



*Beneath the roof, inside the walls
A darkened version of you crawls*

IN THE RECESSES of a dark alleyway at the very heart of London, an old repurposed warehouse drew in the residue of night-time spirits, like a raven picking indiscriminately at carrion and spitting out the useless scraps. The interior was completely concealed by the gloom that seemed to exude from its tired, yawning entranceway and its black, soulless windows. Outside, the remnants of posters decorated the towering, black walls; torn and fluttering in the warm, summer winds like torn flesh. It was late July and two wide security guards in regulation black puffer jackets stood in front of the entrance with arms crossed, while four beer-soaked ‘townies’ attempted, ineffectually, to gain entry. The bouncers explained to them this was a members-only club and after some discussion they finally gave up and decided to go and try elsewhere.

The building was only ever inhabited at night, and met by all manner of creatures: young and old; male, female and

transgender; gay, straight and bisexual; goths, punks and rivet-heads alike. Inside the dimly lit club, through the threshold and along a narrow corridor, the crudely painted black walls peeled away exposing little light grey patches of better times. The gentle rattle of chains and soft murmuring of voices stirred through the dark, carrying with them the bitter fumes of the city, mingled with the thick musty air of the club. A small, square opening the size of a dumbwaiter, halfway along the left-hand side of the wall, led to a room occupied by a blonde girl, her tiny frame covered in fishnet and a web of tight leather thongs. Her hair was tied tightly at the top of her head into a ponytail, which fell in golden swathes down her back. She was feverishly collecting money and signatures from members as they passed her little window.

Inside the lobby stood a forest of scantily clad women and gangly pale men. Leather studded straps covered various parts of their bodies, and silver rings and studs covered their faces, with tattoos occupying any left-over flesh; they wore their hair gathered in braids or dreadlocks of extravagant colours.

A queue had formed as members received their ticket stubs to be exchanged for a hand stamp. A beefy-looking blond man, with his hair tied back carelessly, wearing a leather jacket, sat patiently on a large box at the end of the corridor, holding a rubber stamp in his left hand.

He took the hand of the next person in line; a short goth boy with matted, uneven, black hair under an old black trilby adorned with black lace ribbons. The boy held out a gloved hand and giggled frivolously at his obvious blunder. Pulling away a torn part of his ragged black T-shirt, he bared a warm,

white, bony shoulder. The boy's white skin made the blond man's pulse quicken and his mouth water at the sight of the tender flesh between the boy's shoulder and neck. He licked his lips and two sharp points scored the tip of this tongue. Images of the warm blood coursing thickly through the boy's veins made him tingle with desire. Moving slowly towards the boy, he caught himself quickly and moved back, pressing a hard, wet, rubber stamp onto the boy's soft shoulder. Still chuckling childishly to himself, the boy bowed courteously and tipped his hat. The stamp bore the club's name, 'SLIMELIGHT'.

Beyond and to the right, a set of deep, wide, black steps led upwards, surrounded on each side by dirty black walls; at the top they turned left towards the first floor. Pipes distributed along the walls occasionally emitted small bursts of vaporous steam, and a low, buzzing sound filled the wide, dark stairway, creating an atmosphere of industrial menace. A petite girl, wearing a floaty, purple velvet dress beneath a flowing black velvet coat, attempted to carry two bags filled with bottles and cans carefully up the steps, tackling each step in turn, every now and then nearly tripping on her dress. Eventually, a helpful goth boy with crimped hair and tight PVC trousers came to her aid, taking the bags and walking with her up the awkwardly elongated steps.

A door at the top of the stairs opened up into a wide room; goths and punks occupied the tables that were haphazardly scattered around the room. To the left, beyond a wire mesh fence, a few punks fought over a pool table, amid empty cans and spilt lager, cheered on by several more punks sitting in the area around the pool table. Further, and to the right, a dance floor

spanned the remaining space, surrounded by walls upon which obscene projections played, and video screens hanging from the ceiling showed animated cartoons and old horror movies. Brightly coloured youths flocked together like tropical birds in a mating ritual of dancing, white noise and an accompaniment of sirens and strobe lights.

At the far end of the dance floor, a pair of double doors led into another, much smaller room. Posters advertising the latest new releases from an assortment of goth and industrial bands covered each wall. In one corner of the room, sitting around a small table, a group of tired youths with pure white faces and blackened eyes, like little ghosts, huddled over cups of thick black coffee. Behind a makeshift wooden counter in another corner of the room, boxes of crisps and bars of chocolate, and a large jar containing brightly coloured lollipops, lined the back wall. A bright red glow of a Coke machine came from next to the counter.

A set of double doors on the other side of the room led to a corridor and another set of stairs lined with more 'little ghosts'. A set of speakers in the far corners of the stairwell emitted sirens and low metallic voices, and a low thudding of drums and bass guitar came from a doorway at the very top of the stairs. This doorway opened straight onto a dance floor scattered with shapeless bodies moving through acrid dry ice and strobe lights, like images in a zoetrope. Draped with black coats and wearing big boots with pointed toes and heavy, silver buckles, they moved slowly back and forth across the floor in time with the torpid rhythm, arms hanging loosely at their sides. Three wooden alcoves framed with

steel poles lined along the back wall. Above them rows of scaffolding jutted out from the black fetid brickwork like a health and safety nightmare.

Through the sea of velvet, lace and PVC, in a secluded part of the room, the music died down to a low pulse. The breeze from a fan hanging from the ceiling was the only air conditioning in the hot and stuffy, windowless room. From within the shadows shone a pair of sharp white teeth, pointed at the tips; two tiny white triangles inside a blood red mouth, within a small, pure white mask outlined by black, crimped hair, pulled to unnatural heights and falling around a pair of shoulders cloaked in velvet.

The face belonged to a young girl who, if mortal, would have been about twenty-one years old. She turned to face a young mortal boy of about the same age. He was breathing heavily, his body leaning on her awkwardly, as if drunk or asleep. She moved his head from her shoulder and placed him gently on the back of his chair, his head lolling, his hair gently brushing the soft leather of his trousers. Turning around, she reached down beside her, to a bottle of rich, fragrant mead. She lifted it slowly to her mouth, and took one long, graceful draught.

The girl was Onyx; a vampire. The boy would not die. She had been drinking from the youths in this club long enough to know how far she could go before arousing suspicion. She would drink enough to leave them in a stupor for some hours. Anyone passing by would simply assume they were inebriated or high on some substance or other, like many others at the club. This place had become an important shelter for many of

her kind, drawn in by the unique style of its patrons who so strikingly mimicked their undead pallor and dark dress sense.

Slimelight was just one of many clubs dotted around London providing shelter to her dark children. It was also one of the only clubs to open from dusk till dawn, and was therefore the favourite place for vampires to meet, blending in well with the mixture of young goths and punks, who accepted them as part of their own sub-culture.

The building was situated on top of catacombs under the foundations of an ancient manor house once belonging to the young Lord Alexander Torrens, who had mysteriously vanished in the year 1540, and had kindly bequeathed his dwellings and surrounding land to the vampires. The manor house had long since gone, replaced by the current building, which had occupied the space since 1850. It was originally designed as a stable to house the horses pulling the trams that served Islington and the surrounding area.

Onyx, revitalised having just fed, in one swift and graceful movement got up to find her companions. Pushing through the crowds, pinkish sweat trickled down her neck and onto her chest. She reached down to her thick, leather, studded belt, and from a hook under the belt she removed a black, silk fan. With a flick of her wrist, it opened out like the sail of a galleon. The fan flapped gracefully in front of her face like the wing of a raven, cooling the fresh human blood flowing through her veins; the cool breeze blew softly through her hair. She closed her eyes and imagined herself standing on the cold, silent moors in the heart of Devon, as she had done centuries ago; the icy, moorland wind lapping around

her heavy, black cape and whipping her thick, flowing, red hair – for that was the colour of it back then – in a blaze of incandescent waves. She remembered the first time she had embraced another, the ecstasy and passion of that fatal kiss, his soft brown hair against her chest; his eyes like huge brown jewels, deep and dark, drifting in a milky sea of bliss. The smell of wild bracken and gorse bushes enveloped her, while the stars peered down like the eyes of a thousand gods winking in approval of their union. His lifeblood flowed into her, filling her very soul with its essence, until the moment came when she knew she would have to give it back to him, so they could be together again. Forever.

The music from the club brought Onyx back to dark, lonely reality, as the rolling drums and deep lamenting tones of Peter Murphy cut in. Crowds of young, fresh innocents disappeared and reappeared in the rotating circles of light as she caught a glimpse of two familiar faces, gaunt and luminescent under the neon lights, and made her way hastily towards them. Two waif-like, androgynous boys, like pale twins, stood in one of the few rickety wooden alcoves that lined the far wall, both sporting the same hairstyle; shaved five centimetres above the ears, with thick masses of curly, black hair carefully trussed on the tops of their slender, angelic faces. They both wore ornate make-up around their hazel-green eyes, and deep red lipstick covered their thin, pouting lips. They both wore short-sleeved chiffon tops exposing their round, pierced nipples and narrow, hairless chests; PVC trousers concealed their twig-like legs.

Shade and Visage hunted together by night, seeking shelter in the deep, dark underground crypt which lay beneath

Slimelight, during the day. They had been lovers since they were mortal. Onyx had met them in France in the late sixteenth century, during the French Wars of Religion. They had fled Paris after being relentlessly hunted by a Catholic mob for both their religion and their sexuality. They narrowly escaped with their lives, only to have them replaced with the dark eternal life of the damned. As with all couples she turned, Onyx only embraced one of them, the one she turned could then embrace the other. This was because she believed the embrace to be an intimate thing, the ultimate pleasure, to be shared only between two people, like mortal sex.

Peter Murphy and accompanying guitars screamed over a roll of drums and Shade smiled graciously at Onyx. He turned to put a skeletal arm around Visage, who appeared worried. They were Onyx's youngest, being only four hundred years old, and were often getting themselves into trouble. Visage would get jealous if he saw Shade talking to someone else. Many fights had been started over such matters and Onyx would have to jump in to stop them being removed from the club, which would inevitably lead to them frantically seeking shelter before the encroaching dawn.

"Are you two OK? You weren't in your crypt yesterday. Where were you?" asked Onyx, noticing Visage's troubled expression. "Did you get into another fight?" she asked, with feigned sympathy and just a hint of annoyance.

"I am having bad dreams," Visage replied in a rich, French accent. "After the Ballroom, I went out to hunt. I wanted to be ... alone," he emphasised, glancing at Shade, who sighed, shaking his head despairingly.

“Yes, but he didn’t know what time it was, did he? It was lucky I went after him, otherwise he’d be fertiliser by now,” explained Shade, whose accent had dropped considerably. He had adapted better to the modern world than Visage, who refused to integrate into modern society, preferring instead to mope about in his crypt, or to be generally left alone to contemplate the meaning of his own existence.

“I would have been OK! I just wanted to be alone,” he told Shade angrily, yet with sad, imploring eyes.

Visage was the younger of the two in appearance, having been turned at the tender age of twenty, and Shade in his thirties. Even though both had lived longer than a human lifetime, it seemed ridiculous to think of either of them as being older or younger than the other, but it was obvious that Shade had retained his mortal dominance over Visage. Over the years, however, Visage had remained loyal, but had learned to be independent. This sometimes annoyed Shade.

“What is it Visage?” asked Onyx. His face darkened; there was something more sinister going on than a simple lovers’ spat.

“The Count,” Visage whispered.

A shock of electricity went through Onyx’s body, making her nearly drop her bottle of mead. She hadn’t heard his name in a long time, and had hoped she never would again. The stifling heat from the crowds of dancing youths overwhelmed her, making her dizzy. She remembered the all-consuming flames licking at her ancient torso, her screams piercing the night air. She remembered his demented laughter and maniacal ramblings, as she and the others fled for

safety across the fields and moors of southern England, finally finding shelter in London with the kind and gracious Lord Alexander Torrens.

She assumed, or rather, hoped, the Count had since been destroyed or permanently incapacitated. She was always afraid of the possibility he would return, but had never revealed her fears to the others.

Onyx gathered herself, took a drink and tried to remain calm.

“So,” she said finally, “tell me what happened,” she continued apprehensively. Shade saw the tears welling in Visage’s eyes, so he began to explain for him.

“Well, after I found him, asleep by the body of a tramp in Regents Park, *dangerously* close to dawn. The tube wasn’t running yet, so we took the secret entrance in the Nursemaid’s Tunnel and climbed down the shaft about 30 metres to the Hammersmith and City line, and ran as quickly as we could, changing to the Northern line at Warren Street, and up to Camden Town, where we met with Mad Dog in the pub.” Onyx nodded. Mad Dog owned the Devonshire Arms, a pub located near the Camden Lock, and a favourite haunt of the goths and punks of London, as well as their blood-sucking counterparts. It was conveniently located above the Northern line, from where a shaft had been built by the vampires, straight into the cellar of the pub. She beckoned him to continue.

“Well,” he went on, “he took us to his room upstairs. The windows were blacked out, so we stayed there until the sun went down. He lives there with his mortal lover, you know, Diane.” He stopped for a moment.

“Yes, I know Diane; timid little thing. And he hasn’t turned her yet?” Onyx asked, knowing all too well he wouldn’t, and the reasons why.

“Of course not,” Shade confirmed. “You know, there are two other mortals living there now, musicians, guys; they have a band. We heard them rehearsing while we were sleeping, they interrupted our sleep.” He passed her a flyer. “They gave us this.”

‘Flaming Dolls

Live at the Underworld this Thursday!!’

Onyx folded up the flyer and placed it neatly in her cleavage. Shade and Visage both groaned.

“Why you always do that?” Visage implored.

“I don’t have any pockets,” she explained with shrug and a grin. Onyx reached into a carrier bag and passed Shade a bottle of Wild Brew while he continued with his story against a background of shrieks and guitars from Shriekback’s ‘Nemesis’.

“Anyway, earlier this evening, before we came here, Mad Dog at the pub told us about this strange presence he’d felt lurking around for a few nights. Apparently, it just hung around outside for a while before disappearing. He said he could sense it was one of us, but it was, somehow, more powerful. We didn’t experience it ourselves when we were there, but Mad Dog was quite adamant about it. He didn’t seem to know about the Count, because when we mentioned him, he looked at us as though we were completely mental. He thought he was just a legend, and didn’t believe he actually existed. ‘Just a tale to scare the newbloods’, he said.”

“I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about,” Onyx reassured them. She tried to shake the initial fear to keep them from sensing her own trepidation. As one of the oldest vampires in the group, it was her responsibility to keep calm in any sort of crisis; to provide them with a sense of stability and to keep them safe.

“Onyx, what are we going to do if he is back, how are we to defeat him?” Visage interrupted anxiously. “He is too strong for us to overcome, we need help!” Onyx’s face saddened, and she checked if anyone could hear, as she could sense the panic rising in Visage’s voice. Although she knew it would be impossible – she, like all of her kind, had the ability to communicate in tones no human could possibly detect – she had to be sure no other vampires were within earshot, as they would indeed be able to hear everything.

“I’ll talk to Mad Dog myself. I’m sure it’s nothing,” she said, trying to sound convincing, and finding it to be working for Shade and Visage, but not so much for herself. The idea of having to deal with the terror of the Count, his madness and the inevitable bloodshed, filled her with a dread she could not adequately put into words.

“There, you see? What did I tell you?” said Shade, indicating towards Onyx. “It’s going to be fine.” Shade gave Visage a consoling hug. Visage grimaced at him and muttered something in French, and most likely profane, under his breath.

Onyx was just about to leave them when Visage extended a pallid limb, catching her by her shoulder and gripping firmly.

“You don’t think he is coming back do you?” he asked her urgently. “Please tell me he isn’t coming back!”

“Don’t worry, Visage,” she replied with a smile, “he isn’t coming back.” She placed a gentle hand on Visage’s shoulder, in the most calming way she could. Visage sighed, and smiled, seemingly relieved. He turned back to Shade who held him tightly and kissed the top of his forehead.

Onyx left Shade and Visage in their embrace to find the others; to warn them, although she knew she had to approach the matter with caution to avoid panic. She wasn’t sure whether or not to believe their story; whether or not she *wanted* to believe their story. Mad Dog may have exaggerated; the presence outside could have been anyone – maybe even someone they knew – and now he’s started a frightening rumour that she must do her utmost to quell to keep everyone calm. She had to talk to him and find out for sure. She caught the elusive gaze of a pair of chestnut-brown eyes from the far corner of the room and moved slowly towards them.

