked up and down the street and laughed. Even the tumbleweeds were taking it easy.

"Out there in the desert," I explained, "is Manderley Castle, brought over stone by stone from England. Would you believe it's the wrong house? Back in the Twenties, a robber baron named Noah Cross wanted to buy the famous Manderley—the one that later burned down—and sent agents over to Europe to do the deal. They came home with Manderley Castle, another place entirely. Cross still put the jigsaw together, but went into a sulk and sold it back to the original owners, who emigrated to stay out of the War. There was a murder case there in the Forties, nothing to do with me. It was one of those locked-room things, with Borgia poisons and disputed wills. A funny little Chinaman from Hawaii solved it by gathering all the suspects in the library. The place was abandoned until a cult of moon-worshippers squatted it in the sixties, founded a lunatic commune. Now, it's where you go if you want to find the Anti-Life Equation."

"I don't believe anyone would call themselves that."

I liked this girl. She had the right attitude. I was also surprised to find myself admitting that. She was a bloodsucking viper, right? Wasn't Racquel worried that she was to be sacrificed to a vampire elder? Someone born in 1416 presumably fit the description. I wanted to trust her, but that could be part of her trick. I've been had before. Ask anyone.

"I've been digging up dirt on the ALE for a few days," I said, "and they aren't that much weirder than the rest of the local kooks. If they have a philosophy, this Khorda makes it all up as he goes along. He cut a folk rock album, The Deathmaster. I found a copy for ninety-nine cents and feel rooked. 'Drinking blood/Feels so good,' that sort of thing. People say he's from Europe, but no one knows exactly where. The merry band at the ALE includes a Dragon Lady called Diane LeFanu, who may actually own the castle, and L. Keith Winton, who used to be a pulp writer for Astounding Stories but has founded a new religion that involves the faithful giving him all their money.'

"That's not a new religion."

I believed her.

"What will you do now?" she asked.

"This town's dead as far as leads go. Dead as far as anything else, for that matter. I guess I'll have to fall back on the dull old business of going out to the castle and knocking on the front door, asking if they happen to have my ex-wife's daughter in the dungeon. My guess is they'll be long gone. With a body left back in Poodle Springs, they have to figure the law will snoop for them in the end."

"But we might find something that'll tell us where they are. A clue?"

" 'We?' "

"I'm a detective, too. Or have been. Maybe a detective's assistant. I'm in no hurry to get to the Pacific. And you need someone who knows about vampires. You may need someone who knows about other things."

"Are you offering to be my muscle? I'm not that ancient I can't look after myself."

"I am that ancient, remember. It's no reflection on you, but a new-born vampire could take you to pieces. And a new-born is more likely to be stupid enough to want to. They're mostly like that Rubber Duck fellow, bursting with impulses and high on their new ability to get what they want. I was like that once myself, but now I'm a wise old lady."

She quacked the duck at me.

"We take your car," I said.

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Manderley Castle was just what it sounded like. Crenellated turrets, arrow-slit windows, broken battlements, a drawbridge, even a stagnant artificial moat. It was sinking slowly into the sands and the tower was noticeably several degrees out of the vertical. Noah Cross had skimmed on foundation concrete. I wouldn't be surprised if the minion who mistook this pile for the real Manderley was down there somewhere, with a divot out of his skull.

We drove across the bridge into the courtyard, home to a VW bus painted with glow-in-the-dark fanged devils, a couple of pickup trucks with rifle racks, the inevitable Harley-Davidsons, and a fleet of customized dune buggies with batwing trimmings and big red eye-lamps.

There was music playing. I recognized Khorda's composition, "Big Black Bat in a Tall Dark Hat."

The Anti-Life Equation was home.

I tried to get out of the Plymouth. Geneviève was out of her driver's side door and around (over?) the car in a flash, opening the door for me as if I were her great-grandmama.

"There's a trick to the handle," she said, making me feel no better.

"If you try and help me out, I'll shoot you."

She stood back, hands up. Just then, my lungs complained. I coughed a while and red lights went off behind my eyes. I hawked up something glistening and spat it at the ground. There was blood in it.

I looked at Geneviève. Her face was flat, all emotion contained.

It wasn't pity. It was the blood. The smell did things to her personality.

I wiped off my mouth, did my best to shrug, and got out of the car like a champion. I even shut the door behind me, trick handle or no.

To show how fearless I was, how unafraid of hideous death, I lit a Camel and punished my lungs for showing me up in front of a girl. I filled them with the smoke I'd been fanning their way since I

was a kid.

Coffin nails, they called them then.

We fought our aesthetic impulses, and went towards the music. I felt I should have brought a mob of Mojave Wells villagers with flaming torches, sharpened stakes and silvered scythes.

" 'What a magnificent pair of knockers,' " said Geneviève, nodding at a large square door.

"There's only one," I said.

"Didn't you see Young Frankenstein?"

Though she'd said they had movies in Europe, somehow I didn't believe vipers-vampires, I'd have to get used to calling them if I didn't want Geneviève ripping my throat out one fine night-concerned themselves with dates at the local passion pit. Obviously, the undead read magazines, bought underwear, grumbled about taxes, and did crossword puzzles like everyone else. I wondered if she played chess.

She took the knocker and hammered to wake the dead.

Eventually the door was opened by a skinny old bird dressed as an English butler. His hands were knots of arthritis and he could do with a shave.

The music was mercifully interrupted.

"Who is it, George?" boomed a voice from inside the castle.

"Visitors," croaked George the butler. "You are visitors, aren't you?"

I shrugged. Geneviève radiated a smile.

The butler was smitten. He trembled with awe.

"Yes," she said, "I'm a vampire. And I'm very, very old and very, very thirsty. Now, aren't you going to invite me in? Can't cross the threshold unless you do."

I didn't know if she was spoofing him.

George creaked his neck, indicating a sandy mat inside the doorway. It was lettered with the word WELCOME.

"That counts," she admitted. "More people should have those."

She stepped inside. I didn't need the invite to follow.

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George showed us into the big hall. Like all decent cults, the ALE had an altar and thrones for the bigwigs and cold flagstones with the occasional mercy rug for the devoted suckers. In the blockiest throne sat Khorda, a vampire with curly fangs, the full long-hair-and-tangled-beard hippie look, and an electric guitar. He wore a violent purple and orange caftan, and his chest was covered by bead necklaces hung with diamond-eyed skulls, plastic novelty bats, Austro-Hungarian military medals, inverted crucifixes, a "Nixon in '72" button, gold marijuana leaves, and a dried human finger. By his side was a wraith-thin vision in velvet I assumed to be Diane LeFanu, who claimed-like a lot of vipers-to be California's earliest vampire settler. I noticed she wore discreet little ruby earplugs.

At the feet of these divines was a crowd of kids, of both varieties, all with long hair and fangs. Some wore white shifts, while others were naked. Some wore joke-shop plastic fangs, while others had real ones. I scanned the congregation, and spotted Racquel at once, eyes a red daze, kneeling

on stone with her shift tucked under her, swaying her ripe upper body in time to the music Khorda had stopped playing.

I admitted this was too easy. I started looking at the case again, taking it apart in my mind and jamming the pieces together in new ways. Nothing made sense, but that was hardly breaking news at this end of the century.

Hovering like the Wizard of Oz between the throne-dais and the worshipper-space was a fat vampire in a 1950s suit and golf hat. I recognized L. Keith Winton, author of "Robot Rangers of the Gamma Nebula" (1946) and other works of serious literature, including *Plasmatics: The New Communion* (1950), founding text of the Church of Immortology. If ever there were a power-behind-the-throne bird, this was he.

"We've come for Racquel Loring Ohlrig," announced Geneviève. I should probably have said that.

"No one of that name dwells among us," boomed Khorda. He had a big voice.

"I see her there," I said, pointing.

"Sister Red Rose," said Khorda.

He stuck out his arm and gestured. Racquel stood. She did not move like herself. Her teeth were not a joke. She had real fangs. They fit badly in her mouth, making it look like an ill-healed red wound. Her red eyes were puffy.

"You turned her," I said, anger in my gut.

"Sister Red Rose has been elevated to the eternal."

Geneviève's hand was on my shoulder.

I thought of Linda, bled empty in her pool, a spike in her head. I wanted to burn this castle down, and sow the ground with garlic.

"I am Geneviève Dieudonné," she announced, formally.

"Welcome, Lady Elder," said the LeFanu woman. Her eyes held no welcome for Geneviève. She made a gesture, which unfolded membrane-like velvet sleeves. "I am Diane LeFanu. And this is Khorda, the Deathmaster."

Geneviève looked at the guru viper.

"General Iorga, is it not? Late of the Carpathian Guard. We met in 1888, at the palace of Prince Consort Dracula. Do you remember?"

Khorda/Iorga was not happy.

I realized he was wearing a wig and a false beard. He might have immortality, but was well past youth. I saw him as a tubby, ridiculous fraud. He was one of those elders who had been among Dracula's toadies, but was lost in a world without a King Vampire. Even for California, he was a sad soul.

"Racquel," I said. "It's me. Your father wants ..."

She spat hissing red froth.

"It would be best if this new-born were allowed to leave with us," Geneviève said, not to Khorda but Winton. "There's the small matter of a murder charge."

Winton's plump, bland, pink face wobbled. He looked anger at Khorda. The guru trembled on his throne, and boomed without words.

"Murder, Khorda?" asked Winton. "Murder? Who told you we could afford murder?"

"None was done," said Khorda/Iorga.

I wanted to skewer him with something. But I went beyond anger. He was too afraid of Winton—not a person you'd immediately take as a threat, but clearly the top dog at the ALE—to lie.

"Take the girl," Winton said to me.

Racquel howled in rage and despair. I didn't know if she was the same person we had come for. As I understood it, some vampires changed entirely when they turned, their previous memories burned out, and became sad blanks, reborn with dreadful thirsts and the beginnings of a mad cunning.

"If she's a killer, we don't want her," said Winton. "Not yet."

I approached Racquel. The other cultists shrank away from her. Her face shifted, bloating and smoothing as if flatworms were passing just under her skin. Her teeth were ridiculously expanded, fat pebbles of sharp bone. Her lips were torn and split.

She hissed as I reached out to touch her.

Had this girl, in the throes of turning, battened on her mother, on Linda, and gone too far, taken more than her human mind had intended, glutting herself until her viper thirst was assuaged?

I saw the picture only too well. I tried to fit it with what Junior had told me.

He had sworn Racquel was innocent.

But his daughter had never been innocent, not as a warm person and not now as a new-born vampire.

Geneviève stepped close to Racquel and managed to slip an arm round her. She cooed in the girl's ear, coaxing her to come, replacing the Deathmaster in her mind.

Racquel took her first steps. Geneviève encouraged her. Then Racquel stopped as if she'd hit an invisible wall. She looked to Khorda/Iorga, hurt and betrayal in her eyes, and to Winton, with that pleading moué I knew well. Racquel was still herself, still trying to wheedle love from unworthy men, still desperate to survive through her developing wiles.

Her attention was caught by a noise. Her nose wrinkled, quizzically.

Geneviève had taken out her rubber duck and quacked it.

"Come on, Racquel," she said, as if to a happy dog. "Nice quacky-quacky. Do you want it?"

She quacked again.

Racquel attempted a horrendous smile. A baby tear of blood showed on her cheek.

We took our leave of the Anti-Life Equation.

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Junior was afraid of his daughter. And who wouldn't be?

I was back in Poodle Springs, not a place I much cared to be. Junior's wife had stormed out, enraged that this latest drama didn't revolve around her. Their house was decorated in the expensive-but-ugly mock Spanish manner, and called itself ranch style though there were no cattle or crops on the grounds.

Geneviève sat calmly on Junior's long gray couch. She fit in like a piece of Carrara marble at a Tobacco Road yard sale. I was helping myself to Scotch.

Father and daughter looked at each other.

Racquel wasn't such a fright now. Geneviève had driven her here, following my lead. Somehow, on

the journey, the elder vampire had imparted grooming tips to the new-born, helping her through the shock of turning. Racquel had regular-sized fangs, and the red in her eyes was just a tint. Outside, she had been experimenting with her newfound speed, moving her hands so fast they seemed not to be there.

But Junior was terrified. I had to break the spell.

"It's like this," I said, setting it out. "You both killed Linda. The difference is that one of you brought her back."

Junior covered his face and fell to his knees.

Racquel stood over him.

"Racquel has been turning for weeks, joining up with that crowd in the desert. She felt them taking her mind away, making her part of a harem or a slave army. She needed someone strong in her corner, and Daddy didn't cut it. So she went to the strongest person in her life, and made her stronger. She just didn't get to finish the job before the Anti-Life Equation came to her house. She called you, Junior, just before she went under, became part of their family. When you got to the house, it was just as you said. Linda was at the bottom of the swimming pool. She'd gone there to turn. You didn't even lie to me. She was dead. You took a mallet and a spike—what was it from, the tennis net?—and made her truly dead. Did you tell yourself you did it for her, so she could be at peace? Or was it because you didn't want to be in a town—a world—with a stronger Linda Loring. She was a fighter. I bet she fought you."

There were deep scratches on his wrists, like the rips in his shirt I had noticed that night. If I were a gather-the-suspects-in-the-library type of dick, I would have spotted that as a clue straight off.

Junior sobbed a while. Then, when nobody killed him, he uncurled and looked about, with the beginnings of an unattractive slyness.

"It's legal, you know," he said. "Linda was dead."

Geneviève's face was cold. I knew California law did not recognize the state of undeath. Yet. There were enough vampire lawyers on the case to get that changed soon.

"That's for the cops," I said. "Fine people. You've always been impressed with their efficiency and courtesy."

Junior was white under the tear-streaks. He might not take a murder fall on this, but Tokyo and Riyadh weren't going to like the attention the story would get. That was going to have a transformative effect on his position in Ohlrig Oil and Copper. And the PSPD would find something to nail him with: making false or incomplete statements, mutilating a corpse for profit (no more alimony), contemptible gutlessness.

Another private eye might have left him with Racquel.

She stood over her father, fists swollen by the sharp new nails extruding inside, dripping her own blood—the blood that she had made her mother drink—onto the mock-Mission-style carpet.

Geneviève was beside her, with the duck.

"Come with me, Racquel," she said. "Away from the dark red places."

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Days later, in a bar on Cahuenga just across from the building where my office used to be, I was coughing over a shot and a Camel. They found me.

Racquel was her new self, flitting everywhere, flirting with men of all ages, sharp eyes fixed on the pulses in their necks and the blue lines in their wrists.

Geneviève ordered bull's blood.

She made a face.

"I'm used to fresh from the bull," she said. "This is rancid."

"We're getting live piglets next week," said the bartender. "The straps are already fitted, and we have the neck-spigots on order."

"See," Geneviève told me. "We're here to stay. We're a market."

I coughed some more.

"You could get something done about that," she said, softly.

I knew what she meant. I could become a vampire. Who knows: if Linda had made it, I might have been tempted. As it was, I was too old to change.

"You remind me of someone," she said. "Another detective. In another country, a century ago."

"Did he catch the killer and save the girl?"

An unreadable look passed over her face. "Yes," she said, "that's exactly what he did."

"Good for him."

I drank. The Scotch tasted of blood. I could never get used to drinking that.

According to the newspapers, there'd been a raid on the castle in the desert. General Iorga and Diane LeFanu were up on a raft of abduction, exploitation, and murder charges; with most of the murder victims undead enough to recite testimony in favor of their killers, they would stay in court forever. No mention was made of L. Keith Winton, though I had noticed a storefront on Hollywood Boulevard displaying nothing but a stack of Immortology tracts. Outside, fresh-faced new-born vampires smiled under black parasols and invited passersby in for "a blood test." Picture this: followers who are going to give you all their money and live forever. And they said Dracula was dead.

"Racquel will be all right," Geneviève assured me. "She's so good at this that she frightens me. And she won't make get again in a hurry."

I looked at the girl, surrounded by eager warm bodies. She'd use them up by the dozen. I saw the last of Linda in her, and regretted that there was none of me.

"What about you?" I asked Geneviève.

"I've seen the Pacific. Can't drive much further. I'll stay around for a while, maybe get a job. I used to know a lot about being a doctor. Perhaps I'll try to get into med school, and requalify. I'm tired of jokes about leeches. Then again, I have to unlearn so much. Medieval knowledge is a handicap, you know."

I put my license on the bar.

"You could get one like it," I said.

She took off her glasses. Her eyes were still startling.

"This was my last case, Geneviève. I got the killer and I saved the girl. It's been a long goodbye and it's over. I've met my own killers, in bottles and soft-packs of twenty. Soon, they'll finish me and I'll be sleeping the big sleep. There's not much more I can do for people. There are going to be a lot more like Racquel. Those kids at the castle in the desert. The customers our bartender is expecting next week. The suckers drawn into Winton's nets. Some are going to need you. And some

are going to be real vipers, which means other folk are going to need you to protect them from the worst they can do. You're good, sweetheart. You could do good. There, that's my speech. Over."

She dipped a finger-tip in her glass of congealing blood and licked it clean, thinking.

"You might have an idea there, gumshoe."

I drank to her.

The End