



**The Annotated Mina
Volume One**

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Dedicated to the Clives,¹ the Harkers,² and to all of Mina's friends and supporters at livejournal and journalfen.

Mina can be contacted at mina_de_malfois@yahoo.com.

¹ The Clives are Mina's beta readers. This is first mentioned in Staffing Problem (part two).

² Mina's online readers are called the Harkers. This is an affectionate reference to Bram Stoker's Dracula, and was first coined by Invidereliana. Invidereliana: Semi-private communication via Livejournal. 20 January 2007.

Mina de Malfois and the Snailmail Affair

I'd been online friends³ with Arc since her fanfiction archive agreed to host my stories (as well it might: I'm ferociously well-known, and it must have been quite a boost for them, acquiring me). But our friendship took a significant leap forward when some of my fans started chattering about celebrating my upcoming birthday by sending me cards and gifts.⁴ I was pretty chuffed about this, but there was one difficulty. Arc only has about twenty people friended on livejournal, so she hadn't even heard about the proposed present-giving until I'd brought her up to speed.

That's the problem with Arc, you know: she refuses to cultivate people properly, or brighten herself up at all. I mean, if

³ Mina and Arc are meant to resemble Bertie and Jeeves, of the brilliant P.G. Wodehouse books. Alert Harkers have also seen a resemblance to E. F. Benson's Lucia and Mapp; this was unintentional on my part.

⁴ There have been many instances within fandom of well-known fans attempting to persuade or encourage their 'friends' to send them money or buy them gifts. Examples include Cousin Jean asking for money to take a year off and write fanfiction, and efforts to buy Cassie Clare (the former Cassie Claire) an iPod. Embitca. 'Can't We Just Buy You an iPod?' Fandom Wank 10 August 2005 http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/776590.html (21 January 2007).Snacky 'Buy a BNF an iPod.' Fandom Wank Wiki. 26 November 2005

she just had more of a sense of style, she could probably make it to MNF status--particularly with my help, since, as I don't mind telling you, I am easily the Big Name Fan of at least two fandoms. But she just has no aptitude, I suppose, for putting herself out there. Even her screen-name, Archivist12, is forgettable. You'd never guess she runs 'Penn'd Passion'⁵ from that, would you? But she's sensible, even if she's a trifle dull, and I always turn to her for advice.

'The thing is,' I typed, 'I don't want to give out my mailing address to a bunch of fangirls.' I paused, trying to figure out how best to put this. I didn't have a P. O. Box, and in point of fact, right now I couldn't afford to go get a P.O. Box. But I didn't want to give out my home address, either.⁶ The thing was, when you got right down to it, I may have given some of my fans the impression that I lived at--well--rather a better address than my current digs. They might, when you read between the lines, have been expecting a house, not an apartment. A largish house. I tried

http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Buy_a_BNF_an_iPod (21 January 2007).

⁵ The archive is named Penn'd Passion as a subtle sneer back at the people who sneer at female fanfic authors for writing out of pent-up lust.

⁶ Mina can't give out her address because it would reveal that she is poorer than she says she is. Her 'manor' was inspired by Slytherfen and their 'Malfoy Manor' and 'Snape Manor' fantasies. Cassandra Claire sweetly gave out her P.O.Box address at one point. Cassandra Claire. 'FAQs.' 9 March 2002. That was kind of her.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20020608000054/http://www.livejournal.com/~cassieclaire>

to find a way to get this across, but as usual, Arc didn't need a whole lot of explanation. It's one of her nicest qualities, really.

'For security purposes,' her message said, 'it's probably best that you keep quiet about your location.'

'Yes, exactly,' I responded, leaving out an 'I' in my relief. 'What I need is someone who could lend me their address and forward my mail.'

'Someone close to you, whom you trust,' she replied, 'and someone, moreover, whom the fangirls would accept as a reliable, credible person who would pass on their mail to you.'

It was as though she were reading my mind. Once more I found myself marvelling at her ability to catch on to what I needed.

'Yes, quite,' I agreed.

'A close, personal friend within fandom,' she went on. I hesitated, fingers paused over the keyboard for a moment. That was a difficulty, really. I mean, for obvious reasons, I'd found it politic not to get too close with any one BNF. Associate too closely with one of them, you see, and the others are apt to turn on you, out of pure jealousy and spite. It's dreadful the way some of these people behave; you've no idea. And then, of course, I didn't want my well-known name propelling some other fanfic author to the

top of the lists.

‘Hey, you wouldn’t like to do it, would you?’ I asked. I was trying to sound spontaneous there, but I’d thought it out beforehand. I could trust Arc, you see. She didn’t even write fanfiction, so the competition angle didn’t apply, and really, she stood to benefit from this, if I could just make her see it. ‘It would make people more aware of the archive, I bet,’ I typed.

‘It would do that,’ she agreed. ‘But you realize, you’d have to give me your mailing address.’

I frowned at the monitor. Sometimes I had the slight feeling Arc guessed more than she let on, but she never really came out and said anything directly.

‘I’m staying at a friend’s apartment right now,’ I wrote finally. ‘I’ll send you the address here--the friend’s address, I mean. They won’t mind.’

‘Sounds fine,’ came the answer.

‘I say, Arc,’ I wrote--I’m prone to these little Britishisms; really, it’s almost as if I were British, and more than a few fans have speculated that I must have been educated in England, a notion I’ve done nothing to disabuse them of--‘this is safe for you, is it? I mean, I don’t want you giving your address out online if you’re not comfortable with that.’ She was so reticent about her personal

information that for all I knew Arc lived alone, and I really wouldn't have wanted to put her in any danger. I'm awfully fond of her, when you come right down to it.

'Oh, no,' she assured me. 'Don't worry. It's perfectly safe.'

So that seemed neatly concluded. She posted the announcement on the archive's bulletin board, letting everyone know that she could forward mail to me, and listing a P. O. Box as her address. I dropped a few discreet hints here and there around the web so everyone would know I was onboard with this scheme, and that Archivist12 had my fullest confidence, and I returned to check the boards later that night, to see how my readership was reacting.

Imagine the horror I felt when I logged on and found a pack of fangirls debating not Arc's reliability, but my very existence!

'For all we know Mina could be a middle-aged man,' one had written.

Another of the little fiends had chimed in with, 'She could have given Archivist12 a fake address. I don't want to see Archivist12 wasting money on postage if the stuff's only going to be returned to her.'

I had loyal defenders, of course--the ones vowing to send

presents for me to Arc's P.O. Box far outweighed the sceptics, I'm pleased to say, and many of them were roundly telling off the others for doubting me--but still, it gave me a nasty feeling to see them debating the point. And a couple had already suggested channelling their money into donations to keep 'Penn'd Passion' running instead. I suppose the site does take a lot of funding, but still, it's a bit of a letdown to be promised gifts in the mail, and then find out people are doing something else instead.

And if you think that was bad, it was as nothing compared to what happened next, because just as I went to reassure them of my continued existence and love for presents, my internet connection failed. I spent a jolly uncomfortable night, let me tell you. I tried logging on several times, but no go. I couldn't settle down to anything else; just couldn't concentrate, if you see what I mean. Without me there to guide the conversation, who knew what the fangirl rumours would come up with. I don't mind telling you, I'd put in a lot of time and effort creating my online image, and it gave me the cold chills to contemplate its being ripped to shreds while I was helpless to defend myself.

I rushed home from work the next day and headed straight for the computer, not even stopping to take off my uniform. I held my breath until I was signed in, and for a moment I

stared blankly at the screen, too blinded by panic to read the messages properly. Then it finally penetrated: they were all positive again. Most confided that they were sending me something, or expressed their regret that they couldn't afford to participate this time, poor dears. Not a single one accused me of being a man or faking my address.

It took several minutes of scrolling backwards to find out why the tenor had changed so completely. It was a note from Arc early the previous night that had done it, I saw.

'Not to worry, everyone,' she'd written. 'I've had the great good fortune to be a guest at the Malfois Estate, and I can assure you that Mina is real, that she is female, and that I know her address.' And immediately thereafter my fans had fallen into line and stopped expressing rude doubts. A handful had breathlessly pestered her for details about my home and lifestyle, but Arc had tactfully declined to comment. When I checked my email she'd sent me a short personal message, expressing her hope that I wouldn't mind her having played a bit fast and loose with the truth. 'I felt the most important thing was to head off the scepticism,' she'd said, and I had to agree.

I boggled a bit. She'd certainly saved my reputation, that was for sure--possibly even enhanced it--but it was damned

unexpected. My relief was almost outweighed by my astonishment at her dashing in to save the day like that. I peeled off my clothes thoughtfully and mulled it over in the shower, but couldn't come to any conclusions as to her possible motive.

I'll say one thing for her, though, she was as good as her word. About a week and a half later the first box arrived in the mail, full of unopened cards and letters and gifts from my readers. She'd used her home address on the box, I noticed, not the P.O. Box, which I think showed a pleasant degree of trust in me. And judging by the address, she lives in a pretty high-toned neighbourhood, does Arc. Funny: she'd never said a word about it.

Mina de Malfois and the Charitable Impulse

There are occasions, you know, when even the most beloved of fanfiction authors is forced to admit that the world, and more particularly, fandom, can be a cold, cruel place. Take, for instance, the initial response to my recent brilliant plan to use my online popularity to raise a few funds for a charitable cause⁷. I'd long thought that, really, it was time I did something in that line. I mean, charity begins at one's homepage, after all, and besides, a pack of the Mean Girls of fandom were on my tail, and a well-publicized kindness on my part should bloody well put a cork in them.

I picked a literacy foundation as my target charity, because really, who doesn't need more readers. And now that the world at large could reach me, care of old Arc's P.O. Box, the thing was perfectly simple. I made a few posts hither and yon, explaining the scheme, and urging each member of my devoted readership to

⁷ Victoria Bitter/Jordan Wood and his partner initially ripped people off, via Bit of Earth, by pretending to raise money for a literacy foundation. Renne, Jeanine. When a Fan Hits the Shit: The Rise and Fall of a Phony Charity. Heisenberg Press (September 2004). Renne, Jeanine. <http://www.turondo.com/> (21 January 2007).

send one dollar in cash. In a month's time, I promised, I'd write a fic, the contents to be determined from the letters of the donors.

I'll tell you one thing: devotion isn't what it used to be. Three weeks later, I'd only raised...well, I don't even want to write it down, honestly. A damned paltry amount, though. I couldn't, quite frankly, afford to top up the donation, funds being rather tight right that instant. But I couldn't very well admit publicly that so few fans had sent in their dollars, could I? It'd be like inviting fandom at large to mock me as a has-been, unable to motivate the masses any longer. If I couldn't even raise a triple-digit donation, I was *over*. I was in a real bind, and to make matters worse, I couldn't see my way just then to asking Archivist12 for her advice.

Things were a bit cool between us at that juncture. The friend I'd thought firmly in my bosom had crept round to slip the old stiletto in my back. I'd posted a somewhat controversial piece of fanfiction, you see, and online opinion was pretty firmly divided between those who recognized my stylistic brilliance and subtle evocation of a lush, decadent atmosphere, and those who felt I ought to be locked up for the public good. And right at the height of the thing I'd had a message from Arc, suggesting maybe my fic was a bit too much the thing for her archive. It stung more than a little bit, that. Sharper than a serpent's tooth is an ungrateful

archivist, what?

'My fic is causing people to question their pre-conceived notions of familial intimacy and power imbalances,'⁸ I'd explained, but Arc had seemingly stoppeth her ears to reason.

'Your fic is causing people to question whether you should be in psychiatric care or police custody,' she'd written.

I'd been maintaining a chill silence since that remark, so I couldn't very well go running to her for advice now. We fanfiction authors have our dignity to uphold. If she was going to be like that, well then, so was I.

But Arc isn't the only one in our immediate circle capable of cleverness, after all. I pride myself on being able to handle online public opinion pretty damned deftly when required. I mulled it over all through my next shift at work--believe me, my current post is *not* one that requires or deserves my full attention--and hit on the perfect solution.

There's nothing fandom appreciates more than a bit of real-life drama. What I'd give them would keep them buzzing for months. I'd tell them I'd been robbed, you see, and the box

⁸ Ataniell wrote a Draco/Narcissa fic that also questioned pre-conceived notions of familial intimacy and power imbalances. Azalais du Plessix Malfoy. 'Goodbye.' Freedom of Speech Fanfiction. <http://www.w338puq3y.homepage.t-online.de/viewstory.php?sid=13172&warning=NC-17> (21 January 2007).

containing all their envelopes had been stolen.⁹

And you can wipe that shocked look off your face right this instant, because *of course* I was still going to donate the actual funds that had already been raised to the charity--I'd just say it was from me personally. The size of the thing wouldn't matter as much, then; a double-digit sum looked slightly more generous if it was from a single donor, although I did momentarily regret having played up my reputation as the offspring of the *crème* of the upper class, as it might have misled a few people into thinking I was pretty well-off. Still, I reasoned, a lot of the aristocracy are hard up in these degenerate times, and for all anyone knew, all my available cash went into maintaining the Malfois Estate, right? So that was okay.

You wouldn't believe the level of cynical self-interest that permeates fandom these days. It rocked me to the core, the sheer cheek of the response I got to my tale of robbery and woe. You see, when I posted the story online, I made sure to tell them that I'd dig deep into my own pockets and make a donation, equal to what had been stolen, in the interest of preserving the good name of our

⁹ Cassie Claire, during the "replace my computers" wank, also claimed that the children's toys she'd collected as a charitable donation to a hospital had been stolen. Laura. 'LapTopGate.' FanHistory.com. 24 June 2006. <http://www.fanhistory.com/index.php?title=LapTopGate> (21 January

fandom and my reputation in their eyes; I wouldn't, I told them, have wanted a single fangirl to regret having sent in her cash. When I said that everyone who'd made a donation could comment, 'just to make sure my donation covers the amount that was stolen,' I expected most of them wouldn't bother, but would just trust me to come up with some largish sum. I mean, the *point* of charity is to help other people, not to look for thanks or recognition, and I expected the fangirls to acknowledge that, which just goes to show that in some ways my sweetly trusting nature isn't suited to the vulgarity of online fandom.

When I got home from work the next day--first having peeled off my hated uniform, dropping it in a heap just inside the door, and then having had a good long soak in the tub--I checked my messages, and do you know, there were over a thousand comments from people claiming to have sent in a dollar because they loved my work. What a pack of little liars! It's enough to destroy your faith in humanity, I swear. A lot of my readers are mere teenage girls, and I have to say, if people that young are capable of that level of deceit and self-interest, the world looks to be turning into a pretty sordid place.

But what could I do? I couldn't call them out, though my

fingers itched to type something absolutely scathing about the base sort of people who'd lie just to make themselves look good in the comments section of my livejournal. After all, if the box of envelopes had really been stolen, I couldn't be expected to know who had sent what, and if I accidentally accused someone who *had* donated, this whole mess would just escalate further.

There was nothing for it: I was going to have to call Arc. She's got a knack for sorting out these sorts of tangles. Thing was, I hadn't heard from her since our disagreement, but then, Arc was never wildly communicative. I couldn't quite tell if she was not speaking to me, or just not speaking to me, if you see what I mean. I decided to test the waters with a spot of casual conversation.

I'd noticed before now that Arc stuck pretty consistently to British spelling--always kept the u in colour, and all that--so I seized on that now as a way of opening up the old channels of communication.

'Your spelling always stands up to Britpicking,' I told her. 'Maybe you could beta my next piece.' You couldn't do much fairer than that when it comes to warm overtures, could you? I mean, that's pretty damned high praise coming from me, a person fandom often speculates *is* British.

'That's because I grew up in Canada,'¹⁰ came back her reply. I mean to say, what? I don't mind admitting my heart throbbed with sympathy. *Talk* about having a provincial background--good gods, poor Arc. No wonder she'd never made it to BNF status. And here I'd been practically snubbing her; I felt awful about it. I vowed privately not only to make it up with her, but to positively take her under my wing from here on in. I regarded it as a sort of 'White Man's Burden,' really, to help her navigate the rocky shoals of online fandom. I would be all gracious condescension from here on in, you could count on that.

So anyway, I worked my way round to explaining to Arc what had happened. I had to start at the beginning, and take her right through, because the thing with Arc is, she doesn't really seem to follow fandom gossip much. It's shocking, really, that the owner and maintainer of 'Penn'd Passion' could be so far out of the loop, but there you are. So I explained and explained and explained, typing until my wrists ached, and it was a bit like messaging a black hole, really, because she wasn't making any response. I couldn't tell if she'd wandered away from her computer

¹⁰ Arc is from Canada because my favourite character in *Bimbos of the Death Sun*, Diefenbaker, was also from Canada. Canadians are the real Secret Masters of Fandom. McCrumb, Sharyn. *Bimbos of the Death Sun*. Ballantine Books (Dec 28 1996).

or been eaten by a grizzly or what, and I was bracing myself to be really direct and come right out and *ask* for help, when finally she responded.

‘Do nothing,’ she wrote. ‘Go offline until next week. Will clear this up in your absence.’

It was beyond difficult, staying offline all that time. I wouldn’t have done it for anyone else but Arc, and it pained me to do it even for her, but I trusted her down to the core, and really, she’d been awfully good offering to help when we hadn’t spoken for three weeks. It was ghastly, though. The thing is, I go online to escape from my real life, which, just between you and me, isn’t as thoroughly satisfactory as you might expect. I know it’s hard to believe, but my mundane life is...well, depressingly mundane. And as the days crept by, I got more and more worried about what might be going on in my absence.

When the week was up I logged in breathlessly and there, right there on the main page of ‘Penn’d Passion,’ was a scanned copy of a receipt from the literacy people, acknowledging a donation from Mina de Malfois of two thousand dollars.

Well. I nearly fell off my chair. I reeled around for a while in pure astonishment, and then pulled it together long enough to look up the number in the phone book and call the literacy group.

The woman who answered politely confirmed that yes, the donation really had been made. *Well.*

There weren't words enough for my gratitude, really. Some sort of large gesture seemed indicated, you know?

'Arc,' I messaged her, 'I've been thinking it over, and it seems to me you should just delete that story--you know, the really controversial one?--from the archive.'

'I already have,' she wrote. 'Might I suggest that your thanks-for-the-donations fic should be some nice, light, all-ages-suitable genfic. I think it's what your donors would prefer.'

I don't usually go for writing fluff, you know, but just this once I saw her point.

Mina de Malfois and the Young Blood (part one)

You know, I've managed to avoid most anime fandoms, because what with the endless manga series and the imported DVDs and the re-released subtitled DVDs and so forth, I simply can't aff--I mean, I can't be bothered. Not to mention, there's no part of my anatomy I'd care to squeeze into any kind of sailor suit or schoolgirl uniform and display for public amusement. The public, I put it to you, is under enough varied and sundry stress without that.

My only regret in this direction is that a lot of the young fans seem drawn to anime. I'm not sure what the attraction is based on. Possibly the pictures cut down on the endless arguments that text-only fandoms are so sadly prone to over whether or not Character A is pretty. Or maybe the endless dub vs. sub wars are a natural outlet for all that pent-up youthful aggression that doesn't always find a convenient battlefield to release itself on. I couldn't say. What I can say, though, is that I've felt more than one passing pang of regret that I'm missing out on this obvious opportunity to converse meaningfully with younger fans, displaying my wit and

experience to natural advantage while they hover round collecting the pearls of wisdom that drop from my keyboard.¹¹ It seemed a wasted opportunity.

And then several of my relatives had suddenly shown a hitherto unrevealed depth of affection for me, and near my birthday (unable, apparently, to remember the exact date, but we'll pass over that in stony silence) had given me a gaming system and a couple of new releases. It was a bit the equivalent of having ye old family pony up and treat me to some crack, and for a while there, on about my second or third sleepless night, I wondered whether maybe what the gaming industry needed were stricter regulations and to be forced to fund a few twelve-step programs for us hapless users, but it was definitely a *youthful* kind of crack, if you follow me. I felt plugged in to the ethos of the era.

At about this juncture, Arc mentioned that the archive was going to expand.

I put it to her now that the proposed expansion ought to include a *Sanguinity* wing.¹²

'What's *Sanguinity*?' she asked.

¹¹ Some aspiring BNFs are rumoured to prefer to befriend people much younger than themselves, whom they can influence.

¹² *Sanguinity* stands for every role-playing game, ever, and also for all vampire fantasy.

‘*Sanguinity*,’ I informed her, concealing my amazement that she had never heard of it, ‘is a multi-layered non-narrative text containing and yet questioning all the tropes of vampire, and incidentally angel, literature, in a smooth, coy retelling which demonstrates conclusively the death of the author¹³ by allowing the reader, or ‘player,’ to re-enact the demise repeatedly.’

‘Player?’ she shot back, I fancy a trifle suspiciously. It’s a little disconcerting, the way Arc manages to seize on the one thing you’re trying to talk her around, no matter how carefully you bury the evidence in a flood of information. ‘Is this a video game?’

‘Yes,’ I admitted, although really, I thought that was doing it a disservice. Kind of dismissive, just calling it a videogame, but I let it slide. I suppose Arc can’t help showing her age and her generally hidebound approach to life.

‘Penn’d Passion doesn’t host video game fiction,’ she said.

She needed, I could see, convincing. I rallied round with the arguments. ‘Then it’s about time it did,’ I typed scathingly. ‘We need a shot of new blood. Including *Sanguinity* fanfiction will attract a different fandom demographic, and shake us up a bit.’

¹³ The "death of the author" defence for writing wildly OOC Harry Potter fic makes the rounds periodically. In a larger sense, the casual use of nonsense couched in litcrit terminology to defend idiocy seems to be a cross-fandom thing.

There was a bit of a pause. I imagine she was pondering the brilliance of my arguments, and finding them thoroughly of the shiny. 'I'll look into it,' she said.

A couple of days later she got back to me. 'If you're interested in encouraging the younger element of fandom,' she wrote, 'perhaps you'd consider taking a position on the editorial board of the newly created 'Dread Lane' section at the archive.'

I sat up straighter in my chair. 'Dread Lane' is one of the locations in *Sanguinity*, so clearly she'd been swayed by my description. I didn't rub it in, though. And these editorial boards, they're the thing, what?

You see, every area of Arc's fanfiction archive, 'Penn'd Passion,' has its own board of six volunteers--three canon editors, and three straight-up grammar-and-spelling editors of the editor type, for a total, as I've said, of six. In point of fact, most standing armies are a bit lax from an organizational standpoint compared to this archive. Most armies are probably a sight easier to get into, too.

Before a fic can be uploaded to the archive it gets fine-toothed by one canon editor and then by one rigid grammarian with an aptitude for spelling, and, as you can imagine, the vast majority of submitted fanfiction gets shot back to its author before she's even finished her Celebratory Dance of Accomplishment. If

they send you a list of corrections and suggestions twice the length of the fic you submitted, it's a sign they like you and wish you to resubmit. If they send you a tersely worded, 'We do not think your fanfiction is suitable for Penn'd Passion,' then you might as well get on with flinging yourself out a high window if having the thing hosted at PP was one of your particular goals in life.

But for some unfathomable reason, the volunteers filling these editorial positions are highly thought of in fandom.¹⁴ You'd think, wouldn't you, that any group of people known far and wide to spend their spare time dealing crushing blows to the egos of the populace would be vigorously and routinely denounced, but it seems not to happen all that often. I don't claim that somewhere in the ether there mightn't be a few scorned authors constructing Editorial Board Voodoo Dolls, but if they do, they do so in a cloistered silence, because having it get out that you wailed and gnashed your teeth over a PP rejection muddens your name far worse than the rejection itself.

There is, in short, something statesmanlike about these editorial boards. Taking my place firmly in amongst them would

¹⁴ Of course, in real life, the editors who volunteer large chunks of their time for fanfiction archives don't always get any respect at all: they get called 'bitches' by the likes of FPB. 'FA mods are still lying daughters-of-bitches, but then I already knew that. 'FPB. 'Good.' 05 October 2004.

put the seal on the thing: it would be the equivalent of a banner ad proclaiming that I was not merely a creative force, but a steady, respectable, serious-minded fan.

‘I love to shape young minds,’ I shot back eagerly. ‘In fact, I have quite firm ideas of my own about the *Sanguinity* canon...’

‘The canon editor positions are filled,’ she responded brusquely, ‘but there’s one place left for a good text editor, and your structure and spelling are very sound.’

It was a slight blow--I mean, the canon editor gig contained more real scope for *guiding* the fandom--but still, this got me in on the ground floor of a newish fandom, dispensing wisdom to and fro, basking in the innocent wide-eyed admiration of the young. I accepted.

Naturally once my appointment had been confirmed I made a discreet, tasteful announcement in my livejournal, knowing as I did so that the buzzing hive of internet fandom would disperse the good news far and wide, enabling all true *Sanguinity* fans to find me. I awaited a warm welcome.

‘You have three hundred new messages,’ my computer informed me chirpily when I got home from my next shift, which almost made up for being grease-spattered and downtrodden. I

took a longish shower, lingered for a while over my choice of scent--I needed something that suggested wisdom and strict adherence to conventional English, but also approachability, kindness, and, in accordance with *Sanguinity* canon, the base notes had to be vampiric--and rolled the chair up to the keyboard.

I know fandom sometimes seems to think as with a single mind; I've seen the unkind remark that it thinks but with a single brain cell, and while I wouldn't go that far, there is a certain sheeplike collectivity about them on occasion. Fads sweep through them like viral outbreaks of yore. But even, as I've said, knowing this in advance, it was disconcerting to find that two hundred and ninety-nine people had shown fit to ask me, in the space of a day, the same question. It was as if nothing could proceed until the entrails had been consulted and this vital issue put to rest. The madding crowd crowded maddeningly and awaited my answer to that eternal question, 'Do you ship PB/P or PB/J?'¹⁵

I suppose a word or two of explanation is in order here, for those of you who, like Arc, have missed out on the breathless

¹⁵ The PB/J and PB/P shippers stand for all shippers, everywhere. To put it into HP fandom terms, the PB/J Sammiches are OBHWF-ish in their support of the working class Jab (Weasley haters hate the Weasleys for, among other things, being poor), and the PB/P Booters are Harmonianish in their esoteric theorizing about purity. The PB/P lot are also somewhat like Malfoy fans in their slavish devotion to an imaginary upper class. Sanguinity slashers are most often P/J

excitement that is *Sanguinity*. Perhaps you too were raised in the wilds of Canada, and having spent your youth locked in combat with a variety of toothed and antlered wildlife are now left desirous of a calm, restful life, free from the excitement afforded by this best of videogames. Perhaps you simply haven't heard of it. At any rate, the facts are these. *Sanguinity* players who wish to play for the light, or heroic, side, as the game manufacturers seem to have assumed most folk will want to do, have an immediate choice of three main characters: PrincessB, an unconvincingly well-muscled representative of the deposed ruling class; Pierce, her handsome and athletic third cousin twice removed; and Jab, his best friend from university or something. (I admit to having skimmed through the Pierce and Jab backstory at a brisk pace.)

Players who, wishing to subvert the imposed morality of the game, prefer to play one of the hierarchy of vampires, must shell out for upgrades and add-ons. I don't mind telling you that my own newfound devotion to Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina¹⁶ made it touch-and-go whether I'd be able to meet next month's rent, but such are the sacrifices the devout shoulder

shippers, and are known (thanks to Invidereliana) as Jammies.

¹⁶ Like Snape/Malfoy/DeathEater defenders, Mina has focussed on the "villain" of the game instead of its protagonists, because he is aristocratic and she envies wealth.

willingly.

A dispute, or perhaps a schism, had, I gathered from the messages, arisen within the newly hatched fandom before its wings had even dried. Some of those commenting had helpfully left links to other sites where the factions had gathered to succour their wounds with like-minded comrades whilst heaping abuse on the opposite ship. When I tell you that communities had been formed, blacklists assembled, and friendships dissolved, all within the fortnight since the game's release, you'll understand the degree to which the fever had gripped these youngsters.

This, as I said, took up two hundred and ninety-nine of my messages. The three hundredth was from someone calling himself Warr1or,¹⁷ and it ran thusly: 'If you turn out to be one of those cocksuckers who ship P/J, you'll regret it. I oppose all who dare besmirch noble military men such as Pierce and Jab with their disgusting slash. Malfois Estate will burn if you oppose me! I'll track you down!'

All in all, I felt, a slightly disquieting turn of events.

¹⁷ Warr1or is a typical rabid anti-slasher. Like many rabid anti-slashers, Warr1or comes off sounding as if he secretly thinks about slash A LOT, and this is a source of deep personal shame and inner conflict.

Mina de Malfois and the Young Blood (part two)

Even as I sat there, eyeing the screen thoughtfully, two more messages arrived from Warr1or. 'I hate all slashers,' one read (an unnecessary clarification, in my books, as I'd already sensed some such attitude on his part), 'and vow vengeance on them.' I debated correcting his spelling, since I *am* an editor now, but decided against this course of action.

'Have you ever been in the military?' his second message demanded.¹⁸ 'If you had, you'd understand why Pierce and Jab must be defended!' If that was true military training must be a lot more extensive than I'd ever imagined. I hadn't pictured them talking about slash.

Five more messages--two firmly in favour of PB/J, two equally rabid about PB/P, and one deploring our inability to all just get along--piled into my inbox while I was reading Warr1or's contributions. I decided to mention these developments, ever so casually, to my nearest and dearest.

¹⁸ 'Have you ever been in the military?' is a reference to Ginmar's famous Iraq questions. Ginmar, quoted by Hinkel. FandomWankWiki. 24 November 2005. <http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Ginmar> (21 January 2007).

'Arc,' I told her, 'I've stumbled across a bunch of crazy people online.'

'Yes,' said Archivist12. 'They're called 'fandom.'" I chose to take the high road and ignore this.

'I'm worried that insane shippers will come get me,' I explained, aware as I typed that this sounded slightly silly, but there you are. 'Or failing that, that the anti-slasher who seems to have fixated on me, deploring me for slash I haven't written but he thinks I might, will decide my bloodied corpse would be a disincentive to future slash writers.'

'Did you want me to help?' she asked kindly, and I paused. I mean, I had, not to put too fine a point on it, more or less been hoping for advice, but now that she came out and asked, I rethought the thing. I didn't want Arc getting the impression, which I rather felt she might be getting, that I was constantly running to her for support. The relationship between author and archivist should be one of mutual respect and admiration, tilted perhaps slightly in favour of the author, who as the creative force naturally commanded more awe. This routine of crying to Arc like a child with a skinned knee bawling for its mother was possibly putting a slight strain on that dynamic.

'Oh, no,' I assured her, authorial dignity oozing from my

very font. 'I have it well under control.'

And as a matter of fact I did, or was about to. The answer, I saw suddenly in a flash of brilliance, was to quietly let it be known that neither PB/J nor PB/P, much less P/J, interested me in the slightest. Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina, the most captivating, multi-faceted anti-hero to grace page or screen in recent memory, was, I felt instinctively, where it was at--or, if he wasn't yet, he would be, once I'd dashed off a few of the scenarios now percolating through my brain. I decided my next submission to the archive would consist of the introductory chapter of an epic new Silvestre-centric fic. *That* would show the shippers of both stripes that they were barking up the wrong tree entirely in their mindlessly compliant focus on the 'main characters.'

I spent a happy few days (barring mundanities such as my job and grocery shopping) busily working on the introduction, and jotting down an outline and plot points for my fic. A whole new world, lush and resplendent, seem to open up before me as I absorbed myself in mastering Lord Silvestre de Gravina's speech patterns, understanding the motivations for his deliciously well-bred cruelties, and sketching his extensive wardrobe. Of course my research involved playing the game every night, too, to properly steep myself in the canon. But just between you and me? I'd begun

to suspect that my retelling had rather more depth, profundity, and style than the original. Well, it's to be expected, really, isn't it? *Sanguinity* was created by gamers¹⁹--talented gamers undoubtedly, but at the end of the day, what's a gamer, really? Whereas I have been clearly destined from birth to be a novelist. It's an entirely different level of thing, I'm sure you'll agree.

So I was, as I've said, contentedly absorbed. If I could have quit work and just stayed in the old apartment, life would have been one of those glorious medleys of song, as the Romanian ruling class used to put it.²⁰ As it was, I still had more time off shift than on, and I spent that time in an atmosphere of heady creativity and, as is my habit, exotic perfume. I must say, my last order was something like. I'd got 'Final Resting Place,' 'Decayed Splendor,' and 'Old Money,' as well as three others I hadn't opened yet, and for pure atmospherics, nothing could beat them.²¹ I heartily

¹⁹ In *From the Desk of Archivist12* it becomes obvious that the Council are behind the funding for *Sanguinity*.

²⁰ "Life would have been one of those glorious medleys of song, as the Romanian ruling class used to put it," is Mina failing to understand that the last line of a Dorothy Parker verse was meant sarcastically.

²¹ The expensive mail-order scents with the insanely pretentious names are a poke at BPAL.Black Phoenix Alchemy Lab. <http://www.blackphoenixalchemy.com/> (21 January 2007). Sockpuppet_rat. 'BPAL Hate Memes Small Like...Wank!' Fandom Wank. 19 May 2006. http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/943280.html (21 January 2007).

recommend them to the young author-about-town.

From time to time I sought diversion by watching the hurly-burly that was my comments section, although strictly speaking, I appeared to be the only person not joining in the fray and commenting. It had sort of become the comments section of the people, as it were. The masses had teemed in en masse, plunked themselves down and set up base camps, and were diligently getting down to the business of hashing out the borders between PB/J and PB/P. It was like an infestation of peculiarly romance-obsessed ants: workmanlike, but insane.

There seemed no discernable limit to the amount of time they'd spend defending their pairing, or the number of references they'd drag into the argument as proof. Every now and again some sane soul would pop up and suggest that maybe, just maybe, the game manufacturers hadn't had Shakespeare, Melville, Austen and Tolstoy *in mind* when they created *Sanguinity*, but these helpful attempts at perspective were immediately washed away in a tide of shipping philosophy.²² It was fascinating to watch. It was a sort of what's-it of society, you know? A micro-thingy.

As near as I could figure it, the PB/P shippers, or

²² 'Maybe, just maybe, the game manufacturers hadn't had Shakespeare, Melville, Austen and Tolstoy in mind when they created *Sanguinity*' refers to the Harmonian habit of bringing up non-HP authors, like Jane Austen, in "support" of H/Hr.

'Booters' as they called themselves for some obscure reason²³, clung to the traditional aristocratic practice of marrying distant cousins as an indisputable proof that PrincessB and Pierce were destined for one another. Well, I say 'indisputable,' but in actuality they disputed it from sun-up to sundown and for a goodly portion of each night. The Booters were much enamoured of hereditary aristocracy, monarchies, tradition (or their own notions thereof), etiquette (which they strictly upheld, as long as calling their opponents 'mindless fuckwitted plebes' didn't count as a breach of etiquette), and fanfiction that revelled in a kind of mild incest.

The PB/J shippers, or 'Sammiches' as they liked to call themselves, saw the eventual union of PrincessB and Jab as an example of the purity of love, the value of friendship, the dignity of the working class, the need to resist base physical lust, and a bunch of other high-flown ideals I'd been unable to follow. They were a cheery, in-joke-prone, kindly lot, strewing their every message with smiley-faces and *hugs*, which made it all the more unnerving when you caught them calling their opponents a bunch of jackbooted perverts who should have been aborted directly after conception. Watching the Sammiches turn on their foes was like

²³ Booters: playstation uses PBP to start itself up. Sammiches: peanut butter and jelly, of course. Jammies: PJs.

reaching the end of the rainbow and finding a pot of broken glass and infectious syringes.

And every now and then, to leaven the mix, Warr1or would show up, incoherent with rage and his own special brand of crazy, bent on defending all military personnel everywhere as represented, or possibly incarnated, in Pierce and Jab. His latest comments had taken a turn for the graphic. 'I will destroy all who write about Pierce holding Jab in his muscled arms all through the night,' one promised, and another ran, 'Jab would never whimper piteously and rest his cheek against the torn cloth covering Pierce's rock-hard thigh.' It's like whoever-it-was said: we become the thing we despise. Give him enough time, and Warr1or looked set to become one of the legends of slash, although my glee at this was tempered by the fact that he still seemed obsessed, to an uncomfortable degree, with my location. 'I have your IP number,' he warned, including a string of digits that, for all I know, might well have been my IP number, 'so I know what state you're in.' I was in a state of mild worry and elevated mirth, but I doubt that's what he meant. Warr1or, though no doubt a good fellow in real life and kind to his mother, struck me as singularly unconcerned with my well-being. He didn't appear to have any proper concern for my privacy, either, as I'd had to delete three comments of his

containing my purported IP. Bugger.

And I'd just, with an exasperated sigh, stumbled across yet a fourth of his 'your IP is thus-and-thus' memos and was about to delete it when, to my delight, a defender appeared.

'You semi-literate thug,' PrinceC²⁴ began, and I found myself nodding in agreement as he berated Warr1or, 'what are you hoping to accomplish by threatening the lady? All you're doing is proving your own cowardice, and your unworthiness to stand with heroes such as Pierce and Jab. Leave Mina alone, or I'll make you sorry you crossed her, you blighter.'

I blinked at the screen. I say, that was something more like it. Suave, I put it to you. I wondered from whence this loyal supporter sprang, and how long he'd been reading my stuff. Which of my fanfictions was his favourite? But there'd be time enough for personal questions later. The thing to do now was to get to know who this young knight-errant was, and whether I should befriend him.

'I say,' I typed. 'Thanks.'

'At your service,' he answered. 'Never let it be said that the scholar's mind cannot find a home in the warrior's body.'

²⁴ PrinceC (Prince Charming, of course) stands for every devastatingly attractive but sadly underaged young man you've ever caught yourself lusting over in fandom.

As is so often the case online, it was difficult to tell if he had a deliberately playful mock-courtly style of expressing himself or a congenital brain disease.

A scholar, he'd said. 'Are you at school?' I asked.

'My final year,' he answered, 'but, I hope, only the beginning of a lifetime of learning.'

If I hadn't currently been taking a year or two off, I'd be on the final year of my B.A. myself. I perked up a little. He must be roughly my age.

'And you're a fan of *Sanguinity*, I take it?' I continued.

'I'm a fan of many things,' he said, 'and *Sanguinity* is, potentially at least, one of them. I think it shows great potential for backstory development, and I look forward to reading the fanfiction it gives rise to.'

I perked up a little bit more.

'I have to go,' he added, and I fancied I could sense the regret that lay behind his words, 'but I look forward to talking to you again.' Shortly after his departure in a metaphorical cloud of pixels, the computer chimed, and checking my email I found PrinceC had sent me a picture of himself. No message, just the photo, which revealed a rather handsome young man in full pirate costume standing next to a sign which read, 'Welcome to the

Second Annual ConFanLitCon.'

Quite, I repeat, handsome. Definitely worthy of further study, that photograph. Indeed.

Mina de Malfois and the Young Blood (part three)

We didn't get a chance to really converse much, but over the next little while it became something of a habit of PrinceC's to shoot me a picture every evening. I was building up quite the collection. Not, I hasten to add, that I mean that as any kind of a complaint. To say the guy was easy on the eyes is to understate the matter dreadfully. The average teenage girl has her bedroom walls strewn with posters of various male specimens, and the majority of said specimens, I put it to you, couldn't compete in the Eye Candy Semi-Finals against PrinceC without taking lethal body-blows to their respective egos.

He had, I noted, a promiscuous approach to fandom. According to the photographic evidence, he'd appeared in full Goth garb at the BloodPsyVampFest; in wizard's robes at Wands Across the West; and in a spandex concoction I can't quite manage to describe at KawaiiKon. I began to sense that con²⁵ organizers must have him on speed dial, so as not to create conflicts in his schedule. He'd graced pretty much everything going with his appropriately clad presence. If he ever decided to make the theatre

²⁵ Okay, I made up all the convention names. ConFanLitCon stands for "conventions in

his career, chances were he'd find it restful, because there'd be fewer costume changes.

So I'd spend blissful hours at a stretch either playing *Sanguinity* or, more often, creating my elaborate backstory for the dashing Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina to inhabit, and when I emerged there'd usually be a picture of the also somewhat dashing PrinceC awaiting my perusal. Not a bad existence, all in all.

The evening I submitted my introductory chapter to Penn'd Passion--a process that took forever, as I lost my nerve at the last minute and re-read the fic three times before I was convinced it was error-free, then had to reload the entire submission form and start the process from the beginning--was no exception. The picture, however, was exceptional indeed.

I'm not sure what prompted PrinceC to decide to advance our relationship, but clearly something had. He had determined, I saw at a glance, that it was time for further intimacy. Our friendship, he obviously felt, was due to lengthen. Er, deepen. I meant *deepen*.

Because when I, fic finally submitted and self ready for bath and then bed, opened his email, what greeted my astonished

eyes was a candid shot of PrinceC in the altogether. His costume, I mean to say, was nil. A bare expanse of male flesh was exposed to my riveted gaze.

I didn't know what to think of this, but I thought it energetically, without room to spare to think of anything else for quite some time. Such was my state of distraction that I may have washed my face with hair goop and conditioned my hair with face goop²⁶--I noticed, climbing into bed, that my face felt untangled and my hair unwrinkled, but I didn't really pay it much heed, because, as I said: naked man flesh. Extremely attractive, smooth, silken manflesh, and the man it belonged to, I had reason to know, capable of gallant and nearly rational conversation. A fine subject for study and contemplation, all in all.

But eventually, of course, the initial daze wore off, and so a day or two later I found myself again wondering whether PrinceC, gentlemanly though he was in his day to day conduct, might not be some species of escaped lunatic. I put it to you: do sane men present their recent online acquaintance with nude photos? I suspect not. It seemed a rash and reckless act on his part. I couldn't make up my mind whether I ought to be gloating over

²⁶ Mina's face goop and hair goop are probably Lush products. LUSH. <http://www.lush.com/> (21 January 2007).

my acquisition of an internet suitor, or cringing over the appearance on the virtual horizon of a sort of madman.

I decided on consultation.

'Arc,' I messaged her breezily, 'do you have a moment? I want your opinion on something.'

'Your fic's still under review, but reports are favourable,' she assured me. Well, this was good news, but not what I was after.

'No, not that,' I told her. 'There's this guy.'

'What guy?' she asked.

'This one,' I said. 'Hang on, I'm sending you a picture.' And I emailed her the snap of PrinceC in his pirate garb, having wisely decided that springing the nude photo on her at this juncture would be unnecessarily startling.

There was a pause, and then she asked, 'What are you doing with a picture of Eva Hamill's son?'

'Who?' I asked, bewildered. I'd known, or I would have known if I'd given the matter any thought, that PrinceC presumably *had* a mother, but I hadn't expected Arc to rattle off the mater's name like that. I know Arc is well informed, but really, this was ridiculous.

'Eva Hamill,' she repeated. 'Eva runs one of the Trek²⁷

²⁷ Lots and lots of second and third generation fans have Trek-loving parents.

archives.'

'What, really?' I asked, amazed. 'Bit old for that, wouldn't she be?'

'She's in her middle thirties,' Arc answered, and for some reason I fancied I could feel a slight chill emanating from the screen.

'She can't be,' I protested, 'not and be this guy's mother.'

'She most certainly is,' Arc said firmly. 'I knew her at school.'

I saw at once what had happened. 'No, listen, you have it wrong,' I explained kindly. I didn't want to make her feel badly, but she had obviously slipped up. 'This isn't Eva Whatever's son; it can't be. You must have mistaken him for someone he looks like.'

She argued the point, but I was sure I saw what had happened. Get to a certain age, and everybody's son looked more or less alike, probably. Still, it left me with a slight feeling of...not concern, exactly, I wouldn't go so far as to call it concern, but I was uneasy.

'So, what do you think of university?' I asked PrinceC casually the next time I caught him online.

'I'm looking forward to it,' he responded, all frank open

honesty, damn him. My innards sort of froze over, if you know the feeling. He was in his last year of high school, then. Not his last year of a university degree, or his last year of some other adult pursuit. Damn.

And speaking of adult pursuits, I had a nude photo of this young man saved to my hard drive. I felt a sense of shame creep over me, which wasn't fair, since this whole misunderstanding was his fault entirely. But I had had a strict upbringing, and it told against me now. I blushed to think that I had even *looked* at that dratted photograph. I would have felt highly indignant, if I hadn't been busy feeling other things, like 'complicit' and 'perverse' and 'embarrassed.' I mean, really, I'd been hard done by. I was the wronged party, here. I hadn't *asked* for his photographs, had I? He'd sent them to me with no encouragement from this end. Where did he get off?

Actually, scratch that last question. That's not the sort of thing I want to dwell on.

I blame Trek fandom for unleashing their ghastly youngsters on an unsuspecting public. If they spent less time swanning around in costume and running fanfiction archives of dubious morality, and more time attending to the upbringing of their own next generation, this sort of thing wouldn't happen. It

was clear to me in retrospect that this young man had been raised in a lax setting rife with turpitude and debauchery. I'd heard what went on at cons. I glared indignantly at his photographs. That a youth of such tender years should already be cutting a swath through fandom! These young fans, I tell you, should be observed cautiously and at a safe distance.

I checked my email cautiously, wary that it might contain further youthful exposures, and found it filled to the brim.

'Pornography,' began the first one I opened, and for one awful moment it felt as if my inbox was somehow reflecting the state of my soul back to me, like that 'pathetic fallacy' syndrome I learned about in either lit class or intro psych, I forget which. But I quickly saw that this must be in response to my fic, and not to any online dalliances I may or may not have been toying with conducting. Ah, good: the fic was up, then.

'You fascist,' 'you racist,' 'you degenerate pervert,' cried the next three comments I opened at random. Yes. The fic was definitely up. I breezed through my inbox, keeping a running tally on a scrap of paper, and was delighted to see that the 'this is the most erotic, romantic, well-written fanfiction I've ever read' crowd were outnumbering the 'this is immoral, unnatural drivel' faction. All to the good, then. I basked, yet again, in the glow of internet

fame.

‘The comments are flooding in on *At His Lordship’s Behest*,’ I mentioned to Arc a few days later.

‘I hate to tear you away from the review boards,’ she said, ‘but there are two one-shots in the submission queue awaiting your editorial input.’

‘And no doubt soon there will be many more,’ I assured her cheerily. ‘I expect *At His Lordship’s Behest* to spark a renaissance of *Sanguinity* fanfiction.’ Wait, did I mean renaissance? Could you have a renaissance in an entirely new fandom?

‘It’s too early to tell yet,’ Arc said, ‘but I expect we’ll get a surge of *Sanguinity* submissions, judging by the number of people reading and reviewing the two epic introductions.’

I was taken aback by this news. ‘Two?’ I inquired suspiciously. ‘That would be mine and...another one, then?’

‘I assumed you knew all about it,’ she responded.

‘Ah. Yes. Quite,’ I said, baffled, but with a well-concealed bafflement. ‘Absolutely. Yes. What I wondered was what you *thought* of this, ah, secondary epic. What’s your opinion of it so far?’ I’d never heard of the blasted thing, but I didn’t like to say so.

‘It complements yours nicely,’ Arc said. ‘It’s ambitious, but by all reports he’s very talented.’ And with that she rang off.

It was with some degree of trepidation that I headed over to 'Dread Lane,' PP's *Sanguinity* section, to check out this rival epic. When I say 'rival' I'm speaking broadly, of course, because it would be nonsensical to imagine that some fanbrat was capable of launching a multi-chaptered work that could pose any kind of threat or serious competition to my own planned work. The very idea was laughable. I laughed now, hollowly, but left off quickly. Really, I was only even *checking* the recent submissions out of a kind of mild, condescending curiosity as to whether the so-called 'epic' was being written by a Booter or a Sammich.

It wasn't hard to find. There were only two fics listed under 'book-length fiction.' One was mine. The other was *Of Vice and Velvet*, by PrinceC.

I clicked on it, and brief moments later sat in stunned silence, apart from the pounding of my heart and the occasional involuntary gasp of shock. It wasn't just his masterful handling of the subject matter that shocked me, although certainly he had a level of skill I hadn't expected from one so young. It wasn't just his original female character, Lady Horatia Marianna Wilhelmina de Malfois,²⁸ crack shot and seasoned sailor, shown, in his

²⁸ PrinceC's original female character, Lady Horatia Marianna Wilhelmina de Malfois, is based on Mina herself.

introduction, in her elaborate bedchamber.

It was, in point of fact, the dedication. 'Dedicated, with devoted affection, to Mina de Malfois,' it proclaimed, 'whose fiction inspires and moves me, and who haunts my fondest and most private dreams.'

I boggled.

Mina de Malfois and the Twee Little Maids²⁹

'I've just been conversing with one of the Jolly Hockeysticks³⁰ people,' I typed, 'and she tells me she's a Girl Scout.'³¹

'I'm not surprised,' Arc replied.

Well, I had been. The J.H.er in question was an adult woman, for one thing. 'Arc,' I asked her, hoping to work my way round to enlightenment, 'were you ever a Girl Scout?'

'Back in the wild days of my youth, I was noted for it,' she said, which was more than a little perplexing. I've always pictured Canada as a stiflingly bucolic place, but never guessed it was quite so numbingly tranquil that its denizens would view the

²⁹ 'Twee Little Maids' is a Mikado pun. Sorry.

³⁰ 'Jolly Hockeysticks' is actually a phrase used to describe bluff, hearty, schoolgirl-story type women. Within the Minaverse, the Jolly Hockeystickers are a group of fans. They will later (during Attempted Coup) face internal disputes and split temporarily into the Jolly Hockeystickers and the Jolly Hollidays, collectively referred to by non-partisans as "the Jollies," but this rift seems healed by Reality Check.

³¹ The Girl Scout song is used as a Sekrit Lesbian Signal in Mabel Maney's brilliant [the Case of the Not-So-Nice Nurse](#). There's a song: 'I'm a Girl Scout, I'm a Girl Scout, How 'bout you? How 'bout you? Can't you tell by looking? Can't you tell by looking? I'm one too, I'm one too.'"Maney, Mabel. [The Case of the Not-So-Nice Nurse](#). Cleis Press; 2nd edition (January 2006). So, no, Xenalvr and Arc are not talking about the Girl Guides; they are trying to tell Mina something else.

Girl Scout movement as emblematic of youthful dissipation.

I wasn't asking out of mere idle curiosity. Ever since PrinceC had started archiving his fanfiction at Penn'd Passions, there'd been a pack of howling fangirls hanging around the place, cluttering up the message boards with their inane chatter. I mean, *I* had fans, but this was ridiculous. He couldn't leave so much as a comment on anyone else's work without an influx of them descending to leave dozens upon dozens of comments--not comments on the work, just comments in response to his comment, all readily recognizable as desperate bids for his attention. I was beginning to truly loathe them. I mean, I'd even begun to feel a sort of fond nostalgia towards Warr1or, and wondered where he'd been lately.

Some of the worst of the lot belonged to a sort of club called Jolly Hockeysticks, which had recently held one of its annual meetings at some hotel where PrinceC had been attending a cosplay event. The J.H. people weren't cosplayers, they were some other type of lunatic, but I suppose the sight of PrinceC in tights did something to their already precariously-balanced sense of reason, because they'd been trailing after him ever since, all over the bloody internet. I don't know how they all came to hear about Penn'd Passion, or *Sanguinity*, or PrinceC's multi-chaptered fic-in-

progress. Maybe one of them sent up smoke signals, or used semaphore flags, to alert the others. All I knew was that they had all wafted in, a foul concoction of drippy schoolgirl slang and overwrought hormones, and showed no signs of leaving.

When they weren't cooing idiotically over his fic, they were posting pictures on their 'author bio' pages, or pestering Arc to set up a special section of PP for fanfiction based on traditional girls' boarding school stories. I'd argued pretty strongly that she shouldn't, but I couldn't be sure that Arc was onside. It's not that I think she'd want to give aid and comfort to these godawful drips. It's just that when you own and maintain a large archive like PP, it can be difficult to resist the urge to make it even larger. It becomes a kind of mania. I'd seen it before.

Anyway, I hadn't yet seen any of the J.H.ers' fanfiction, so I had no way of judging how ghastly it might be, but it would have to work long and hard at ghastliness to be anywhere near as ghastly as their photographs.

I'd worked it out. Basically, any Jolly Hockeystickser who was below a certain age, I.Q., and bodyweight specialized in pictures of herself, usually dressed in a cross between the 'Gothic Lolita' look and a schoolgirl outfit. Any Jolly Hockeystickser above either the age or weight cut-off, or possessed of a dribble of

misplaced common sense, specialized in photos of her toy collection, dollhouse, or tea service. Some managed all three, and posted pictures of their toys holding miniature tea parties in over-cluttered dollhouses. Not to be outdone on the creative combinations front, the younger, thinner, more clue-bereft J.H.ers sometimes exerted themselves to the extent of posting self-portraits in which they clutched their own dolls to their chests or sipped tea out of dainty teacups.

Aside from writing schoolgirl fanfiction, which I devoutly hoped Arc would condemn to the outer darkness, the J.H.ers held meetings and meet-ups and meet-and-greets with frightening regularity. I say frightening, because from the sound of it, what went on at these events was designed to strike terror into the hearts of the reasonable. When I tell you that they'd recently gotten together to read *Alice in Wonderland* out loud to their assembled My Little Ponies, you'll understand my horror.

As far as subcultures go, this one was pretty damned sub. You couldn't shove any more cute into this lot with a shoehorn.³² I

³² Faire Damsel is an excellent example of this sort of princessy, girly, twee persona. 'I Am A 100% Ultra~Feminine, Pink, Frilly, Girly~Girl, A Hopeless Romantic Who Was *Born In The Wrong Century*. I'm Often Compared To A Pre~Raphaelite Model, A Botticelli Cherub, Or A Porcelain Doll. I'm An Ethereal, Whimsical, Child~Like Dreamer With Her Head In The Clouds And Her Heart On Her Sleeve. I Believe In Love At First Sight, In Happily Ever After And

was pretty much fed up--I'd started to daydream wistfully about shaving kittens bald and drop-kicking wee fairies off the balcony-- and when a few of the bolder young J.H.ers posted pictures of themselves in gauzy pink lingerie, I wanted to choke them all.

And I was in this frame of mind when one of them, a 'Xenalvr' by name³³, sent me a gushing review of my own multi-chaptered *Sanguinity* fic. Like PrinceC, I'd thus far only posted my introductory chapter, but it was pretty juicy stuff, sensual and suggestive, obviously setting the stage for my own special brand of intellectual perversity. I couldn't understand why any of the J.H.ers would be reading it, but this female had, she assured me, loved every word. She wanted, she claimed now, to get to know me better.

'You must be one of PrinceC's fans,' I'd said, trying not to sound bitter.

'Oh, no,' she'd assured me. 'I'm a Girl Scout.' I'd never heard that the Girl Scouts were particularly anti-PrinceC, so her

Dreams Coming True. I Believe In Magick And Enchantment And Never Giving Up Hope. I Try To Be The Best Wife, Daughter, Sister, Auntie, Cousin And Friend That I Possibly Can. If You Read These Words And They Strike A Chord In You, Perhaps We're Meant To Be Friends.....' Faire Damsel. <http://faire-damsel.livejournal.com/profile> (21 January 2007).

³³ Xenalvr is, obviously, from Xena fandom; like Arc, she has ties to the Girl Scouts. I picture her as more 'Jolly Hockeysticks' ish and less 'Twee,' but she may, just possibly, be attracted to the twee-types.

response was a tad baffling, which is why I'd brought up the subject with Arc. I mean, in the run of a normal day, I don't discuss or even think of the scouting movement at all, but I sensed some mystery here.

'I hope I haven't shocked you,' Arc said now. Apparently it was going to be one of those days when people made no sense whatsoever. I gave up expecting any logical answer to the puzzle.

'Not at all,' I told her, and I meant it. If her idea of a good time encompassed tents and sleeping bags and gaggles of uniformed girls practicing their knot tying, it wasn't my place to criticize. 'I think that's marvellous, Arc old girl.'

Having offered this spot of reassurance re: her wholesome girlhood activities, I reluctantly returned to what I'd been doing before the Girl Scout question distracted me: editing. I had six short submissions to proofread, and scrutinizing them for worthiness for inclusion at PP, while no doubt a heady experience of power, was a little on the tedious side. Three of them, I noted, were from Booters, and the other three from Sammiches. That, I supposed, was a good thing. I didn't want one or the other faction deciding I was guilty of shipping favouritism. Although, I reflected grimly, a good ship war might send those damned wannabe-schoolgirls scuttling for cover.

To his credit, I'd noticed, PrinceC never bothered to grace these fiends in femme form with much of his attention, at least not that I could see. Possibly he whiled away his evenings poring over their abundant photographs, but if so, he never revealed it by word or deed. Still, as I've said, every time he left me a public comment, which he did with gratifying regularity, swarms of them would appear, yapping and twittering away amongst themselves, and never so much as addressing me or my fics.

And speaking of these pests, there was something odd about these fanfics I was supposed to be editing. Well, not so much the fics themselves, if you follow me, but the usernames of the authors who'd submitted 'em. The three Booters in question were ChaletGirl, MalTowers4ever, and AnnMarlow, whereas on the Sammich side of the equation we had NawtyestGrrl, BalletChic, and RowanMarlow.³⁴ This suggested something to my heightened suspicions. I mean, above and beyond the prolific output of these Marlow sisters, there was something not quite right about those names. Not a single one of them, I mean to say, referenced *Sanguinity* or its characters or setting. Rum, what?

It came to me in a flash: those damnable Jolly

³⁴ In order, these are fans of the Chalet School books, Malory Towers, Antonia Forest's Marlow series, Blyton's Naughtiest Girl series, and Noel Streatfeild.

Hockeystickers were trying to sneak their way into *Sanguinity* fandom to get PrinceC to notice them!

‘Arc!’ I bleated, only luckily via instant messenger no one can hear you bleat, so dignity was preserved.

‘What’s up?’ she asked.

‘Our current plague of schoolgirls are hanging around the *Sanguinity* section, making asses of themselves,’ I told her. ‘Can’t you tell them to clear off?’ I explained my theory re: the names of the new authors and what that revealed about their fandom origins.

She remained unconvinced and, what was worse, unconcerned. ‘I can’t tell them to get out of the *Sanguinity* section for writing *Sanguinity* fic,’ she pointed out, in what she no doubt felt was a reasonable manner, but it came across as callous and disloyal. ‘And sometimes people do continue to use pennames they created for a previous fandom.’

‘Like that Xenalvr person,’ I said, reluctantly conceding her point.

‘Who?’ Arc shot back.

‘Xenalvr,’ I repeated.

‘What? The last I heard, she was fully absorbed into trad. girl school stories’ fandom,’ said Arc, switching her posish on the

matter so abruptly that my head spun. 'So she's making a nuisance of herself on the *Sanguinity* boards, is she?'

'No, wait,' I protested weakly, 'not really. She's one of the sounder ones, I think. She just dropped by to tell me how much she enjoyed my work.'

'I just bet she did,' said Arc's next message. I was beginning to sense hidden depths here. 'What else did she say?'

'Nothing much,' I replied, too alarmed to bother going into the whole anti-PrinceC stance the Girl Scouts had apparently adopted as part of their pledge, or something. It's not like Arc to be this emotional. I wasn't sure dredging up scouting memories was safe right now. 'Why, do you know her?'

'We were at school together,' Arc said. 'Listen, if these people want to hang around Penn'd Passion, there's no reason for them to be in the 'Dread Lane' section. I'll take care of it.'

Somehow this failed to fully reassure me. Usually when Arc says she'll take care of something you can consider it as good as taken care of, but this case, it struck me, was different. I'd received the definite impression Arc wasn't thrilled to the core to be reconnecting with this old chum from her schooldays. In fact, I suspected some sort of longstanding grudge here. The mere mention of this woman seemed to have irritated her in some

fashion. In this mood, I mused, who knew what Arc was capable of.

And I mused jolly correctly, let me tell you, because on the following day I saw for myself what Archivist12 was capable of when roused: betrayal, deceit, poor judgement, pandering to the basest element of fandom, and did I mention betrayal? Well, if I did, it deserves mentioning again.

Right there on the main page of Penn'd Passion was a tersely worded announcement: 'Penn'd Passion, as part of its ongoing expansion, has opened 'the Girls' Dormitory,' a section devoted to fanfiction and discussion of traditional girls' series.'

I tried, once I'd calmed down, to view the thing neutrally. Arc had probably thought she'd acted for the best. But, dash it all, you don't fight a plague by inviting it to take up a post as pestilence-in-residence, do you?

I uploaded my next chapter in moody silence. No good, I felt, could possibly come of this.

Mina de Malfois and the Old Guard

'I'll be away from my desk for ten days,' Arc had warned me. 'I'll forward your most recent batch of mail before I go. I'll be attending a Tolkien conference--I'm particularly looking forward to the sessions on 'Sindarin Syntax for the Purist' and 'Practical Reconstructions of Quenya.'³⁵

Well, that figured. Arc is so serious minded, she naturally gravitates towards the most boring ends of fandom. I don't mind admitting that I've never, not once in my life, given any thought to learning either Quenya or Sindarin. To be strictly accurate, I don't speak a second language, although I've often been told that my use of French words and phrases in my fanfiction is striking,³⁶ so I've no doubt that I'd display a natural fluency if I ever took the time to learn.

But the point of learning either Sindarin or Quenya escapes me. I mean, if I learned, say, French or German, I could

³⁵ 'Sindarin Syntax for the Purist' and 'Practical Reconstructions of Quenya' are, believe it or not, actual things that Tolkien fans argue about. The purist/reconstructionist divide is deep.

³⁶ Fangirl French strikes me, personally, as even more pretentious than fangirl Japanese,

converse with the French or the Germans, but the chances of my ever meeting up with a non-English-speaking Elf seem minimal. If it happens, I'll deal, but until then, not so much.

'You know, you really might enjoy the fandom,' Arc added, and not for the first time. So far I'd resisted her urgings. Still, one can't deny that Tolkien fandom has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, an undeniable cache of its own. Sure, some of its members are a bit fusty, but that might become fashionable; Eau de Olde Bookes would probably be being bottled and sold any day now. And haul them out, blinking, into the sunlight, and what did you find? A lot of professorial types, some incredibly beautiful costumes, and an impeccably respectable British background. They were, to be blunt about it, the top drawer of fandom. I wondered, also not for the first time, whether theirs was an area I should perhaps interest myself in.

I'd finally gotten around to watching the blasted movies, for one thing, and while this didn't *quite* manage to fill me with a burning desire to read some fifteen-hundred-odd pages of extremely dense prose, it did open my eyes to some damned pretty men.³⁷ And for another, more practical, reason, I'd heard a lot of

though that's a matter of taste.

³⁷ An even wider divide is the one between Tolkien book fans, particularly those who read the books before the movies came out ("trufen"), and Tolkien
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buzz recently that the creators of *Sanguinity* were positive hobbit freaks. Apparently that proclivity showed through pretty clearly in *Sanguinity*. Warr1or had even written two long, footnoted essays arguing that the spiritual purity and sexual monogamy of the Elves of Middle Earth were the obvious inspiration for PrincessB.³⁸ I confess I wasn't well versed enough in all things Tolkien to see it, myself.

Perhaps it was time to follow Arc down the misty trails of LotR fandom, although not, I hasten to add, as far down as the languages-and-Silmarillion level of obsession. My time is not, I submit, limitless. Still, somehow the news that Arc would be absent from her keyboard for an extended period had left me feeling peculiarly bereft and hollow. Immersing myself in a new fandom should be just the distraction I needed.

To this end, I made a brief entry in my livejournal on the subject--the subject of my budding interest in Tolkienism, I mean, not the subject of my bereft hollowness, which was nobody's business but my own. When you're a BNF of my status--not, dear reader, that I expect you ever will be, as few attain these lofty

movie fans, or Ringers, who are often accused of only being in the fandom because of their shallow attraction to the actors.

³⁸ If Harmonians were LotR fans instead of HP fans, they'd probably be doing this. As it is, I bet if you google "sexual purity"+"Tolkien" you'll find actual essays.

heights--the fen bring links and resources to *you*. I didn't forecast much legwork on my part at this preliminary stage.

The first to comment was PrinceC. 'What an amazing coincidence,' he said. 'Did you get my letter?' I hadn't, and said so.

'Then it proves what I've long suspected,' he wrote. 'We must be soul mates, you and I, destined to cross each other's paths again and again.'

This would, ordinarily, have alarmed me; impassioned outpourings from the technically under-aged are not something I wish to be seen to encourage. In this instance, however, it struck me with rather more delight than apprehension, and I'll tell you why.

Arc's strategy in creating the Girls' Dormitory at Penn'd Passion had, by and large, been successful. I could scarcely credit it, myself, but it appeared Arc had, once again, had the foresight to see what needed doing and to make it so. Almost all, I mean to say, of that ultra-femme scourge that had so recently threatened to flood Dread Lane had left off posing as *Sanguinity* fans and were redirecting their energies back into girls' series fanfiction, where they belonged.

The astute reader will note I say 'almost all,' however. One or two stragglers still hung around. Some of these, as for instance Xenalvr, seemed sound, sane fans; Xenalvr herself, I am

convinced, is a generally good egg, although I wouldn't go saying so in front of Arc if I were you, as they seem to act as irritants on one another. Some others of these newbies, though, were not only pronounced drips, but were PrinceC fangirls of the most shameless, coy, flirtatious type imaginable. It's not that I begrudge him fangirls at all. I have a huge fanbase myself, and I know how gratifying that can be. Far be it from me to deny the youngster his rightful share of the *Sanguinity* glory. But something about these females just grated on my nerves, and the most grating of them all was a piece of work calling herself BalletChic.

Now, reading PrinceC's message, I smiled to myself, imagining her reaction. Oh, I hadn't ever stooped to outright hostility towards the girl; it would ill befit my status both as an author and as one of Dread Lane's editorial staff. I'd corrected the spelling errors in her one-shot Sammich fluff without giving even the faintest sign that I found her photographic self-portraits an affront to human dignity. I'd put my feelings to one side and recommended her fanfiction for inclusion at the archive, thereby confirming her tenuous toehold in *Sanguinity* fandom, and if that wasn't a purely selfless, noble gesture on my part then I'd like to know what is.

Deep down, however, concealed beneath my calm

professional exterior, I nursed a growing distaste for BalletChic. If PrinceC's messages to me caused her to choke on her pixi stix, well, so be it.

'I might have guessed you'd be one of those clever Tolkienites,' I replied to PrinceC now.

'I don't know about clever,' the lad replied with modesty. 'Compared to the other papers at the conference, mine's probably jejune, but then, most of the other presentations at the sessions are by PhD candidates. I'm honored to even be included.'

I pouted for a moment as another little frisson of forlornness shook me. Was everybody else in fandom off to this con except me? Was I the only one who wouldn't be there to enjoy the lectures, the hobbitish filksongs, and the deliciously unwashed tangled-haired men?³⁹

Then I returned to my senses. It would be disastrous to attend an event like that when I wasn't properly caught up on the fandom, and anyway--I glanced across at the mirror, and frowned slightly at the fit of my clothes--I didn't feel like putting in public appearances right now. One wants time to get in fighting trim for that sort of thing.

³⁹ Oops, my own shallow attraction to one of the actors seems to be showing. Actually, in all fairness, some of the Tolkien *fen* are also rather yum.

I had cause to be glad, in the next little while, that I was approaching this fandom for the first time without any witnesses. Tolkien fandom should come with warnings for the unwary. Something along the lines of 'best approached in solitary confinement' would just about do the trick. To take an example at random, the first time I ran across the phrase 'Elvish Linguistic Fellowship',⁴⁰ I'd burst into unrestrained laughter, thinking it must be a joke. I now know that if I'd made a gaffe like that amongst the committed fen, or 'the fen who really ought, for their own good, to be committed,' they'd have turned on me in anger and accused me of being a mere Ringer.

It chilled the blood to think that Arc ran with this crowd.

And PrinceC did too, of course. The last batch of mail from Arc had included a handful of mail from fangirls, and the letter from PrinceC. Well, by letter I mean poem, if you really must know. It was all lush fields and ancient forests and nostalgia for an era of chivalry, kind of thing, and it was signed, 'your ARDant admirer, PrinceC.' If that weren't disturbing enough on its own--and it was, believe me--his stationery, though of a high fibre count, watermarked, and inarguably tasteful, had a black border a half-inch wide. He was either in deep mourning or, more likely, deeply

⁴⁰ The 'Elvish Linguistic Fellowship' actually exists, of course.

Goth. He'd tied the letter with a strip of black ribbon, which again earned full marks for style and a certain kind of taste, but rather drove home the point that my correspondent was a teenaged boy.

Embarrassing, really. And yet also, undeniably, intriguing. It's funny how you can look at a gesture cynically, fully aware that it's a deliberate gesture calculated to make the gesturer appear attractively and romantically iconoclastic, and yet still, at a deeper, more private level, you catch yourself thinking *my, this person is attractively and romantically iconoclastic*. Seeing through it doesn't make it entirely ineffective. Have you ever noticed this?

I was still feeling left out. I hung around online, but there was nobody I really wanted to talk to. The occasional breathless updates from people who were happily in attendance at the con made it worse, somehow. When Warr1or sneered that Tolkien fandom was nothing but a refuge for a bunch of elitist, effete elf-slashers, I caught myself half agreeing, and had to remind myself that soon I would be one of that elite. I picked up my copy of *the Fellowship of the Ring* with a heavy sigh. Its uncreased spine and pristine pages seemed to silently reproach me for a life spent in frivolity among fandom's lightweights. Now I felt trapped in a sort of fannish equivalent of summer school.

Not, I should in all fairness add, that the trufen were

universally inhospitable. Many of them gave me a chilly reception, and many more ignored me altogether, but given the calibre of fangirl idiocy so prevalent online I can't blame them. I mean, considering the ivory-tower isolation and advanced age-iness of the fandom in question, they might not have heard of me. They might have thought *I* was just another idiot fangirl.

And some of them were flat-out kind in response to my first tentative forays onto their bulletin boards. 'Remember Silverlock,' one of them cautioned the others. 'Do we want to turn away potential pilgrims to the Commonwealth?'⁴¹ I had no freaking clue what that meant--I mean to say, I'd read just enough *FotR* at that point to be pretty certain it wasn't Tolkien he was referencing--but, oddly, the others all took his point immediately. There was a slight but marked increase in their tolerance levels afterwards.

I wish I could say the same for self. My tolerance levels were at ground level, and seeping steadily lower. It wasn't Professor Tolkien himself. His books, once you buckled down and forced yourself to the task, rather grew on one. I wasn't entirely *gripped*, and I wouldn't be calling him 'Dear Professor' anytime

⁴¹ John Myers Myers' Silverlock was released and read in the U.S. at around the same time *LotR* was. As a result, older American Tolkien fen are, remarkably often, also conversant with *Silverlock*. Myers, J. M. Silverlock. Ace; Reprint edition (April 5 2005).

soon, but I was starting to enjoy him. No, I say, it wasn't *his* writing that was getting me down so much as the writing of his fans. They went in for 'humour' in a big way. See how I've put quotation marks around 'humour,' as if to imply a certain distance or doubt there? Yeah.

Mostly in online fandom, as a helpful general rule, if you encounter someone who goes in for juvenile, moronic puns, that someone, it can be safely assumed, is both a moron and a juvenile. In the Middle-Earthian corners of fandom, I'd discovered, it didn't work that way. Find a person sniggering over the female form or coining 'clever' new names for the characters, like 'All-a-gone,'⁴² and you were just as likely to be talking to a sixty-year-old tenured professor with a stack of publications to his credit as to a fourteen-year-old boy.

By the tenth day, I'd come close to cracking. I didn't 'grok' their jokes and references; I wasn't sure I *wanted* to 'grok' them; I wasn't *entirely* sure what 'grok' meant.⁴³ I was utterly unable to contribute to any of their conversations, and I hated it.

⁴² I hate to say it, but adult male Tolkien fans of A Certain Age do go in for this rather often.

⁴³ grok: to understand fully, completely; from Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land. If I had a nickel for every time an adult male had asked me if I "grokked" something "in fullness," I'd have...a dollar or two in change. Heinlein, Robert A.. Stranger in a Strange Land. Ace; Reissue edition (Jan 11 2002).

So I screwed up my courage and risked lowering the tone a little by broaching a subject I was at least capable of offering an opinion on: the movies. 'Did you think the films were faithful to the intent of the books?' I asked cautiously.

And then a beautiful, beautiful thing happened. 'I love Orly!'⁴⁴ chirped up BalletChic, who must have followed me into Tolkien fandom when she'd heard PrinceC was a participant. For a moment there was no response to her comment, as if no one could quite believe she'd said it.

And then they descended, filled with righteous snark, and roundly and sarcastically abused her in several languages. Some of their remarks, I noted with interest, were in Quenya, or, possibly, Sindarin. They're lovely languages, aren't they?

'You were right,' I messaged Arc when she'd returned from the conference. 'I'm really enjoying Tolkien fandom.'

⁴⁴ 'I love Orly!' The cry of the Orlando Bloom fangirl; is received by serious Tolkien fen as proof of idiocy.

Mina de Malfois and the ConFanLitCon Con

‘I hope you don’t mind my contacting you directly. But I just have to know,’ concluded the politely worded email from some fan I’d never heard of. ‘Do you know what the money is being used for?’

In my personal experience of online fandom, that sort of question never leads anywhere good. I felt a degree of apprehension, enhanced in this case by my complete inability to place this person. I decided that, before I responded, a little research was in order.

Arc was away for a couple of days. For an archivist, she does an unseemly amount of gadding about.

‘It’s spring,’ she’d said when I’d hinted mildly that perhaps she might want to spend some time at home. ‘*Then longen folk to go on pilgrimages.*’⁴⁵

Not that I needed her for this, anyway. A little online sleuthing was all that was required. There was nothing much on the ‘Dread Lane’ discussion boards, just a few cryptic warnings:

⁴⁵ ‘Then longen folk to go on pilgrimages.’ Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Canterbury Tales.

'Shh, don't talk about you-know-what *here*,' and 'BalletChic will kill anyone who spoils the surprise, guys.' Intrigued, I decided a visit to 'the Girls' Dormitory' was in order. I usually avoid it, the way I avoid leper colonies and the more squalid sort of madhouse, but if the inmates were plotting, I needed to know.

There was *lots* of buzz on their message boards--'she says it will be ready in time for ConFanLitCon, are you going to be there?' kind of stuff--but nothing really coherent. BalletChic's livejournal revealed nothing to the casual observer, either.

But I'm nobody's fool. I've had plenty of experience with untrustworthy fangirls of BalletChic's type, believe me. I'd long since learned how to handle their sneaky, secretive ways. I maintain a sockpuppet journal⁴⁶ *just* for these types of situations, and *naturally* my sock had cosied up to BalletChic when she first appeared on the scene. And sure enough, when I logged in as my sockpuppet, I saw a friendslocked post on BalletChic's journal.

I read it and was perfectly flummoxed. I won't quote the entire thing, but the gist or heart of the matter was that BalletChic

⁴⁶ Of course no mention of sockpuppets can pass without a reference to my beloved Charlotte Lennox, and her sockpuppet expose. I do hope she'll commit it to print someday, if only for private circulation. Lennox, Charlotte. 'The MsScribe Story.' Bad Penny. 15 June 2006 (and forward).

http://www.journalfen.net/community/bad_penny/1074.html (24 January 2007).

had made an announcement that she was collecting funds for a present for 'the foremost author of *Sanguinity* fanfiction.' She'd helpfully included a link to her paypal account so people could make donations. There were glowing paragraphs full of praise and positive criticism below the link.

For the space of an hour, I honestly thought I'd misjudged the little blighter. I even felt badly about it. Maybe she wasn't such a vile creature after all, I mused as I sponged off in the tub. Maybe, I thought, lying back in the scented foam, she had hidden depths.

I was, of course, being too kind. If I have a flaw, it's that I'm too willing to believe the best of others. Because once I'd dried off and dressed, and went back to reread her friendslocked post, I saw my error at once. Buried amongst the paragraphs of drivel about contributions to fandom and literary style was the giveaway. 'I'll personally present our gift,' she'd written, 'at the Third Annual ConFanLitCon.'

Of course, as all of my true fans and readers were aware, I'd had to disappoint them by letting them know I wouldn't be attending the Third Annual ConFanLitCon. I hadn't attended the first two, either. I hadn't, if you must know, been to many cons since hitting BNF status. I'm not comfortable with being

photographed, and I couldn't get the time off work for ConFanLitCon 3 anyway. Not, of course, that I'd mentioned either of those two reasons to anyone. If my readers have built up a certain image of me, far be it from me to spoil that image by encouraging speculation about why, exactly, I don't like to be photographed. And if that image is of a member of the social and economic elite, free of the drudgery of mundane employment, well, what was the harm in that?

No, I'd hinted that I was expecting important guests at the Malfoy Estate during the weekend of the con, and couldn't be away from the manor. So it couldn't, you see, be me that BalletChic was planning the surprise present for, even though the phrase 'foremost author of *Sanguinity* fanfiction' would naturally suggest me to anyone reading it.

I had a sinking feeling I knew to whom she was applying my accolades. BalletChic, you see, was one of the most persistent of PrinceC's fangirls, and it was entirely within the range of possibility that she'd decided *he* led the pack in our fandom.

I was thisclose to leaving her an indignant comment when I remembered that I was logged in using my sockpuppet account. A sockpuppet is only useful for spying purposes if it is, so to speak, pristine and unnoticed. For all I knew, BalletChic was the

unpleasantly suspicious type who recorded IP numbers. Better not to risk it.

I did, however, once I'd carefully logged out of my sock account, reply to the email from the fan who'd obviously been led into believing this gift scheme was targeted at me. It seemed only fair to reiterate that I wasn't going to be in attendance at ConFanLitCon, and so could not possibly be the recipient. I confess I allowed a hurt tone to creep into my email.

This had exactly the effect I'd expected it would: soon the web was alive with indignant posts from *my* fangirls, who wanted to know how BalletChic could be so wrongheaded. An equally lively pool of PrinceC fangirls sprang up to argue the point, but there was disunity within their ranks. Some had begun to question publicly just how much money BalletChic had raised, and exactly how she intended to spend it. And why, they began to wonder, did she get to present it alone? Shouldn't it be done by a joint committee? Squabbles broke out over who deserved to be on the committee.

One angry soul had added up the sums mentioned in the comments to BalletChic's post, and she theorized that BalletChic had raised a huge amount, and that, moreover, she was using the money to pay for her travel to, and attendance at, the con. All hell

broke loose at this suggestion. A mob of jealous fangirls began to mobilize, intent on either confronting BalletChic, or at least being present to share in the credit when PrinceC was approached and gifted.

I was starting to regret I wouldn't be there myself, just to watch.

Warr1or was also among the disappointed, although he was, he claimed, more sorrowful than angered. He posted a kind of open letter to BalletChic on his livejournal, lamenting her failure to live up to his PB/J supported ideals, which he went on to describe at length. 'In BalletChic, one might have expected to find a chaste, sweetly modest femmefan worthy of respect, friendship, and, eventually, love,' he wrote. 'Instead she has revealed herself to be another modern whore, throwing herself at PrinceC's feet in her eagerness for sexual satisfaction of the basest kind.'⁴⁷ I will not

⁴⁷ Warr1or's obsession with the purity of fictional characters' relationships is an indirect Harmonian reference, harking back to an online incident when Vanceone accused Theregoesyamum of being the whore of her high school because she dared to suggest that the HP teenagers experiencing attraction towards one another was normal teenage behaviour. 'Gun, just cause you promote whoring yourself out in highschool doesn't mean that we all think it's a good idea. I wasn't only hormonal, bored and selfconscious as a teen. You were, I was not. For all I know, you were the high school whore.' Vanceone. FandomWank. 11 May 2006. http://www.journalfen.net/community/hp_cornfield/11790.html?thread=2916622#t2916622 (21 January 2007).

disparage PrinceC for being the object of her lust, for he may be an innocent victim, but I pray nightly that he will resist. Is there no woman in today's society who can match the soul's perfection embodied forth in the character of *Sanguinity's* PrincessB?' And so on and so forth. I won't reproduce the whole thing here, but you get the idea. The poor idiot was distraught, although in my opinion it would take a team of crack psychiatrists working around the clock to get him to admit what was really upsetting him.

Once the con was underway, I was glued to the screen. Usually when everyone else has flocked off to some event I'm not at, I prefer to ignore it as much as possible, but now I watched eagerly, seizing on each internet rumour, looking for plot developments in the chatter that streamed across my monitor. I wanted to know what was happening, damn it.

And a lot, my informants assured me breathlessly, was happening. BalletChic had art on display in the gallery, and was attempting to sell it. I boggled at the prices named, but according to her friends, she was really talented, so I checked out her online artwork while I waited for the next spate of gossip. Wow: she *was* talented, at least at first glance. Her site was filled with what looked like oil paintings and sketches, mostly of Jab. I squinted at the screen. There was something odd about her art. Jab looked really,

really familiar, but also somehow wrong.

I was just reaching for the keyboard, ready to give voice to my vague suspicions--I have to say, I hate nothing more than talentless people trying to propel themselves to BNFdom--and saw that, in the little while I'd been checking out her posted art, excitement had hit ye olde ConFanLitCon art display. Whoever was in charge of the room had denounced her 'sketches' and 'paintings' as just so much copying, screencapping, and photoshopping.⁴⁸ Confronted by the voice of authority, BalletChic had sullenly withdrawn her art, and several of her friends were reported to be in tears. BalletChic herself, however, was defiant, and said that if they couldn't rise above traditional labels and categories and appreciate her work, that was their problem, not hers. She didn't care.

'And I don't think she did care,' Arc told me afterwards, 'because I think, in her mind, that was less important than her plan to approach PrinceC.' If Arc was right about that, and she probably was, then what happened next must have devastated BalletChic. I almost feel sorry for her, really.

I had this from multiple sources. To be honest, I'm still

⁴⁸ Of course, the most infamous fanartist in this genre would be Crystal Gamgee.Anatsuno. 'Detagged, you're it!' FandomWank. 16 April 2004. http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/374922.html (23 January 2007).

reading every eyewitness account I can find. You see, PrinceC was scheduled to lead a session on 'inter-fandom social interactions and the sense of community.' Apparently the session was well attended, and most of the attendees were there early, hanging around and interacting socially. A gaggle of them were standing at the front of the room, trying to catch PrinceC's eye, but he was engaged in conversation with two of the con organizers. (One of them, I'll tell you in strictest confidence, was Xenalvr.)

And then, everyone says, BalletChic marched in with an enormous box in her arms. Several of her friends have since claimed she looked 'pale but brave,' but I think we can discount that as hyperbole. She set the box down in front of PrinceC, and informed him that it was a gift from her 'personally;' the howls of outrage from those who contributed money are still reverberating around the net. He, looking by all accounts bewildered, opened the box.

Everyone at the front of the room saw the contents clearly, or is now claiming they did. The people who she'd conned out of donations are claiming this particularly gleefully, and on one level I don't blame them. It was, you see, a box of sex toys and assorted intimate gadgets,⁴⁹ but that's not even the oddest part.

⁴⁹ A group of Smallville fen actually did this. They presented Michael Rosenbaum with,

Right at the top there was a sort of binder, with one of her Jab 'paintings' on the cover. PrinceC hauled this out first, probably because it was the only object in the box he was willing to touch with un-gloved hands. It was pretty obvious, people have told me, that she'd created the cover art by photoshopping PrinceC's head onto a screencap of Jab,⁵⁰ and then adding *herself* to the picture, and a big pink banner that read 'fanfiction.'

You know, if the folks who put together the DSM-IV⁵¹ are ready to publish a major expansion, I bet they could get whole chapters of information just by tracking down BalletChic and interviewing her. I mean to say, what? Imagine *doing* that. The girl must need her prescription re-adjusted.

Anyway, PrinceC didn't say anything, and one sees his

and I quote:'FYI, our gifts to him included the \$900 check to RMHC (along with a card for him), the jersey, the anti-Lexana t-shirt, and a superman tin that we've [rightfully] dubbed the 'smut box' (because it contained a pocket pussy, wet lube, a whip, Panty Dropper Massage Oil, Everyone Loves a Happy Penis -- Penis Massage Creme, Tit Tarts, Aphrodisiac Chocolates, Kama Sutra Cards, and a purple cockring).'GivenToFly. TWOP Forums. 16 March 2006.

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=2124561&st=2070> (23 January 2007).

⁵⁰ 'Not to mention the whole "MY HED IZ PASTEDE ON YAY" effect.'Shinigami_co. FandomWank. 16 April 2004.

http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/374922.html?thread=23987850#t23987850 (23 January 2007).

⁵¹ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders categorizes the most common mental disorders, listing the description, diagnosis, treatment, and research findings for each. As of this entry there is no entry under pseudicide, though, and the section on 'Factitious Disorder' fails to mention Munchausen by Internet.

point. He just lifted this thing out and looked at it, while everybody nearby sort of blushed and cringed in sympathetic embarrassment. Finally BalletChic broke the silence. 'I hope you don't object to RPF,' she said.

'I don't mind real person fiction,' PrinceC told her, pretty gently by all reports, 'but you've gotten the pairing wrong. I'm just not interested in you.'

I think he showed a lot of restraint, there; most people would have panicked and called security, or at the very least turned snide and recommended a good psychiatrist or long-term care facility. But it wasn't what BalletChic had been hoping for, I guess, because she burst into tears and fled the room, and is reported to have checked out early. No one seems to have actually seen her since.

I have *got* to start attending conventions.

Mina de Malfois and the House of Mourning (part one)

I'd known, pretty much right from the point when my informants began to regale me with the tale of BalletChic's ill-fated play for PrinceC's affection, where all this would inevitably end. I mean, look at the thing logically. She'd ripped off a fair number of her friends and supporters, absconding to ConFanLitCon on their money. Her art had failed to impress the con organizers, who tend as a group to be wary of plagiarism. Her self-insert RPF hadn't wooed PrinceC, and had probably scared him, though he was manfully keeping silent about the whole thing.

To a cynical BNF such as myself, it was patently obvious what she'd do next. In situations such as hers, fandom's Magic 8-Ball returns its traditional answer: all signs point to psecicide.⁵²

⁵² The first recorded instance of a fandom psecicide I could find happened in 1941. "Early in 1941, just before Boskone I was to take place, Earl Singleton's roommate made known that he had committed suicide. Singleton was comparatively new in the field, but had become a leading figure since the Chicon, and the occurrence was a great shock. Numerous poems and issues of fanzines were dedicated to him, and considerable debate about the ethics of suicide took place." John Bristol (Jack Speer). Fancylopedia. Published by the Fantasy Foundation, 1944. http://fanac.org/Fannish_Reference_Works/Fancylopedia/Fancylopedia_I/p.html (23 January 2007). See also Avocado, 'the Tragic-ish Death of Limeybean.' FandomWankWiki. 31 January 2006. http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Tragic-ish_Death_of_Limeybean (23 January 2007).

So when she locked down comments on her livejournal, I merely shrugged in a web-weary manner. When she deleted her DeviantArt account, and removed all of her artwork from the internet, I sighed impatiently. Her friends were variously castigating her, demanding their money back, asking for apologies, or, increasingly, pleading with her to please, please, please tell them what was going on. I, however, along with anyone who'd seen this sort of thing before, awaited the familiar chain of events.

To be honest, my attention was absorbed elsewhere anyway. The creators of *Sanguinity* had unveiled a tie-in MMORPG, and I was, to put it mildly, enthralled. I'd read every magazine article and online review I could get my hands on in the lead-up to its release, and pre-registered my avatar the *instant* I could. The game hadn't, technically, started yet, but I was busy poring over the creators' newsletter and planning my strategy.

'You know what would help pass the time?' Arc had asked dryly. 'Updating your fic.'

'I will, I will,' I'd promised her breezily, but I hadn't found time yet to get the next chapters submitted. The Penn'd Passion submission form is lengthy, and I was having trouble squeezing it into my schedule.

'Do you think,' I messaged PrinceC, 'property rights will

be protected within the game? I'd love to build a replica of the Malfois Estate in gamespace.' I'd asked, and naturally received, his permission to use his OFC's name, Lady Horatia Marianna Wilhelmina de Malfois, as my avatar name, and I'd fallen into the habit of speculating about the game with him.

'I think land ownership will be tied to the premium accounts,' he responded. Bugger. Naturally he'd already purchased a premium account for his avatar, Prince Choronzon Erik Vladimir de Gravina.⁵³ I was still saving up for mine. It was causing me some slight anxiety, actually, because I wasn't sure I'd have the funds in time for the game's opening, and then there were the monthly fees to worry about. At this rate, a gamespace Malfois estate wouldn't be much more affordable than a real one.⁵⁴ But a premium account was absolutely essential, or else Lady Mina--as my avatar would be called for short--wouldn't have the accessories and clothes my, I mean her, image required.

The days were just eaten up with planning and anticipation. I not only couldn't get motivated to work on my fanfic, I barely had time for non-game conversation. I almost

⁵³ Choronzon was the 'demon of chaos' Aleister Crowley claimed to have raised; Erik is of course the Phantom of the Opera; and Vladimir is a shout-out to Dracula fans (as, arguably, is Mina).

⁵⁴ 'Second Life: Memberships and Pricing,' Linden Labs. <http://secondlife.com/whatis/pricing.php> (24 January 2007).

missed seeing BalletChic's last post, but the shockwave of internet reaction brought it to my attention.

'Dear All,' she'd written, 'the time has come to make an ending, and I owe it to my friends and family to say goodbye. Know, at the close of my days, I loved you all. Not as well as you deserved, I know, but I tried. The lies have grown too heavy now, and the mistakes cannot be rectified. Friendship, it turns out, has a price after all, and I, alas, exceeded it unknowingly. The One I chose to give myself to refused the gift. Think not for a moment I intend Him to feel any guilt or sorrow, but know only that my desire and devotion remain intact. My love has not wavered. For Him I make this sacrifice. My life's blood will not have been spilt in vain if it proves to Him the depth of my love. And love's power knows no limits. Perhaps it will grant the secret wishes of my heart, and allow me comfort from beyond the grave. I make my ending now, alone, but without regret. Farewell. Love enduring, BalletChic.'⁵⁵

By next morning, mourning's minions⁵⁶ were out in full

⁵⁵ BalletChic's last post, her psecicide note, is inspired by the note Amy Player left her [sic] parents. Renne, Jeanine. When a Fan Hits the Shit: The Rise and Fall of a Phony Charity. Heisenberg Press (September 2004). Renne, Jeanine. <http://www.turondo.com/> (21 January 2007).

⁵⁶ From GM Hopkins: 'I saw this morning morning's minion...' Hopkins, G.M. 'The Windhover.'

strength. The entire internet proceeded to go nuts. Girls, their comments strewn with *sobs* and *hugs*, left impassioned memorials all over the place. Poems were composed to BalletChic, and artwork tributes--the bulk of which featured unicorns, angels, and roses--sprang up everywhere. One girl created a breathtakingly schmoopy drawing of a lone pair of ballet shoes discarded in a corner, and was immediately friended by several hundred fellow bereaved.

Comments were turned off on BalletChic's livejournal, so somebody created a community called 'remember_Bchic,' and a thousand people promptly turned up to declare, 'I didn't know her, but I can't stop crying.' Not to be outdone, a competing MySpace community, BalletChicMemories, sprang into existence, and all the cutters posted poetry that was even more emo than usual. The people who she'd successfully conned out of hundreds of dollars fell all over themselves expressing their regret, guilt, and determination to live better, kinder lives in her honour.

Even PrinceC, at one point, referred to her as 'that poor kid,' which filled me with an urge to shake him. I said nothing, however. Those few of us who'd kept some kind of perspective were very careful to keep quiet at this point. Hysterical online mourners never react kindly to levelheaded reminders about

pseuicide.

‘Arc,’ I asked her, just to check, ‘what do you think of all this?’

‘I think it’s psychologically interesting,’ she said, ‘to watch full-fledged mourning over a person who is, undoubtedly, still alive. How’s the fic coming?’

I debated telling her that I’d been too distraught to type, but thought better of it. Even Arc’s patience probably had limits.

‘I’m typing up chapter one tonight,’ I told her, and I did get to work on it, but I kept peeking back at the rituals of grief. The dysphoria continued unabated. BalletChic was more beloved in ‘death’ than she’d ever been in life. A horrible thought struck me.

‘Arc!’ I messaged her.

‘Yes?’ she asked. I sensed a certain level of suspicion, such as ought not to exist between archivist and author, and rushed to allay it.

‘I’ve typed up chapter one, which I’m emailing to you right now,’ I assured her, ‘but I’ve just realized I can’t possibly submit it just yet.’

‘It might get overlooked in the current hysteria,’ she agreed, and once again I marvelled at her insight.

‘Exactly,’ I said. ‘I’ll wait it out until the end of the week,

when things have calmed down a bit.’

I was giving them too much credit, there, and overestimating the speed with which calm reason would overtake the frenzied. My favourite mail order perfumery, to my annoyance, sold out of both ‘Final Resting Place’ and ‘Ashes of Grief.’ CDs of ‘music that reminds us of BalletChic’ were created, and several of my own fans, under the impression that I, too, shared their sorrow, mailed copies of these to me. A few of them also sent me burned copies of a Very Special Podcast⁵⁷ dedicated to BalletChic.

By the end of the week, a ghastly new fad had sprung up. Fangirls, gripped by a belief that ‘any one of us could die at any moment,’ and unable to assuage that belief by a simple exchange of fanart and fanfic, were weaving bracelets out of their own hair⁵⁸ and mailing these off to people they especially wanted to be remembered by.

‘Arc,’ I urged her, ‘I’d appreciate it if you could open all

⁵⁷ I recently listened to a Very Special Podcast in which the Harmonian podcaster read out several emails that praised her podcast for giving various fangirls the courage to speak out against abuse in their lives. Now, while I take actual child abuse very seriously indeed, my immediate response to said podcast was to roll my eyes and denounce it as sheer, attention-garnering nonsense. There are a lot of real tragedies in life; there are a lot of fake tragedies online. Few instances of actual abuse have been much improved via fanfiction and podcasting.

⁵⁸ Not only did the Victorians make hair wreaths, but Americans, during the Apache wars, made and wore hair jewellery.

my incoming mail, and burn anything you find that looks like it might be made out of human hair, okay?’

No go. ‘Am forwarding all your mail immediately, *unopened,*’ she typed firmly, and I can’t say I blame her. The thought of the artefacts that might, even as we spoke, be laying there in the mail stack, filled one with a kind of dread.

Speaking of fannish creations, BalletChic’s now vanished artwork had gained a reputation to be envied. Her scanned, cut and pasted, photoshopped concoctions were now being seriously discussed as the creative, beautiful output of a tortured soul. In vain did the ConFanLitCon organizers attempt to remind people that a short while ago they’d been laughing at these same pictures. The shadow of the grave apparently makes stuff look better. Photoshopping *was too* an art form, insisted the same people who, some ten days previously, had been denouncing her as an untalented, thieving fraud. She hadn’t been an obsessive, stalkerish fangirl, they argued now; cutting and pasting her own photos into her fanart was a post-modern critique and re-examination of the entire Mary Sue phenomenon.

My eyes were rolling more or less constantly these days. The ocular strain was enormous. BalletChic was an even more successful con artist now that she was ‘deceased’--a sort of Shade of

Fraud.⁵⁹

The Sammiches were reaping the side benefits, such as they were. BalletChic's only remaining piece of fanfic was the one shot PB/J piece I'd cleared for inclusion in 'Dread Lane.' She either hadn't ever written anything else, or she'd deleted it along with her 'art.' This story now became the focus for a lot of the virtually bereaved, who sighed over her portrayal of Jab and PrincessB's One True Love. Sammich devotees churned out essays, and I use that verb advisedly, on what it meant that a lonely, depressed girl had nevertheless found some measure of comfort in the deeply meaningful romance of two fictional characters who don't actually date in the game. The Booters, for once, held their aristocratic tongues, unwilling to heap derision on BalletChic's recently departed plebeian soul.⁶⁰

I only had one real source of consolation in all of this. If it was irritating me to watch the wave of post-mortem popularity sweeping over BalletChic, it must be irritating her even more. Because of course I had no doubt she was out there, watching all of

⁵⁹ I could not resist a schadenfreude pun. Forgive me.

⁶⁰ 'The sheer outrageous stupidity of many things you've said here that actually touches my proletarian and Democratic soul.' Rice, Anne.
http://www.amazon.com/gp/discussionboard/discussion.html/ref=cm_rdp_st_rd/102-1056558-6216913?ie=UTF8&ASIN=037541200X&store=yourstore&cdThread=Tx2995TQ1YT1Y12&reviewID=R1FLRH CYSK13PB&displayType=ReviewDetail (21 January 2007).

this unfold. No fangirl, turning to pseudicide as a way out of a tight spot, ever stays away for long. I'd been watching, expecting at any moment to see someone claiming to be BalletChic's best friend, or mother, or twin sister, emerge to ride the crest of her newly created fame.

I'd been, it turned out, underestimating her creativity.

Mina de Malfois and the House of Mourning (part two)

The next development, I suppose, would have been the creation of a livejournal in the name of 'Ciyerra of Tyana.' The thing is, though, I didn't notice right away. That's the problem with recording these events: I'm never sure whether to let you have developments in the order in which they occurred, or whether you'd prefer to know how they came to my attention.

My own attention, just then, was taken up with grave matters. I still didn't have the funds to buy my *Sanguinity* premium account, and chapters one and two of *At His Lordship's Behest* had been posted to remarkably little acclaim. PrinceC had had a similarly dismal response to his updates to *Of Vice and Velvet*, and we commiserated of an evening.

The relatively small volume of comments had meant, however, that I was able to pay greater attention to each one. I'd been attempting to reply to them, if only with a few brief words of thanks. The better class of BNF tries to make these little gestures, although it is a struggle sometimes to keep up with the sheer volume of feedback.

Among the reviews there'd been much positive feedback for a scene I'd written in which PrincessB, hosting a séance for her fashionable friends, inadvertently draws the attention of the undead, more specifically of Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina. It throbbed with erotic tension, that scene, and the readers gushed praise in response. Several of the esoterically-minded fans had seized on that séance in particular, and were regaling me with tales of their own encounters, to which I politely feigned attention, partly out of good breeding but mostly out of a fear of enraging the crazy.

One of these fangirl spiritualists had puzzled me by asking if I was 'in contact with her,' and several had immediately chimed in to agree that my inclusion of a séance scene *couldn't* be coincidence. It was proof, they said, that I had been in touch with Ciyerra of Tyana. That was the first time I'd ever seen the name, though I didn't come right out and tell them so. Instead I thanked them for reading me, cautiously agreed that spiritualism was very interesting, indeed, and then went off to do a spot of googling.

Fangirl belief systems are a curious thing. Fans fall willing prey to obvious con artists, yet let some honest soul in genuine need of assistance speak up and they respond with scepticism and sarcasm. Nine times out of ten, they doubt real facts

but rush to embrace stylized nonsense. Still, even knowing this, I boggled at their credulity now. I say this with all the respect they're due, which in this instance was none: they were making complete asses of themselves.

Ciyerra of Tyana, when I googled her, turned out to be the username of a livejournal, entitled 'remnant' and subtitled 'whispers from the grave.' All very melancholy, and all, I saw, mirrored at the requisite deadjournal under the same name. Thus far, you'll agree, de rigueur for your standard emo journaler, and nothing worthy of further enquiry. And I almost let it drop there, without even glancing at the contents, but for an idle curiosity as to why readers had assumed I was 'in contact' with this Ciyerra when she wasn't even on my friendslist. Speaking of friendslists, she seemed to have friended all of BalletChic's supporters. Aha, I thought smugly, this will turn out to be the 'sister' or 'friend' reinsocknation of BalletChic.

I clicked to the journal entries and was soon lost in a kind of awe at the sheer nerve of the wench, not to mention the equally sheer idiocy of her respondents. Ciyerra of Tyana didn't claim to have known and loved the tragically pseuicidal BalletChic. Oh no: that would be too easy.

Ciyerra's first two posts had been, except for their subject

lines, wordless. The subject lines were phrases like, 'something stirs in the shadows' and 'the veil is lifted, briefly, to reveal....' The entries themselves were black and white photographs, somewhat enhanced by filters--blurred for maximum spookiness, and tinted here and there for emphasis. They had all been taken, as far as I could make out, in the same room, although in keeping with the carefully crafted atmosphere I suppose I should call it a chamber. It appeared to have stone walls, though those may have been photoshopped in. Forgive my cynicism, but someone has to keep their wits about them, and a quick read-through of the comments informed me that I would have to be that someone, as witlessness had struck her other readers full on.

Based on the photographs, online ingenuity had concluded that Ciyerra was the ghost of BalletChic. This theory of stunningness had arisen when a few bright sparks noticed that a sort of altar was foregrounded in all the photos, and that the altar was bearing, in addition to assorted candles and tat, framed copies of BalletChic's late, lamented fanart. Since only BalletChic had been known to have copies, and since she was dead, Ciyerra must, ran the argument, be her new 'presence.'

Well, I thought so too--that last bit, I mean, about presence. But the commenters had shouted down what few

attempts had been made to introduce reasonable terms like 'sockpuppet' and 'still alive then.' No, no: instead, the grief-stricken hordes had decided that Ciyerra was an online avatar of the spiritual kind.

Each object d'artifice on the altar was being dissected as though it might contain the secrets of human existence. The presence of a set of Rosary beads was noted, and this provoked a fresh outpouring of grief from the 'Girls' Dormitory' set. There was also, some sharp-eyed viewer pointed out, a small, framed photograph of PrinceC. I scowled. Corpse or no corpse, I wanted to throttle her.

Ciyerra nurtured this delusion, of course. The most recent entries contained, along with the haunting photographs, some verbal gibberish designed to underscore the point for the slower crazies. 'Reduced to shadows and faint energies,' she'd typed, 'I flicker across these new Paths of the Dead. I am composed of memory and longing, and a love that will never fade.' I wondered briefly if a warning to PrinceC might be necessary, but dash it all, how do you break it to a chap that he's in danger of being haunted by the spirit of livejournal?⁶¹

⁶¹ I've been unable to find any internet hauntings, but I did find some weirdness involving bringing a character over from the astral plane. 'Because of a friend's "introduction" to my character Kat, and the story that Neon and I had written, he whole-heartedly believed that

'Your means of communication are my only existence now,' she'd reiterated in her most recent post. 'Shrink not from my sad ghost, my fondly remembered friends, but pity me, and remember.' I, personally, remembered that I'd disliked her from the start, which, in retrospect, demonstrated a keenly sensitive insight verging on the psychic.

Some days, the level and amount of idiocy online make me want to leave fandom for good.

Most days, of course, I recognize that this fannish tendency to leap onto bandwagons and get carried away by enthusiasms is pretty much the basis for my own popularity. Without slightly mad fangirls, I put it to you, would there even be BNFs? It's not talent alone that propels one to the top, after all. Still, an online haunting was taking things a bit far, in my opinion.

'Have you noticed Ciyerra of Tyana?' I asked PrinceC cautiously.

'If by 'noticed' you mean 'paid any attention to,' then no, and I have no intention of doing so,' he answered. 'I suppose I'd be more flattered if she weren't so obviously around the twist.'

My opinion of PrinceC rose. Really, for such a young

she was real, that she existed on the Astral Plane, and that they had fallen in love, got married, and she had his baby, who then grown up within the span of 3 months max.' Yukidragon. 06 July 2005. <http://yukidragon.livejournal.com/146250.html> (21 January

man, he's astoundingly sensible.

And that, let me assure you, is a rare and undervalued quality in online fandom. Fangirls were rejoicing at each sign that the sheeted dead were gibbering and squeaking in the metaphorical internet streets. Packs of eager believers had friended Ciyerra, and were breathlessly reporting on her every post. The shot glass and absinthe bottle on her regularly-photographed altar had formed a focus of worship, and fangirls far and wide were claiming that they set their alarms nightly so they could quaff a shot of absinthe each midnight in tribute to her shade. This ritual, they insisted, 'strengthened her spirit energy.' I didn't believe it for a minute. If there were that much absinthe being sold to teenage girls, it would be making headlines, and concerned parents would be holding protests.

The internet economy was getting a boost from the tomb, though. Ciyerra supporters were selling one another crafts at a rate the Dow Jones people would admire. Candles 'just like the ones on her altar' were popular, as were black armbands embroidered with pink ballet slippers, and fanart 'tributes' featuring Jab or PrinceC mooning around in a graveyard. I suppose by this point all those who'd joined the Cult of Mourning were too heavily invested, in

terms not just of crafts but of credibility, to simply admit they'd been had.

And some unknowable percentage probably really believed. Fans have been known to cling to some pretty non-standard beliefs. This phantom of the internet was mild stuff, really. For some reason I was feeling less rage-y about it all now that I knew PrinceC shared my cynical amusement and refusal-to-be-taken-in-ness. Not my problem, after all, if a bunch of rabid imitators set up altars in their bedrooms, or offered prayers by moonlight to energize an imaginary ghost. And if Warr1or chose to collect morbid Jab-in-mourning fanart, some of it not entirely worksafe, well, at least it kept him off the streets. I didn't even begrudge PrinceC the cyber-roses the romantically-minded mourners insisted on buying him 'to assuage the pain.'

But when I, obeying a passing whim, checked Penn'd Passion and found that Ciyerra of Tyana had been allowed to create an account there, I saw red. I can stand, I mean to say, so much, but not more than that.

'Arc,' I messaged her tersely, 'you've allowed Ciyerra to register at Penn'd Passion.'

'So I have,' she agreed calmly.

'But then you must have her IP number,' I pointed out

shrewdly.

‘Writer-archivist privilege,’ Arc claimed smoothly.

Hmph. ‘Surely you don’t believe in ghosts,’ I snapped, ‘so I suppose you believe in second chances.’ It irritated me, this casual undeserved forgiveness.

‘How’s chapter three coming?’ she asked, deftly changing the subject. I admitted it was done and had just been submitted.

‘Then I’ll tell you this much,’ Arc said. ‘Ciyerra has paid her dues, and in return, I okayed her account. Now, why don’t you go amuse yourself at the *Sanguinity* game site?’ I bridled at her tone. Dismissive, I thought, and I felt quite disgruntled, and strangely flat.

At least, until I logged on, as so wisely suggested, at the *Sanguinity* game site. Arc, I saw at once, hadn’t been blowing me off at all. She’d been confiding in me, though with the utmost circumspect discretion.

‘Welcome to your Premium Account!’ enthused my avatar page. ‘You have received a gift of twelve months’ premium time, paid for by Ciyerra!’

Mina de Malfois and the Honey'd Briar (part one)ⁱ

'Ahoy, Lady Mina,' said Xenalvr's message. 'Care to sign on for grog and good times? I've reserved a bunk aboard the *Honey'd Briar* in your name.'

Ships had been seen in the harbour--the gameworld harbour, that is. The in-game soundtrack had acquired several nautical tunes. I'd been busy setting up Malfois Manor, which, thanks to small but frequent donations from my generous fans, was located on one of the desirable cliffs below the really humungous cliff on which Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina's castle towered. I had, however, seen the sails of at least two largish vessels, and had wondered idly if they were player property or whether, like the castle and Lord Silvestre de G himself, they were part of the game. *Sanguinity Online* was so vibrantly interactive it was hard to tell the difference sometimes. I'd already heard the most delicious rumour that players who built up enough in-game hours and assorted points could win a chance to have their avatar graphically and ruthlessly bedded by the non-player-character Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina. The very thought made

me tingle.

‘You’re in charge of one of the ships?’ I asked now, curiosity sparked. Constructing and furnishing the manor was nowhere near completion, but Lady Mina had to get out there and interact in order to increase her sociability and plotline scores.

‘Alas, that honour belongs to Capt. Arc,’ said Xenalvr, ‘but her first mate, Xena, is m’self.’

‘You and Arc are on speaking terms?’ I asked, which was poor etiquette I admit, but my astonishment had gotten the better of me.

‘You don’t think two bosom chums who were at school together could stay on the outs forever, do you?’ she answered.

I was sceptical. I had no experience myself of this old school tie thing, so perhaps it induced more nostalgic loyalty than I was giving it credit for, but I doubted it. It seemed to me that n. l. probably came in smallish doses. ‘How long is this truce expected to last?’ I asked.

‘Oh, probably until roughly the time she finds out I’ve asked you to sign on,’ Xenalvr said breezily, ‘but she can’t call dibs forever. Can we count you amongst the crew, matey?’

I agreed that they could, though not without a mild sense of foreboding.

This was the first I'd heard of Arc's having an in-game presence, let alone of her being in possession of such a major piece of property as the *Honey'd Briar*. Given the spot of trouble that had arisen back at Penn'd Passion, I suppose one couldn't blame her for putting out to sea, although I strongly suspected the same problem might pop up in gamespace. There was nothing to stop Warr1or registering an avatar, after all.

His devotion to PrincessB had taken a new, and disquieting, turn. Looking on the bright side, it had been a while since he'd called any of PrinceC's fangirls a whore. On the less-bright side, his preoccupation with fandom's wanton females, (or, as he invariably misspelled it, wonton females), seemed to have coloured his perspective on the *Sanguinity* canon. In an effort, I think, to maintain his precarious psychological balance--and I have the educational background to back up this view, as I almost became a psychologist, but I switched majors--he was writing lots of fanfiction in which PrincessB appeared as a chaste, innocent fourteen-year-old girl. My theory is that the canon PrincessB, who is patently obviously an adult female, and a well-developed one at that, was too threatening for him. Possibly she struck him as too dangerously impure.

At any rate, whatever his particular damage was,

Warr1or was resolutely working through his issues by writing lots of fanfiction, and you'd think, wouldn't you, that that would be a good thing. Fandom, let's face it, functions as a sort of impromptu group therapy for a lot of people, and the hand that pens the fanfic often twitches with suppressed psychosis. But Warr1or's particular approach involved pairing his young, innocent, pure, devout, and shall I repeat *fourteen year old* version of PrincessB with a more or less canon version of Jab: manly, muscled, workmanlike, sweaty, and adult. I privately suspected, based on Warr1or's loving physical descriptions, that he was in actuality writing the "PrinceC's hed pastede on" version of Jab that so often appeared in fanart.

So Warr1or's PrincessB parroted his views so exactly that one rather wondered if self-insert Mary Sues could cross gender lines, and his Jab bulged, throbbled, and brooded to a degree that would do Heathcliff or Byron proud. Nothing untoward had actually *happened* in Warr1or's fic--it was entirely possible that he didn't know how sex worked--but the stench of chan rather hung over it, and readers had, predictably, begun to threaten full-fledged hysterics. So Arc had reason, really, to plunge into the relative sanity of online gaming and set sail.

She might have chosen a less perilous distraction, though.

Life onboard a wooden sailing ship was hazardous. As soon as it became generally known that we were setting out on an exploratory voyage but intended to steer well clear of the Furry Islands, we were pelted with 'no furbashing' messages. An entire flock of Elizabeths⁶² showed up, wanting to book passage. I urged our captain to turn them all away, having deduced from the miniature Ouija boards which their avatars wore on chains around their necks that these were some form of Ciyerra supporters, but Xena exercised her first-mately wiles and persuaded her to take three on as servants. They all looked identical, and all simpered in unison, but they also all claimed to be skilled at wielding a pistol, so perhaps that would come in handy. I found them off-putting, but Arc claimed to find them less creepy than she found the rest of the crew, who were all NPCs. I pointed out that the NPCs had more fully developed, well-differentiated personae than did the

⁶² The Elizabeths are, as well as Ciyerra supporters, big fans of Pirates of the Caribbean. Specifically, they are that kind of PotC fan who, while envying Elizabeth her moments with Will and Jack, hate her with a frightening intensity. 'Welcome to Wretched Beast!, the approved hatelisting for the skanky whore Elizabeth Swann, from the Pirates of the Caribbean series. Love her? Go away. Hate her so much it physically hurts? Join!' Wretched Beast. <http://broken-body.net/wretched/> (21 January 2007). 'To say the least, I don't like Elizabeth. In fact, I despise her. There is nothing good about her character whatsoever. Unless you're into that cliché WOMAN POWA!!! thing, there's no reason for her TO BE liked. Let's go through the basics here. First of all, she's a snobby bitch. You can just tell.' Bianca. 'Elizabeth Is a Wretched Skank Who Needs to Die.' Crossing Blades. <http://www.crossing-blades.net/elizabeth-dp.php> (21 January 2007).

Elizabeths, but she ignored this.

And then we were hardly out of the harbour when another vessel drew alongside. I gasped with excitement at the sight of Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina's insignia. 'Load cannons,' Capt. Arc said dispassionately, 'and wait my command.'

'Arc, are you kidding?' I asked. 'You can't fire on them; that's one of Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina's ships!'

'Address the captain like that again, and I'll have you flogged,' Xena told me, her avatar grinning wolfishly.

'Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina is the in-game enemy, Mina,' Arc said patiently. 'We're supposed to fire on his fleet. Should we try to sink her, or just cripple her?' she asked Xena.

'Aim for the masts and sails,' Xena advised. 'De Gravina's men are rumoured to traffic in human cargo; we might be able to rescue them.'

'Probably more bloody Elizabeths,' I muttered darkly, and my avatar stomped off to help Elizabeth9, Elizabeth114, and Elizabeth!1! ready the cannon.

'Are you going to be a discipline problem?' Xena called across to me hopefully, and Capt. Arc gave her a look that could've frozen whole oceans, salt content or no salt content. None of us noticed, until it was too late, the dashing avatar that leapt over the

side to press the blade of his cutlass across Arc's throat.

'Prepare to be boarded, ladies,' he said cheerfully.

'It's PrinceC!' the Elizabeths shrieked in unison, swooning and collapsing across the decks in heaps of uselessness. That's what happens when you set your 'sensitivity' readings too high during avatar creation. Idiots. Although I'll confess in passing that my own toes curled at the glance his avatar gave mine. I couldn't help it. His every pixel gleamed with military manliness and historical accuracy.

'How can your dexterity points possibly be that high this early in the game, you blighted nuisance?' Arc asked him irritably, and he grinned.

'Never you mind,' he told her smugly. 'I'm here to parlay.'

'Then put your sword away, you young idiot,' she told him, but sort of affectionately. 'What's up?'

'One of my crew retrieved a message in a bottle,' he said, producing a scroll of parchment, 'and I thought you might want to assist in the mission.' Xena and I crowded close to Arc so we could read over her shoulders.

'Please help me,' it began. 'I've been kidnapped by a shipload of P/J slashers. They saw I'd listed the Inspector Devlin

novels⁶³ among my interests and came looking for me, thinking I was one of their kind! I tried to tell them I only enjoy the Devlin mysteries for their wealth of historical detail, but they wouldn't listen. They got angry when I said I hated their ship. They've made me their cabin boy, and are threatening to force me to commit unspeakable acts.' The message was signed 'Warr1or.'

'Kidnapped by Jammies,' Xena snorted. 'It's a fitting ending for him.'

PrinceC threw back his head and laughed. 'We can't just abandon him, though,' he pointed out. 'Imagine his panic. Besides, once you've been made aware of a mission you lose perseverance points if you don't complete it.'

'I didn't realize Jammies were so dangerous,' Arc said, looking amused. 'The ones I've met seemed content to stroll around in striped silk pyjamas and read Evelyn Waugh novels to their teddy bears.'

'There's a rougher element down by the docks,' PrinceC said. 'I assume it's those who've seized Warr1or.' Arc looked as if

⁶³ 'Detective Inspector Phillip Devlin of Scotland Yard is having problems of his own. Having fallen for his younger constable, Freddie Collins, Devlin finds that leading his double life is often more complicated than he'd originally thought.' Flanker Press. http://www.flankerpress.com/paragon_animals.shtml (23 January 2007). Cook, J.S. The Paragon of Animals. Flanker Press (May 18, 2006). Cook, J.S. A Cold-Blooded Scoundrel. Flanker Press (June 23, 2005).

she'd be perfectly content to let him stay seized, but I gave her a look of avatarial pleading. I mean to say, think of all the points that hung in the balance. Plus, undertaking a rescue mission alongside one of Lord Silvestre's ships seemed a fine and fitting expenditure of gaming hours.

'All right,' Arc sighed. 'Let's go rescue the idiot. Everyone keep their eyes peeled for lavender sails.' We agreed to set out next day to search a nearby cluster of islands, PrinceC's avatar disappeared by some means I didn't quite catch, and I logged out of gamespace to check my email.

It's disorienting, returning to the real world after time spent in-game. My messages got me re-grounded quickly, however. My readers were adoring chapter three, except for a handful who variously claimed it revealed a lax moral attitude, an anti-Catholic bias, or a failure to respect real vampyre culture. Par for the course, really. I also had a notice that a submission by a Booter awaited my editorial input. I rather looked forward to that: the Booters could do things with riding boots and assorted tack that made one reflect quietly on the possible joys of leather one had been missing out on. And, finally, I had a handful of emails from fangirls who'd all forwarded me the same invitation to an upcoming séance. It breathlessly promised that, guided by a

lifelong devotee of the work of Joseph-Antoine Boullan,⁶⁴ a select group of the former friends of BalletChic were going to attempt to contact her spirit incarnation, Ciyerra, via the miracle of IM conferencing.

I remember reading once something about 'to thy haunts kindred spirits flee,'⁶⁵ but this was the first time I'd ever heard it suggested that the haunt in question might be instant messenger. For a fleeting instant I itched to explain to them that receiving messages via computer from someone who *wasn't dead* wasn't proof of anything beyond their own congenital idiocy, but I saw it would be a waste of time. Besides, séance by ouijanet might be amusing. I RSVP'd my intentions to be amongst those present.

⁶⁴ 'Boullan's and Vintras' teaching was based on a sex-magick which were called *celéstification* and consisted of two different forms: a) sexual intercourse with the higher spiritworld and chosen human individuals through *unions de sagesse*, or b) sexual intercourse with the lower and elemental spiritworld and ordinary human individuals through *unions de charité*. (Carl Kohl, 1904.) 'Boullanian Carmelite.' <http://www.neoluciferianchurch.org/boullanian-en.htm> (24 January 2007). Note a certain similarity with the Tented Tartanists' beliefs about their relationships with fictional males.

⁶⁵ The quote is actually 'to thy haunts two kindred spirits flee,' and it's from Keats' 'On Solitude.'

Mina de Malfois and the Honey'd Briar (part two)

When next we were all logged in, the *Honey'd Briar* was nudging her way into a sandy cove on a small, forested island. Birds sang cheery, exotic songs as Arc secured the ship, loaded us up with game-goods, and directed us across the sand to the edge of the forest.

'We should establish a base camp,' she said, so when we reached a likely looking clearing we set to. I'd figured that, for established former Girl Scouts such as Capt. Arc and Xena, pitching a few tents would be the work of a moment,⁶⁶ and I wasn't wrong. While they did that, I busied myself gathering firewood, and the Elizabeths stood around giggling and occasionally twirling to make their gowns billow out gracefully. I longed for a few good crossover avatars, maybe some Trek-inspired red shirts, but I supposed we'd have to make do with what we had.

'Now,' Arc said seriously, 'everybody take note of where

⁶⁶ Tent jokes ahoy. Since this is the section dealing with slashfen and extremely-hetfen, it contains a lot of erection jokes. Specifically, the Girl Scouts being able to pitch tents is a rather tasteless reference to some mens' enjoyment of what I guess we'll call 'performative' Lesbianism.

the base camp is, and pay attention to what direction we move in. We have no idea who inhabits this island, or what might happen. If we get separated, head back to the base camp. Got that?’

‘Aye, aye, Capt.,’ Xena said, saluting. I nodded. The Elizabeths giggled and hugged each other. We set out along the trail, single file, with Xena in the lead. She’d insisted, citing combat points and strength, and Arc had agreed. I guess a good captain has to be familiar with the particular skills and strengths of each of her crew.

Eventually the trail led to a sign, beyond which we could see a kind of village of about a dozen buildings, each one equipped with a flagpole bearing a coloured sweater or shirt. Odd. I looked at the sign for explanation. ‘The Cult of the Gay Unicorn,’ it read.⁶⁷

‘I’ve heard of these people,’ Arc muttered.

‘Think they’re likely to shelter the Jammies?’ Xena asked.

Arc nodded. ‘I suspect they’d see it as their duty,’ she

⁶⁷ Some of you may have noticed that the Cult of the Gay Unicorn resemble LotR Tinhats. In a larger sense, they also stand for het/femmeslash-hating slashers. ‘We are drawn to Elijah because he is so beautiful, and he is beautiful because he is whole, as we should be, as we might someday be again. He is like the sun, or the full moon, whole and radiant and perfect. Ah, how he shines.’ Oselle, quoted by Hinky. ‘A very special tldr LOTRips wank.’ FandomWank. 29 May 2006. http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/717743.html (21 January 2007). Also quoted by Narcissam. ‘Elijah Wood, Moon God.’ 19 May 2006. http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Elijah_Wood%2C_Moon_God (21 January 2007).

said grimly, and indicated we should follow her.

We'd scarcely stepped out of cover of the forest when two sentry-women came forward. 'Are you with P.R.?' one demanded.

'Are you the Powers That Be?'

'No, no,' Arc assured her. 'We're just from fandom. We're looking for another ship, one with lavender sails and a pyjama-clad crew.'

'What message is in the pyjamas?' asked another woman curiously, stepping forwards. Soon a cluster of inquisitive cultists surrounded us.

'Er...no message that I'm aware of,' Xena answered, obviously puzzled.

'Can you not read the signs?' a pretty young cultist asked her, playfully, and the others laughed merrily.

'Tell us about the Gay Unicorn,' Arc suggested, sounding like a seasoned anthropologist. 'We are not familiar with your beliefs.'

'They are not just 'beliefs'!' one cultist corrected her. 'He really *is* a gay unicorn!'

'So very gay!' her fellow cultists sighed happily.

'He's your totem animal?' I asked, confused.

'He is our God,' said the pretty one, addressing herself

largely to Xena for some reason. 'He is the most perfect young man ever to exist. He shines like the stars, and is as graceful as a fawn, and as elusive as a bunny rabbit made of moonbeams!'

'Okay,' said Xena, looking mildly alarmed, and who could blame her. 'And...he doesn't like women at all?'

'Oh, no,' the pretty cultist assured her, clinging to her arm. 'He has female *friends*, but he doesn't like them sexually.'

'He's too gay!' shrieked the cultic chorus, in a kind of queer ecstasy.

'They're just to throw those who hunt him off the track,' continued the pretty cultist.

'So very gay!' the others shrieked again.

'Het is but a mask and a seeming,' intoned one of the sentries.

The other responded in the same flat, rhythmic chant. 'And femmeslash is an abomination.'

Xena looked ready to slug someone. 'Does he ever visit the island?' Arc asked, by way of changing the subj.

'No!' they chanted. 'He sends us signs, but does not speak to us directly. They prevent him!'

'He'll never notice us,' one of them assured us with goggle-eyed fervour. 'We are as worms beneath his feet.'

Arc and Xena exchanged concerned glances. 'Er...perhaps someday he'll notice you,' Xena said, speaking pretty mildly by her standards, given the circs. I could tell she was trying to offer them some hope, but it was a wasted effort.

'Imagine if he *did* notice us!' a nearby cultist moaned.

'It would be awful,' sobbed another. 'We are not worthy of his notice!'

'We are imperfect!' yelled the one nearest us. 'We will never regain the perfection that is his!'

'Imperfect!' they all moaned in chorus, and, as if on cue, they all produced silver floggers and began to flagellate themselves enthusiastically. Arc looked on resignedly, and Xena merely looked sickened, but I don't mind admitting I lost my head completely. The Elizabeths and I screamed in horror. One of the Elizabeths clutched my arm in her panic, and in a momentary comradeship born of terror I clutched hers back, and when the two of us eventually stopped running we were back at the base camp. We let go of each other, embarrassed.

'That was ghastly,' the Elizabeth burst out. I nodded.

'We should try to get a fire going,' I suggested, striving for practicality. Something about the grisly madness of the cultists made me want to be all useful and well grounded.

When we had the campfire blazing, and our avatars were huddled comfortably near it for warmth and security, I glanced over at the Elizabeth. She was, it struck me now, a person. Well, sort of a person. More of a person than those bloody cultists, anyway. I decided to try talking to her.

‘So, I’m guessing you like some person or character named Elizabeth?’ I tried. To my alarm her eyes filled with tears.

‘Not really,’ she said bitterly. ‘I hated her, really. Her character is silly and useless and overdressed.’ I looked silently at the ball gown and pearls the Elizabeth’s avatar was wearing, but said nothing. I didn’t have to. The Elizabeth went on, resting her head against her knees, ‘I resented her for being so pretty, and I criticized her for being helpless and unrealistic. I always said that Elizabeth wouldn’t really have been able to fire a gun.’

I wasn’t sure what she was talking about. If I followed the thread of her argument, she’d created her avatar to look exactly like someone she hated for being pretty and useless. ‘Can you fire a gun?’ I asked, cautiously. I mean, maybe her loathing stemmed from her skill as a real-life target shooter, or something.

‘No,’ she said sadly. ‘I can’t do anything. I’m useless. In real life, I’m every bit as useless as Elizabeth. I’m as bad as those cult people.’

‘Come, come,’ I said, and with sincerity. ‘You can’t possibly be. There must be lots of things you can do.’

‘It’s all right for you,’ she pointed out. ‘You can write. That’s at least a sort of talent.’

There was no arguing with that, though it seemed to me she understated the matter, but still, I wanted this girl to feel better. For some reason her plight touched me deeply. ‘You, uh, you must have a good eye for fashion,’ I suggested, groping wildly for something to praise. ‘You made that dress for your avatar.’

‘I copied it,’ she said dully, and sighed heavily. There seemed no more to say, though I wished I could think of something. The thing was, I rather knew how she felt. The sight of the Gay Unicorn Cultists in action filled me with a kind of desire to be a more useful, practical, down to earth person than I’d ever been before. The minute the others show up and we log off for the night, I promised myself, I’m going to clean the old apartment top to bottom, and get everything ship-shape and organized for once.

Eventually Arc and Xena strolled into camp. ‘We searched their community,’ Arc said exhaustedly, putting the kettle on to boil, ‘and they aren’t hiding Warr1or or the Jammies. They did let it slip that the other side of the island is inhabited by their mortal enemies, so we’ll search there next time.’

‘Where are the other two Elizabeths?’ I demanded, wishing I’d bothered before now to give them nicknames or something. Somehow the cultists’ self-effacement made me feel uncomfortable dismissing the Elizabeths as just Elizabeths, even if they were silly, ouija-board-wearing Ciyerra-supporting fangirls.

Xena grinned. ‘Probably over among the enemies,’ she said. ‘They bolted pretty fast, but in the wrong direction.’

I pondered. ‘So, who are these enemies?’ I asked. If they were the sworn enemies of the Cult of the Gay Unicorn, it seemed to me they stood a good chance of being sound, reliable people.

Arc frowned slightly, looking thoughtful. ‘Some group calling themselves the Cult of the Tented Tartan,’ she said.

Mina de Malfois and the Honey'd Briar (part three)

I remember once hearing it said of some chap that 'he haunts wakes, fairs, and bear-baitings.'⁶⁸ Ciyerra, fandom's ghost, kept to the spirit and not the letter of this, choosing to haunt livejournal and now, possibly, IM. It was with no little curiosity that I logged in to the séance chatroom on the night in question. I ran a quick eyeball over the list of those present and noted PrinceC amongst them. Most of the other guests were bragging about their black and pink armbands, bracelets, and tributes in a kind of devotional one-upmanship, and posting links to photos of their altars. 'Quiet, quiet,' the ostensible hostesses kept typing, but with little visible effect.

'I am here,' Ciyerra typed. The words floated across the screen in a font of such pale pink it could barely be seen, but the group fell instantly silent. I suppose atmospheric are contagious or something, because even though I'd come here for a laugh and nothing more, I started to feel a tad peculiar. Sitting alone in my apartment, I got goose-bumpily aware of how dark and empty the

⁶⁸ Shakespeare's 'The Winter's Tale.'

room behind my back was, and I took a nervous gulp of wine.

‘Will...uh...will we ever see you again?’ asked one of the room’s moderators.

‘Will you be at any more cons?’ interrupted some other person cheekily, earning instant bannination. Some of the fangirls *giggle*’d nervously.

‘Worlds within worlds within worlds,’ came Ciyerra’s response. ‘No: I will never be with you again.’

I shivered unwillingly, and felt a mild wave of annoyance with myself, but dash it all, this was unexpectedly creepy. I didn’t *believe* her. I just...wished I’d left the lights on, and maybe sat at more of an angle so there wasn’t so much out-of-view palpable nothingness in the empty room behind me.

‘Be careful,’ Ciyerra warned. ‘I went too deep, and got caught. It’s easier than you realize to lose the way home.’ And that was her last communication for the night, although everyone hung around for another twenty minutes or so. It was just as well, really. If even I was having this morbid over-reaction to the inherent creepiness of all this, I could only imagine that the more intense fangirls must be nearly in hysterics by now.

The thing was, even though I was perfectly aware that she’d been referring to her own entrapment via layers of con

artistry and stalkerish inappropriateness, what she'd said had a kind of resonance. Sometimes when I'd been online, or curled up somewhere with my fanfic notebook, raising my head to the 'real' world felt almost like surfacing from some depth. Playing *Sanguinity* has the same effect. And to be entirely honest, the real world in question feels rather sadly flat and dull sometimes. BalletChic's mistake, it occurred to me now, had been in surfacing too abruptly, or in failing to exercise the requisite caution when approaching the borders between layers: taking people's real world money, and icking out PrinceC in person, because she'd wanted her fannish crush to be a real one. It was like divers who get the bends when they come up too fast. Ciyerra, like your better class of literary ghost, came bearing a warning worth heeding, really, once you'd sorted through the gibberish.

It was a relief, next day, not to have to think about her. Home from my shift, thoroughly scrubbed and freshly clad in comfortable clothes and a swashbuckling scent, I logged in to find Arc pacing the deck. We'd decided to sail around the island, rather than crossing overland to look for the Tented Tartanists,⁶⁹ if only to

⁶⁹ Inspiration for the Cult of the Tented Tartan originally came from GerardButler.net and the GALS, as well as the fans behind gbcast. The Tented Tartanists represent rabidly-het fangirls in general. GerardButler dot net. http://www.gerardbutler.net/index_main.php (21 January 2007). GALS. <http://www.gerardbutlergals.com/> (21 January 2007). GBCast. <http://www.gerardbutlergals.com/gbcast/archive.php> (21 January 2007).

avoid having to encounter the damned flagellants again. Having once laid eyes on them in mid-flog, as it were, I quailed from the thought of dropping in on them again, and Arc seemed to share my aversion.

‘According to my ded. reckoning,’ Arc was saying.

‘Dead reckoning, surely?’ I said.

‘Ded. reckoning,’ Arc insisted.

‘Now she ded from reckoning,’⁷⁰ said ‘my’ Elizabeth, the one I’d fled from the Unicornists with, and I snickered appreciatively. It’s funny: she’d seemed undistinguishable from the rest back when we’d been making preparations at the dock, but now that I was getting to know her I fancied I saw signs of human intelligence. She must have felt similarly chummy, because her avatar now stuck out its hand and said, ‘Call me Liz, will you?’

I shook her hand. ‘Mina,’ I said unnecessarily.

‘I know,’ she said, and grinned.

‘Bear a hand!’ Arc bellowed, and Liz shouldered one of the NPCs aside, grasping the rope with hands that looked, if not seasoned, at least capable of becoming, well, capable.

⁷⁰ Ded. reckoning is short for deducted reckoning. Windas, Cedric. Traditions of the Navy. Originally published in 1943; reprinted in 2001 as part of the Lee Valley Classic Reprint Series. In this instance, it is a reference to ‘now he ded from coke,’ originally ‘now he dead from coke.’ FandomWankWiki.

http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Now_he_dead_from_coke (21 January 2007).

'I'll do it,' she said firmly, and hove to.

When we reached the far side of the island there was no sign of a lavender-sailed ship, but, as Xena pointed out, we had to stop anyway to recover our missing crew-women. We anchored the *Honey'd Briar* in a cove flanked on either side by grey, jagged, towering cliffs of a decidedly phallic aspect, and made our way along another winding path--this one, I noted, strewn with rose petals. Finally we emerged through a wrought-iron gateway, also heavily entwined with roses, and gazed at the cultists' encampment.

Whereas the members of the Cult of the Gay Unicorn had tended towards a slender, sylphlike, almost boyish appearance, these Tartanists had chosen avatars of a buxom, womanly build. We got a clearish view of this, because several of them were immersed in a rose-scented bath of improbable milk,⁷¹ and the rest lounged around in equally improbable, and rather revealing, historical costumes from various eras. There were no sentries

⁷¹ A rose-scented bath of improbable milk is featured in the lyrical 'Goodbye' by Azalais du Plessix Malfoy.' This is their ritual; it has been so as long as Draco can remember. Every morning they bathe together, himself and his beautiful mother. They scrub each other's pale skin with sea salt in a bath of dragon's milk and rosewater; the petals of three times thirteen black roses float on the surface.' Azalais du Plessix Malfoy. Goodbye.

<http://www.w338puq3y.homepage.t-online.de/viewstory.php?sid=13172&warning=NC-17> (23 January 2007).

posted, but a few avatars drifted dreamily towards us. 'What's your opinion of slash?' one asked sharply, and all the others turned to stare at us expectantly. Xena, who was in the lead, froze, momentarily unable to guess which was the right stance.

'Of what?' I asked, thinking on my feet and widening my eyes innocently. Their expressions softened instantly.

'Nothing, my dear,' said the first one kindly. 'Just some unpleasantness from the outside world that you needn't trouble yourself about here. Make yourselves at home, please. In a few hours we have our writers' circle, and then we'll be pledging our love to the fictional males of our choice,⁷² but until then, you're free

⁷² An example: *'My Personal Unbreakable Vow to Severus... My Unbreakable Vow to Severus Snape I promise to be always faithful in body and mind, and never love another man. I promise to love and cherish you all of my life. I promise to respect and honour you all of my life. I promise to dedicate all of my life to you. I promise to stand by you in good times and bad times. I promise to protect and guard you, and to prevent you from any harm. I promise to provide anything you need for you. I promise to take the best care of you. I promise to use your name with the respect it deserves. I promise to always wear the ring with your name in it, as a symbol of my love. I promise to obey you, no matter what. I promise to respect your wishes and not to be selfish. I promise to look after you in sickness and in health. I solemnly promise all of this to you, Severus Snape, my only love. May these words create a strong loving bond, which can only be broken by death. If I break the promises made, or treat you not in the manner I should be, I'll make sure I'll die. May all the good forces and spirits bless our love eternally.... So it will be done... Lady Darkness' Lady Darkness. Originally found at Severely Obsessed: A Tribute to Severus Snape.*

<http://www.freewebs.com/severelyobsessed/index.htm> (23 January 2007). Quoted by Narcissam. 'Severus, Come to Me...' FandomWank. 22 October 2006. http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/1015949.html (24 January 2007).

to explore whichever aspect of devotion interests you most.' She'd whispered the word 'fictional' as though it were obscene, and made a complicated little gesture, like a religious hand-sign to ward off evil.

'Er, thanks,' Arc said dubiously. 'We're actually searching for a friend of ours called Warr1or. Have any of you seen him?'

'Ah, yes, the anti-slasher,' said the cultist approvingly. 'Yes, we rescued him from that horrid fleet of Jammies, and put him to work tending our herd of dragons. The bulls, you see, are venomous, and prefer to be handled by men, whom they consider more innately respectful. Although I don't know why,' she added, frowning. 'No one could respect or cherish the source of their power more than we do.'⁷³

'Is the venom very dangerous?' Xena asked curiously.

'Oh, yes,' replied a nearby cultist. 'It can be quite lethal.'

'Then why do you keep dragons at all?' Xena persisted, and the cultist rolled her eyes and laughed a tinkling, feminine laugh.

⁷³ 'A venom cock, they're called. I'd heard the words grunted respectfully among pottery clan man. I'd also heard the words mentioned by women wearing a carefully blank expression cultivated to hide opinion. Understand, women do not rever the venom cock as men do. They see it for what it is: an uncontrollable reaction to an impending event, and a slightly foolish reaction at that.' Cross, Janine. Touched by Venom. Roc Trade (November 1, 2005).

‘For their milk, silly,’ she said. ‘See how soft it makes our skin?’ She held out one graceful arm, which Xena stroked appreciatively.

Arc, meanwhile, had thought of something. ‘Have any of you heard of PrinceC?’ she asked shrewdly, and a chorus of gasps and giggles answered her. The throng fell into elaborate semi-swoons, hands pressed theatrically to their foreheads. ‘We’re working with him,’ Arc continued. ‘He’ll be very displeased if we don’t return with Warr1or.’

They looked delighted by this news. ‘Ohhh, so we risk incurring PrinceC’s displeasure?’ said one breathlessly, and the others giggled in an over-excited way that rather suggested they looked forward to this outcome.⁷⁴ Arc, recognizing that her strategy had not gone as planned, reluctantly admitted that this was so.

‘Then you must stay, and be our guests!’ said the cultist who’d spoken first, happily, and there seemed nothing for it but to wander their territory, waiting for some sort of inspiration to strike.

‘I could probably take them all,’ Xena offered as we strolled off.

⁷⁴ Some rabid het-devotees are much addicted to the idea of a sort of romanticized BDSM, which they write into thinly-veiled fantasies/ stories about Snape, the Phantom of the Opera, or whichever fictional male they’re currently devoted to.

'It would be wrong to attack unarmed women,' Arc pointed out, adding firmly, 'and if you weren't talking about fighting, *I don't want to hear about it.*' Xena lapsed into blushing silence. By this time we'd entered a rose garden-cum-maze,⁷⁵ and we rounded a corner we discovered our missing Elizabeths, seated on a bench and looking shaken.

A little close questioning uncovered a sordid tale. In order to prove they weren't members of the Cult of the Gay Unicorn, our two Elizabeths had been forced to undergo a ritual which involved, as far as we could piece together from their embarrassed mumbles, licking chocolate sauce off a doll.⁷⁶ 'It was

⁷⁵ The rose garden-cum-maze is a multiple shout-out to PotO roses, rose-scented baths, the maze in Labyrinth (and in countless romance/fantasy novels), and all those fanfiction readers who loathe the word 'cum.' Thanks to Tree_and_leaf, I am also going to claim it as a reference to the Romance of the Rose; goodness knows, if anyone has a contrived, formalized view of romantic love it would be my Tartanists.

⁷⁶ The doll, and, alas, the chocolate sauce, were inspired by this: 'A hand taps my shoulder. "Do you want hear about my dolls?" asks its owner, handing me her card. "Pat Berschied," it reads. "Gerry's Travelin' [sic] Gerrymigo Tart." A pin badge for her hometown of Paducah, Kentucky, is attached. Full marks for civic pride. "We have our own little Gerry community in Paducah," she enthuses. "We meet once a month with dolls from Gerry's films and have parties with them. We dress 'em up like his characters."....Another voice pipes up. "I have a Gerry doll. It's a mannequin really, but it's full-size and anatomically correct." Kelly's friend Paulette Comstock, who hails from Wisconsin, moves closer. She wears a T-shirt featuring several photographs of Butler. Her hair is a shock of dark cherry, framing piercing pale green eyes. The look could be bottled: menopausal intensity. "We dress him up too," she says with a wink. "It's great fun. Although it can get out of hand. You ever tried cleaning up chocolate spread?"' 'The Herald' via 'Thomson Dialog NewsEdge.' 11 February 2006.

<http://www.tmcnet.com/usubmit/2006/02/11/1362913.htm> (24 January 2007).

huge, it was huge,' one Elizabeth kept sobbing, and we eventually established that she meant the *doll* was huge: life-sized, in fact, and wearing, at least initially, a tuxedo and a white mask.⁷⁷ Xena looked appalled, and I can't say I blamed her.

And here we were, I remind you, doomed to attend some sort of cultic ritual in a few short hours! Who knew, I mean to say, what they had in store for us. We looked at one another, and shuddered.

⁷⁷ As Likescarecrows and Amy_star_ pointed out, the doll with the tuxedo and the white mask could be Tuxedo Mask. I was thinking Phantom of the Opera, but Tuxedo Mask would make just as much sense for het fangirls, so picture whichever one creeps you out the most.

Mina de Malfois and the Honey'd Briar (part four)

When my alarm rang, I couldn't remember at first why I'd set it. I'd been dreaming about PrinceC. The dream had started out entirely safe for work, with PrinceC and I watching 'the Princess Bride' together, and heated up considerably from there. I mean to say, he'd just said 'Guide my sword,'⁷⁸ in a voice made husky with desire, when I was rudely woken by the noise. I crawled out of bed, deeply relieved to find this wasn't a workday, and set the coffee perking while I showered and dressed in crisp, clean pyjamas.

Soon I was comfortably seated in front of the computer screen, clutching a large mug of revivifying liquid and waiting for the others to log on. We'd arranged an early-morning gaming session, so we'd all be present when we completed our mission, rescued Warr1or, and accumulated our points. I felt ready to face anything, even the Tented Tartanists' rituals.

In the gameworld, it was overcast and looked ready to rain. Once we'd all assembled in the maze, Arc led us back to the

⁷⁸ A phallic reference so obvious I shouldn't be pointing it out, really.

main clearing, and we saw that the cultists were busily erecting a sort of open-air tent made out of some shiny, silver material.⁷⁹ ‘Ah, you’re here!’ said one of their apparent leaders, herding us inside to sit, cross-legged, on silk cushions that had been arranged in a huge circle. ‘Sit near me, pets, and I’ll help you follow our proceedings,’ she said warmly, and there seemed little to do right now but comply.

‘We’ll begin with the fanfiction reviews,’ another announced, and several of the cultists produced notes.

‘It’s traditional to begin with critiques of our recent fanfiction,’ explained the one who seemed to have taken charge of us, and Arc nodded intelligently. I sat up a little straighter, interested in spite of myself. You never know where you might stumble across interesting tips and advice on fanfiction, after all. Honing one’s craft takes constant effort and input.

Not here, though, apparently. The critiques began with a cultist, who stood and introduced herself as Christine, solemnly informing us that Meg’s latest story was one of the most beautiful she’d ever read. Meg, in turn, assured us in all seriousness that Christine had recently written the most moving fanfic *she’d* ever

⁷⁹ It’s a tinfoil tent. Like a tinfoil hat, but bigger. And they’re erecting it, of course.

read. Their part of the ritual seemingly over, they concluded their strange duet by curtsying formally to each other and sat down again. You could tell Meg and Christine were seasoned hands at this. Probably they'd been participating in these rituals for quite a while now.⁸⁰

'Johnson,' Xena murmured derisively.⁸¹

'The reciprocal civility of authors,' Arc agreed.

Then things got slightly more complicated as three young cultists rose from their places in the circle, suppressing nervous smiles and standing up as rigidly as if they faced a military review. Gerry'sGirl, reading quickly, said that Darla had written a really good fanfic that we should all read. Darla breathlessly did her bit, telling us that Mrs.Sev had also written a really good fanfic and we should all read it. Mrs.Sev, as I'd been beginning to suspect she might, declared that we should all read the really good fanfic that Gerry'sGirl had written. Exchanging relieved glances, they all sat

⁸⁰ Obvious Phantom of the Opera references: Meg, Christine, Gerry'sGirl, and the 'strange duet.'

⁸¹ Samuel Johnson: 'The reciprocal civility of authors is one of the most risible scenes in the farce of life.' Johnson is also, arguably, a pun: it's slang for 'penis.' 'Johnson.' <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=johnson> (24 January 2007). While we're on the subject of euphemisms, 'honeypot' is archaic slang for the vagina. 'Honeyed words' are praise or flattery; 'briar' could be taken as a metaphor for penis (look at Sleeping Beauty, sent to sleep by one prick and, in the older tellings, awoken by another). So the 'Honey'd Briar' is either a euphemism for sex, or a joke at the expense of the Tartanists and their exaggerated regard for the phallus.

down again, with the air of people who'd completed a daunting task and were satisfied with how they'd acquitted themselves.⁸² The other cultists smiled encouragingly throughout this performance, and applauded quietly afterwards.

Under what she probably thought was the safe cover of the noise of the cultists' clapping, Liz snorted, rather loudly. I don't say I blame her, but I rather wished she hadn't, as silence instantly fell and the entire circle turned to face us.

'Is something funny, dear?' asked the one who'd ushered us in, and though her tone was still kindly you could sense a certain iron entering into it. These matronly types, I know from experience, can put prison guards to shame. I wished there was some way to slip Liz a warning, because she obviously hadn't taken note of the steely-eyed gaze some of the cultists were directing her way.

'It's just that none of you are going to improve as writers if you can't criticize each other's work,' Liz said obliviously, and I cringed. Aside from disrupting a ceremonial occasion, she was trotting out the conversational equivalent of a hand grenade there, and I rather wished she'd shut up before the whole hive was

⁸² Christine and Meg are clearly PotO phans; Gerry'sGirl would be a Gerard Butler fan, Darla a Spike fan, and Mrs.Sev a Snape fan.

roused.

‘Oh?’ said the motherly cultist dangerously, still smiling sweetly. ‘Do any of *you* write fanfiction?’

There was a pause. To my horror, I saw that my companions had involuntarily turned to look at me. ‘Well, yes,’ I admitted. ‘I do.’

‘What’s your name, dear?’ purred the cultist, and I tossed my hair back. If these people thought they could make my fanfiction the target of their pent-up critiquing urges as some sort of childish revenge on Liz, they had another think coming.

‘Mina de Malfois,’ I told her coldly, and watched it hit home. There was a second silence, deeper than the first, and then a mad scramble as the majority of the cultists fell on their faces. Only their leaders still sat facing me, the faces in question now suffused with awe.

‘Your portrayal of Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina is masterful,’ one said hoarsely.

‘Masterful!’ several echoed.

‘How wonderful that you’ve joined our circle!’ said the matronly one, sweeping said circle with a look that left no doubt she was laying claim to full credit for our having joined it. ‘This is a marvellous opportunity for us to tell you which of your extremely

masculine heroes are our favourites, and what should happen next in your stories.'

And they proceeded to, at length, the younger cultists sitting up eagerly to join in the discussion of which of my heroes and scenes were the best and hottest. Several cultists confessed that my depiction of Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina had revived their flagging real-world marriages to an, judging by the details they shared, astounding degree. Others said that they'd entirely forsaken mundane men to devote themselves to Lord Silvestre as depicted in my fanfics. I confess to a slight enjoyment of this stage of the proceedings, although Xena bored quickly and began to tap her fingers in a pointed manner. Arc leaned towards me and hissed, 'Perhaps your newfound influence can be used to our advantage.'

Oh, right: the mission. 'I say,' I interrupted awkwardly, and was gratified by the respectful hush that fell over the cultists, 'we really do have to be going, and we need to take Warr1or with us. Sorry.'

'But what about incurring PrinceC's displeasure?' wailed one, disappointed.

'When we see him,' Arc assured her, 'we'll be sure to tell him you kept Warr1or in captivity for ages. He'll be very

displeased.'

'Gosh, will he?' said the cultist, brightening.

'Will he punish us?' asked one, blushing all the way down to her cleavage. For some reason she aimed this question at Xena, so Xena answered.

'Probably,' she said off-handedly, raking the girl with a glance that made her blush even more deeply, 'but I don't know if he's a really *skilful* disciplinarian. He's young, you know. Lacks experience.' A fair number of the cultists, I noticed, lapsed into a thoughtful silence at her words.

'Let's go,' Arc snapped as soon as they produced Warr1or. He was looking dishevelled in stained and charred lavender-striped pyjamas, but also, I noticed, rather buff. I suppose his avatar had built up strength points while it was managing the dragon herd.

We trudged back along the path, mostly in silence. The only one who seemed disposed to chat was Warr1or, rendered nervously talkative by relief at being rescued, I suppose, and he directed most of his remarks to me, because he recognized my name. I listened to his mingled disparagement of slash and praise of my own work semi-attentively, wondering to myself if I'd finally reached the saturation point, because quite honestly the subj. of the

agreed-upon brilliance of my fanfiction was beginning to bore me. Eventually we emerged to find that a second ship had parked alongside ours, although I'm pretty sure that parked is the wrong word. It was, of course, PrinceC.

'Mission accomplished, I see,' he greeted us, and Arc informed him that no, it wasn't quite, and explained that he had to hop along now and earn his share of the booty by putting on a good display of phallogentric displeasure.

'No problem at all,' he said cheerfully, and I shot him a disgusted look. I noted with mild satisfaction that Liz, the Elizabeths, and Warr1or all loyally shot him d. looks as well. It's good to have back-up in these things.

'And you,' Arc added, turning on Xena, 'might as well go with him.'

'Those poor women *did* look as if they needed my help,' Xena said, with a grin that astonished me. I mean to say, Arc had spoken with her usual unflappable calm, but it was readily apparent to me that she was feeling some slight urge to throttle Xena, and it boggled me that Xena could grin in the face of such simmering what-do-you-call-it. 'I'll hike my way overland to look in on the Cult of the Gay Unicorn, too,' Xena was saying thoughtfully, 'and gradually make my way back to the mainland.'

‘I’m sure you’ll turn up eventually,’ Arc said, and I couldn’t tell if she was amused or furious.

‘I always do,’ Xena agreed, and turned to PrinceC. ‘Care to make a manly wager?’ she asked him, eyes glinting playfully.

He held up his hands in mock surrender. ‘I know when I’m...er...licked. But this should be fun anyway. I’ve been reading the works of Aleister Crowley lately, and this will be a rare opportunity to put his ideas into practice.’

They headed off, and we returned to the *Honey’d Briar*. ‘Was he kidding about Crowley?’ I burst out, as we sailed away.

‘I doubt it,’ said Liz darkly. Warr1or looked thoroughly scandalized.

‘A lot of randy teenagers go through a Crowley phase,’ Arc said comfortingly, but then slightly spoiled the effect by muttering, ‘Of course, *most* of them gain eventual self-control.’

We sailed gloomily back to port to add up our points.

Mina de Malfois and the Staffing Problem (part one)

The weather online had been terrible. We'd had extended drivel, followed by periods of freezing irony and a few isolated slutstorms.⁸³ Some of the worst hit areas were still moaning about How Mean Fandom Had Become,⁸⁴ which rather made one wish they'd be hit again, harder.

I didn't care, though. I was contentedly absorbed in the problem of finding appropriate servants to maintain Malfois Manor in the manner to which I intended to become accustomed.

One of the features of *Sanguinity Online*, you see, is a weekly dispersal of tithing points to paid-up users who've put in enough gaming hours. These t. points are useless in and of themselves--you can't store them for longer than a week, or turn them into wealth or anything--but if you give them away to other players, they turn into gaming money for the recipients, plus your

⁸³ Slutstorms: Angua 9. 'Jesus H. Everloving CHRIST, What a Sexist!' 29 May 2006. <http://angua9.livejournal.com/255259.html> (21 January 2007). Carlanime. 'Let's Talk About...Sluts.' 27 May 2006. <http://carlanime.livejournal.com/246901.html> (21 January 2007).Gunderpants. 'Lessons in Manliness from Vanceone.' 30 May 2006. <http://gunderpants.livejournal.com/250864.html> (21 January 2007).

⁸⁴ The eternal moan of those being called out on their own bad behaviour. The self-appointed Cult of Nice are notorious for this.

own popularity points go up. Naturally most of my regular readers, having been alerted to my in-game presence by the enthusiastic praise-hymns of the Cult of the Tented Tartan, had added me to their recipient lists.

My in-game wealth having increased at a gratifying rate, Malfois Manor was now surrounded by extensive private grounds, which included a graveyard. In a flash of brilliant inspiration, I had created, at the edge of the graveyard nearest the public path, a tasteful shrine to BalletChic, featuring a white marble statue of a winged, veiled ballet dancer holding an open volume, the cover of which was engraved simply, 'Ciyerra.' Naturally the fangirls flocked to gaze at this. The unlucky avatars with free or discounted accounts, having no funds to spend, contented themselves with milling outside my wrought-iron fence, inhaling the scent of the virtual roses and night-blooming jasmine. Those lucky avatars possessed of funds could, for a small fee, enter to set their overwrought selves around the memorial, where they lit candles and incense, flirted with their fellow self-injurious, and read their poetry out loud to each other. The small fees quickly repaid the cost of the monument, the fence, and the graveyard, and were now daily accumulating in Lady Mina's vaults.

And so, well flush with funds, I'd inserted a tasteful

announcement on my livejournal and on my Penn'd Passion and *Sanguinity* homepages, informing those interested that Malfois Manor was ready to employ a small staff of handpicked players. The game, you see, allows those with sufficient property to hire a clique from amongst the registered, but usually non-paying, players. They, poor souls, get a location to call their own, and increase their ability to participate in a variety of ways, in return for which they spend a set number of their in-game hours hanging around being helpful and looking the part. I'd already offered Liz the position of head housekeeper--she had a paid, but not premium, account, and so owned no property, and gladly accepted to get a roof over her head.

I was thinking along the lines of acquiring a maid, so my head housekeeper would have someone to be head of, a butler, because those are ever so impressive, and a groundskeeper. Warr1or promptly laid claim to the groundskeeper role, which I'd rashly said called for a sort of gardener slash gamekeeper,⁸⁵ and which provided a small private cottage near the stables as incentive. I agreed to hire him, provided he promised not to fill the currently empty stables with dragons, and turned my attention to

⁸⁵ Warr1or may, just possibly, be expecting more excitement from his in-game job than Mina meant to imply there would be.

the other applicants.

Some really special people were writing in. The first applicant for the maid position bore a string of aliases, which I recognized only too well. She was one of that rare species of ass who, having decided she had multiple personalities (in spite of honest input from observers to the effect that she barely had one), refused to rest content in her multiplicity. Instead she made a practice of barging into other people's conversations to try to insist that they use non-number-specific pronouns.⁸⁶ This was, of course, impossible to do without cruelly assaulting the English language, but since the young person in question mangled the language herself on a regular basis, she wasn't much bothered by that. She also, while tirelessly urging complete strangers to contort their speech to accommodate her, reacted hysterically to any criticism of her own writing or ideas, because she was highly sensitive to insult if it were directed towards rather than from her self or selves. She'd ambitiously suggested she could be both maid and butler, but I refused her as politely yet firmly as possible on both counts.

The next applicant was a woman who'd contacted me a while back, ostensibly to praise my fanfiction, but actually she

⁸⁶ While I have met 'multiples' online, this is not actually poking fun at them, but at the arguments over 'non-gender specific' pronouns.

seemed to have confused me with an Agony Aunt. 'I'm a monogamist,' the earnestly misguided damsel had written, 'but my boyfriend is a polygamist. Of course, it would be morally wrong for me to criticize his nature or impose my choices on him. The problem is that I spend a lot of time at home alone while he sees his other partners. Do you have any suggestions of ways I could pass the time?' My editorial pen had fairly itched to tell her she was using far too many words to say 'doormat,' but I'd wisely refrained. Hell hath no fury more incoherent than that of a woman busily aiding and abetting the guy scorning her, and the thought of my inbox filling up with outraged self-justifications from the willingly victimized had given me pause. I'd decided on the indirect approach, and had urged her to spend her spare time playing *Sanguinity*. Perhaps, I'd reasoned to myself, her virtual life would be a comforting contrast to her real one.

Now here she was, urging me to accept her pretty, innocent, sixteen-year-old avatar as a junior maid. I felt a slight obligation here, since I'd rec'd *Sanguinity* to her in the first place, so after consulting Liz I hired her and gave her a bedroom in the servants' quarters.

And then I came to an application that *really* gave me pause. It was from Ciyerra, and she was cheekily applying for a

position I hadn't created, though I saw at once that it was a damned clever idea. She would, she informed me, be willing to drift in to serve as the resident Malfois Manor ghost.

Wary of trickery, and feeling the need for guidance from a higher power, I contacted Arc immediately, and laid out the recent developments as clearly and concisely as possible. Ghostly *Sanguinity* avatars, I pointed out, can only communicate sporadically via séance and traditional encounters, and are mostly confined to semi-transparent lurking at the location to which they're bound, so this would afford me an opportunity to exercise some control over her in-game presence.

'What do you think?' I asked.

'I love ghost stories and haunted houses,' she replied. A bit startling, that. I'd never seen this irrational side of Archivist12 before now. 'I think you should hire her. Provided, of course, you don't mind being associated with the current controversy surrounding her.'

'There's controversy surrounding her?' I typed. It was news to me. I thought Ciyerra had gained near-universal acceptance across the internet by this point. She was more popular than Jebus,⁸⁷ according to her followers.

⁸⁷ John Lennon once said something like this about the Beatles. Jebus comes from the

'Have a look at the discussion boards,' Arc said, so I wandered over to see what was up at PP, and was soon absorbed in a saga of amateur detecting that made one feel as if Nancy Drew were once more amongst us.⁸⁸

Not everyone, I learned, had signed on as a true believer. The IM séance had fanned the devotion of the credulous, but it had sparked an investigation by a handful of doubting Thomasinas. These had diligently combed every entry in BalletChic's abandoned journal, and tracked down every comment she'd ever made, putting together a list of all known information about her which included her real name and the city and state she'd inhabited. Having given her airy nothingness a habitation and a name,⁸⁹ they'd narrowed down to three the number of hospitals she could

Simpsons.

⁸⁸ Some other sagas of amateur detecting: 'Before her tragic death of noncontagious but totally untreatable tuberculosis, Limeybean founded the ljscret LiveJournal community. Turns out Limeybean had secrets of her own. Just little, tiny secrets-- like she never had tuberculosis, and she wasn't dead.'Avacado. 'The Tragic-ish Death of Limeybean.' FandomWankWiki. 31 January 2006. http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Tragic-ish_Death_of_Limeybean (24 January 2007). 'A well-loved Codename: Kids Next Door fan named Renee falls into a coma. This prompts a huge show of sympathy from the KND forums as Renee's siblings keep the community updated on her condition. Then, Renee wakes from her coma and-- while still in intensive care-- personally thanks her online well-wishers via laptop. From there, Renee's condition deteriorates and improves a number of times. Also, the virus she has is so rare that there's not even a name for it, though it's apparently bad enough to inspire her and her siblings to stutter in their text.'Reeve. 'You Cannot Deny the Emotional Impact of the Stutter Typing.' FandomWankWiki. 29 August 2006. http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/You_cannot_deny_the_emotional_impact_of_the_stutter-typing%21 (24 January 2007).

have been brought to if she'd really attempted suicide.

I was riveted. These girl detectives were, I put it to you, a shrewd and determined bunch. I mentally cheered them on in their tireless search for the facts, and read my way through each post and link and discussion, eagerly awaiting the moment when they would, obviously, prove BalletChic had never seen the inside of an ambulance, and Ciyerra had *certainly* never emerged from the inside of a coffin.

Which made it all the more startling when I reached the last post from one of the two primary, and most admirably cynical, investigators. She'd reported, in a brief but data-rich post, that she had called hospital x and been told that a patient had been admitted under BalletChic's real name on such-and-such a date--the evening, she noted, of BalletChic's last post--but the patient had died without ever regaining consciousness.

⁸⁹ 'And give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.' Shakespeare, MND Vi15-17.

Mina de Malfois and the Staffing Problem (part two)

She would not, the departing investigator informed us, be pursuing inquiries about BalletChic or Ciyerra any further; she was completely convinced of the truth of what she had been told. As unlikely as it seemed, she concluded, BalletChic had really killed herself. Ciyerra was either someone else, or a ghost. The investigator added that her money was on ‘someone else,’ but that at any rate, she wouldn’t be following up on that. BalletChic was really dead, the amateur detective felt terrible for ever having doubted her, and unless we wanted to call *her* credibility into question, there seemed no response to this.

I don’t mind telling you that my blood ran cold as I read this, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I had spotted, you see, something truly disturbing. Of course the amateur detectives didn’t realize this, but this theory that BalletChic was deceased and Ciyerra just a standard impostor didn’t fit all the facts. I mean, I had one fact they didn’t, and I had it straight from Arc: Ciyerra’s IP matched BalletChic’s.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ The identical IP addresses are another Charlotte Lennox reference.

After an irrational moment of feeling chilled to the core I got hold of myself. Ciyerra couldn't, just couldn't, be a ghost. Either the matching IP meant that she'd been BalletChic's sister or roommate (although one rather quailed at the thought of a sister or roommate so heartlessly morbid they'd impersonate a dead girl), or, even more likely, what we had here was a phoney investigator. Yes, that fit. One person among the handful of doubters had pretended to go along with the sceptics, but in reality had been a Ciyerra supporter, and she'd concocted the whole story about contacting the hospital in order to 'prove' BalletChic's death to the credulous. I sighed heavily, relieved to have seen through it.

But then, a couple of days later, another of the lead investigators threw in the towel and said she, too, had reached a dead end. She told a similar tale of having contacted the area hospitals, and of having been informed by hospital x that yes, a girl of that name had been admitted but had failed to recover consciousness. Everything--hospital, phone number, name, date, and time--matched.

It gave me the willies. Not that I believed Ciyerra was a ghost, but I was starting seriously to think she was some sort of lunatic. If BalletChic really *was* dead, then what sort of person would be pretending to be her? And did I, I asked myself, want

that sort of person haunting Malfois Manor?

My betas, showing a remarkable lack of timing, had sent back a list of tentative suggestions for polishing chapter four of 'At His Lordship's Behest.' 'Dash it all, Clive,' I replied to my betas--I often address them this way,⁹¹ even though they are in fact a group of people, most of them female, and none of them named Clive; I am *just that British*--'Dash it all, Clive, this isn't the time. I'll get to it when I get to it, old chap, but just now I have to sort out some in-game complications. Ta very much for your input, though, and I'll be sure to credit you all by name.' Beta readers like these little acknowledgements.

And I was busy, although strictly speaking I wasn't *doing* anything, unless fretting counts as doing. I couldn't shake off my fear that BalletChic had had a mouth-foamy axe-wielding dangerous maniac of a sister or BFF. The thought that I had had email from someone whose idea of an entertaining lark was to go around impersonating a deceased person was horrid enough in itself. The added fact of the identical IP address, indicating that this morbid fake had shared accommodations with poor BalletChic, was an additional turn of the screw.⁹²

⁹¹ This is why Mina's betas came to be known as 'the Clives.'

⁹² James, Henry. The Turn of the Screw.

‘What on *earth* do you think motivates her?’ I asked Arc.

‘*Quieta movere magna merces videbatur,*’ she said, which was no help whatsoever.

‘I can’t hire her. I mean, would you want to hang around *Sanguinity* with a lunatic?’ I went on.

‘Whither thou goest,’ she typed.⁹³ A chilling phrase, but she’d spelt ‘ghost’ wrong, though I tactfully refrained from pointing this out.

The answer came to me the next day at work. I’m often subject to sudden inspirations at work, particularly while working the evening shift. It’s the combination of being slightly tired and bored out of my skull that does it, I suppose. I enter a kind of drudgery-induced trance, and all sorts of ideas flood in while my consciousness is being altered by rude customers and idiotic demands.

Anyway, I saw suddenly that I’d been getting ahead of myself in panicking. What I needed to do, obviously, was confirm the reports the amateur investigators had reported. I’d been in fandom long enough to be thoroughly familiar with cliques, after

⁹³ Ruth to Naomi: ‘Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.’ Ruth 1:16.

all; I must be losing it, to be so easily convinced by the sworn testimony of two complete strangers posting online. For all I knew, they were each other's sockpuppets, or better yet, two sockpuppets belonging to BalletChic. They had different writing styles, but this would hardly be the first instance of someone faking *that*. It's not like I'd met them for lunch or anything, so I could look them in the eyes and gain a true assessment of their personal honesty.⁹⁴

So the next day I tackled the thing head on. I sat down with the phone book--the actual, physical, tangible phone book; I was being thoroughly and sensibly paranoid at this point--and looked up the number for the hospital they'd claimed BalletChic had been admitted to. I dialled the number, and a pleasant female voice greeted me with confirmation that I'd reached the front desk of the hospital in question. So far, so good. 'I'm looking for a patient,' I said, and gave the woman BalletChic's supposed name.

'One moment, please,' she said cheerfully, and put me on hold. When she came back on the line, all the cheerful had left her voice. 'I'm terribly sorry,' she began, and went on to confirm that the patient had indeed been admitted--and on the right day--but

⁹⁴ Another reference to Charlotte Lennox and the MsScribe affair. MsScribe's defenders refused to believe she was lying because they'd 'met her in person.' Lennox, Charlotte. 'The MsScribe Story.' Bad Penny. 15 June 2006 (and forward). http://www.journalfen.net/community/bad_penny/1074.html (24 January

she had died without regaining consciousness.

I don't even know what I said in response, but I got off the phone, quickly, and back to my computer. I unfolded the whole uncanny tale to Arc the instant she finally showed up online.

'I think you should go ahead and hire her in-game,' Arc said calmly.

'But, Arc,' I protested, crept to the bone. 'I don't want Malfois Manor being haunted by a real virtual ghost, or a lurking lunatic.'

'Nonsense,' she said, displaying a callous lack of empathy for my c. to the b.-ness. 'It will add atmosphere.' This was, I suppose, true, but much good it would do me to possess a reputation-enhancing bit of atmospheric if I were amongst those being terrified by it.

'It jolly well won't if I'm too filled with dread to log in,' I pointed out reasonably.

There was a pause. 'Have I ever mentioned that I do a lot of volunteer work?' Arc asked.

I frowned. She was straying far and loose from the important subject of the Malfois Manor haunting, in my opinion. 'Oh, yes?' I typed coldly.

‘For instance, I sit on a board that reviews the non-medical hiring decisions of several area hospitals,’ she went on.

I paused. Arc seemed to be trying to communicate something here. Hope flourished slightly. Perhaps Arc had known something about BalletChic in life that would render the spirit of Ciyerra less damned disturbing, though I couldn’t imagine what. Or else--I struggled to remain rational--or else, maybe Arc knew that BalletChic had had a sister who was deranged but harmless, and this hypothetical non-violent nutter was the one playing Ciyerra.

‘You mean,’ I suggested cautiously, ‘you recognized BalletChic’s name as that of a former patient?’

‘I mean,’ she typed back patiently, ‘I recognized BalletChic’s name as that of a current front-desk receptionist. She’s a full-time employee. It’s how she affords things like ‘premium accounts’ and ‘repayment agreements.’’

Arc, I tell you, moves in mysterious ways.

Mina de Malfois and the Attempted Coup (part one)

I wandered across the grounds of Malfois Manor--of course it's possible to apparate your avatar directly inside your home, but I preferred to touch down on Dread Lane and stroll in through the front gates, admiring the rolling lawns and gardens. Warr1or was doing beautiful work. Just now he was watering the rosebushes, although his puzzled frown seemed directed at Stasia, my junior maid, who was dancing and pirouetting along a mother-of-pearl flagstone path, oblivious. I made a mental note to turn down the volume on the in-game soundtrack. All residents can choose music in their own rooms, but only the property *owner* can set the volume and choose the master playlist.

Or, I thought irritably, maybe I ought to turn it off altogether. I was feeling pretty damned annoyed with the stable of models and vocalists responsible for such features as the game's soundtrack and the appearances of the NPCs. Sure, these professionals had contributed to the atmosphere of the game, and had incidentally provided a new category of real-person fiction for those who liked that sort of thing. I'll grant you that that earned

them fair claim to their own following of fans.

But it did not, at least not in my opinion, justify their recent bid to take over the entire fandom.⁹⁵ These singers, musicians, and models, collectively known within *Sanguinity* fandom as 'the Voices,' were not only attempting to organize their own for-profit conferences, but were threatening to use their leverage to shut down all con activity by the fans, unless said activity had their prior approval and ongoing supervision.

It irked me. They had no right to meddle with fan activity. And yet that was exactly what they'd been trying to do, intruding themselves heavy-handedly into communities set up to organize conferences, and even criticizing fan-based charity drives and newsletters. It was an outrage.

This might have all amounted to nothing. The powers that be have made futile, impotent attempts to control fandom

⁹⁵ 'The Blake's 7 American fandom was, during the mid to late 1980s, in the middle of a power struggle between two different sets of fans. The main group, perceived as being the more powerful force in the community was the group of fans who friends of the main actors of the show. The actors included Paul Darrow. The second set of fans were what on-line fandoms would call big name fans in the sense that they were well known and respected zine publishers, fan fiction writers and fan artists. For various reasons, this second group wanted to be the group which the actors contacted for conventions and to act as mediators between them and other fen.' Laura. 'Blake's 7.' 14 May 2006. http://www.fanhhistory.com/index.php?title=Blake%27s_7 (24 January 2007).

before now, after all. Take those insecure profic authors⁹⁶ who wrap themselves in the franchise as a futile shield against critical readers, and who regularly mount flaccid attacks on fanfiction authors in a pitiful attempt to ride BNF coattails and stir up controversy. They usually can't keep it up for long.

But at about the same time this grumbling began from the Voices, a new player appeared on the *Sanguinity* landscape, and I sensed at once that here was a powerful emergent force. Well, just the fact that he'd come to my notice at all was telling, really. He'd dashed onto the scene with a handful of fics that were accomplished enough to briefly float a rumour that he was my sockpuppet, a charge Josh promptly denied, all the while charmingly professing himself flattered by the misunderstanding. 'Mina can't have a sockpuppet,' the Mean Girls sneered. 'She puts her name to everything, even things she hasn't written.'⁹⁷ That was an unfair reference to an honest mistake from eons ago, and my friends once again lost no time in leaping repeatedly and energetically to my defence, occasionally accidentally lying in their

⁹⁶ 'Author of Diagnosis Murder books. Hater of fanfic.' Narcissam. 'Lee Goldberg.' FandomWankWiki. 26 January 2005.

http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Lee_Goldberg (24 January 2007).

⁹⁷ Eilan. 'Plagiarism and all that.' 24 November 2005. FandomWankWiki. http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Plagiarism_And_All_That (21 January 2007).

well-meant enthusiasm.

Next there was, for a short time, a suggestion that he was a PrinceC sockpuppet. I wasn't fooled, though. There was no way this Josh Amos⁹⁸ was a sockpuppet. His was a distinct, recognizable, unique voice, and besides, his *Sanguinity* avatar was noted for its tousled brownish-blond hair, whereas everybody knew PrinceC chose avatars with sleek black hair like his own, so he'd be easily recognized at cons.

Josh Amos, it quickly became evident, epitomized cool. His fanfics were brilliant, but he downplayed them. His avatar was frankly gorgeous, but thus far he'd declined to flirt with anyone. Fans went out of their way to talk to him, but instead of taking this for granted, he responded graciously to each and every comment, always managing to sound faintly surprised at the attention. He'd never said a word about his connections, but somehow a whisper ran through fandom that he had several of the Voices on speed-dial, or that he'd met the game designers, or that he was, perhaps, an actor himself.⁹⁹ He fast became a nucleus for those fans who structured their lives around 'encounters' with their favourite celebrities, and a growing number of these insisted he would turn

⁹⁸ Josh Amos gets his name from Josh Groban and Tori Amos.

⁹⁹ Josh is, in other words, very like Jordan Wood/Amy Player, although Josh

out to be someone famous. I found it distasteful, personally.

And besides, Josh was, unfortunately, also becoming a focal point for those fans who supported the Voices in their bid to control *Sanguinity* fandom. He didn't call them fans--he called them 'Nomadic Listeners,' whatever that was supposed to mean¹⁰⁰--but he made convincing arguments that their loyalties should lie with the Voices who had given them so much joy with their NPC characterizations and sheer soaring musicality. Was it, he asked, too much to expect that they retain control over their artistic creations?

Surprisingly, Warr1or provided a strong counterargument. At issue, he pointed out, was not just control, but a fundamental moral schism between the greed of the Voices, who sought to limit *Sanguinity* fandom to financial transactions and paid appearances at Voice-arranged events, and the higher, purer, selfless participation of the fans, who were motivated only by love and creativity. Reading his impassioned open letter, I felt tears spring to my eyes. It was a masterpiece of moving sentimentality and an almost spiritual plea for the fans to transcend commerce in favour of art. At least, it was until the point when he accused the

has not yet claimed to be on the run from the IRA.

¹⁰⁰ Here Josh is shamelessly ripping off Tori Amos, who once called her fans 'ears with feet.'

Voices of being immoral man-whores. One of the things I planned to do today was to discreetly ask him to tone that bit down. It wouldn't help us any if the fans started to sound like freaks.

When I entered Malfois Manor I saw that the ghost of Ciyerra had left a message in blood, or possibly lipstick, across the front hall mirror. 'How dare they? We're the real fans, not those starfuckers,'¹⁰¹ she'd scrawled angrily. I rather resented that 'we,' as it seemed to imply that she thought herself on equal BNF footing with myself, but I couldn't afford to alienate anyone right now. I needed her faction onside if we were going to successfully resist this attempted coup.

There'd already been one split among the Jolly Hockeystickers, and that had probably affected Ciyerra's base of support, since the two sides weren't currently speaking to each other and were automatically taking up opposite sides on every issue from appropriation to yaoi.

One doesn't like to imperil one's feminist cred, so I'd kept my derision to myself, but honestly, they were behaving like a bunch of girls. The split had occurred because a few of them had gotten their feelings hurt because some of their bestest chums had

¹⁰¹ Rednour, Shar. Starf*cker: A Twisted Collection of Superstar Fantasies. B&T (2001)

remarked that they didn't enjoy a particular secular holiday. This had been taken as an outrageous offence against everything the holiday could possibly be taken to stand for--patriotism, motherhood, and romantic love had been mentioned--and a series of huffy defriendings resulted. The newer, smaller group had gamely tried for ironic distance by calling themselves the Jolly Holidays,¹⁰² but their 'see us? We're laughing at you' pose rather failed to come off, as you'd be hard put to find a less jolly group anywhere outside of an actual morgue. They specialized in nursing their hurt feelings tenderly and proffering one another handkerchiefs and endless cups of imaginary tea.

Weeping copiously all the while, they'd recently come out

¹⁰² The Jolly Holidays are a reference to, among other things, these posts condemning Terry Pratchett fans for celebrating May 25th: 'The worst part is that Terry Pratchett, in honor of the king of British, comic scifi/fantasy, chose "Towel Day," a day of remembrance for the recently deceased Douglas Adams, as the date of the fictional rebellion/riot. So instead of commemorating an event of true loss and sadness, we get craptacular lilacs (which I'm allergic to) and endless repetition of "were you there" from people who weren't there, and could not have been there even if there was a "there" for them to have been in the first place.' Copperpoint. Livejournal. 25 May 2006.

<http://copperpoint.livejournal.com/625637.html> (24 January 2007). 'I've been getting annoyed at all the 25th May/lilac posts and, I thought, with good reason. You see, I thought that since Night Watch was fictional, commemorating its events in such a mawkish way is slightly disturbing, and that conversely, if one is to work purely from the internal validity of the book, since none of the people posting are mentioned, THEY WEREN'T THERE, and therefore they'd be showing disrespect to those who were.' Stealthmunchkin. 'Ok, I was wrong.' Livejournal. 25 May 2006.

strongly in support of Josh Amos, variously arguing that he had a delicate, sensitive nature akin to their own, that famous people had to put up with unfair scrutiny and criticism from a harsh, unappreciative world, and that the rest of fandom were 'the great unwashed' whom they didn't deign to interact with anyway.

So they wouldn't be supporting Ciyerra and the rest of us on principle, unless we lucked out and Josh denounced another of their cherished holidays, or kicked a puppy or something. But on the bright side, this meant that the vast majority of the Girls' Dormitory crowd would be on our side no matter what we did, as long as we agreed the Jolly Holiday lot were utter drips. Which, you know: they were. So no problem there.

Mina de Malfois and the Attempted Coup (part two)

When I walked into the front parlour I found Liz glaring at the bare windows. ‘Curtains!’ she said, and I assured her that there were plenty of funds in the household management account, and she had my full permish to access it at any time and acquire the window coverings of her choice. I hadn’t known what to pick, myself, so I’d left it for her rather than risk committing a tragic drapery faux pas.¹⁰³

She looked mollified by the news that she had use of funds to run the Manor. ‘We also,’ she said more mildly, ‘should do something about the junior maid’s room. She has basic furniture, but we should provide bedding and toiletries and a few extras.’

I waved an airy hand. The servants’ wages kept them wardrobed and paid for their non-working game activities, but I had no problem covering additional costs so they could live comfortably. ‘Help her ornament her room to her taste,’ I told Liz, and then added curiously, ‘What *is* her taste, anyway?’ It had occurred to me that although I had a passing knowledge of her

¹⁰³ RIP, Sirius Black.

disastrous real-life romance, I knew very little about Stasia's developing in-game persona.

'Wicca-light,' Liz informed me now. 'I think what her heart longs for are a few unicorn- and fairy-themed items, a stack of Guides for the Teen Witch, and some glitter and beads.'

I winced slightly, but agreed that Liz should take the girl shopping. After all, I was paying Stasia to keep the Manor tidy and, until we had a butler, answer the door if required; I hadn't bought the right to criticize her taste. What she wanted to do behind closed doors in the servants' quarters was her own lookout, though it was unsettling to be told that we were harbouring a probable Platinum RavingWench¹⁰⁴ reader.

Liz, whose key-toting avatar had settled in beautifully as the head housekeeper, produced a clipboard. 'You have several emails waiting for you,' she informed me now. 'I couldn't read them, of course, but most of the notifications that arrived on your desk had subject lines about Josh Amos.' She lowered her voice, even though we were the only ones in the room. 'There's a rumour going around that Josh actually *is* one of the Voices,' she whispered, 'and that he's concealing his true identity so that he can participate in the game without intimidating anyone.'

¹⁰⁴ That would be Silver Ravenwolf.

I frowned slightly. Liz spends her days off at the in-game fairs and markets, and at the theatres, so she picks up any gossip making the rounds. If she said that this was the emerging theory, I could trust implicitly that it was the latest, hottest tip. But it seemed to *me* that if Josh really was an in-game intrusion by one of the Powers That Be, he had most likely been sent here to spy on us.

Worried, I headed into my tastefully understated study and pulled a leather chair up to my oak-and-walnut desk--sorry to bother you with the details, but there's no point in being tastefully understated if no one ever notices. Most of my emails were, as Liz had warned, about Josh. Several passed on a story he'd 'let slip' in a *Sanguinity* tavern about several actors who had crashed at his place once. Claiming to be embarrassed, he'd said they'd had to sleep on his floor; some of my informants had bought his 'embarrassed' routine, but I bloody well didn't. If Josh Amos was releasing information about his Voice connections, it was because he *wanted* to encourage that line of speculation.

My final email was from Arc, and I'd saved it for last because it was the only one to which I intended to reply. No matter how busy I am, Arc gets an immediate response, and not just because she merits one: I just can't seem to hold off on replying to her. I feel happier just seeing mail from her in my inbox, somehow.

This message, however, failed to delight me. 'Sorry if your Penn'd Passion page gave you a shock,' she'd written, 'but I couldn't reach you on IM, and we can't be seen to drag our feet on such a serious matter, so I made the change the minute I heard the accusations. We'll set aside some time to go over your stories line by line, making absolutely sure there is nothing, no matter how miniscule, which requires further attribution. I take plagiarism very seriously, and,' the message concluded ominously, 'I expect you to do so as well.'¹⁰⁵

I felt slightly stomach-quivery at that last line. I could tell those ancient rumours had reached Arc's ears and, I realized belatedly, this might well be the first time she'd heard them. Certainly I never bring up unpleasantness from ancient days of yore when I posted at another archive entirely. I mean, why would I? But to a responsible soul like Arc, I saw now, that healthy impulse to just move on and let the dead past bury its dead might not appeal. She could be horribly honest and above-board. I sensed

¹⁰⁵ Arc does not share this unique definition of plagiarism: "She is not a plagiarist - she is a young woman who did not cite a book that she admitted to incorporating material from,' Heidi. Wikipedia. 6 July 2005. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Cassandra_Claire&diff=18273385&oldid=18273243 (21 January 2007). See also: Ignatius. 'The Cassie Claire Primer.' FandomWank. 14 October 2004. <http://www.journalfen.net/community/fwgreatesthits/2663.html?thread=154471#t154471> (21 January 2007).

she was going to be now. *What*, I wondered with a shiver, had she done to my Penn'd Passion page, exactly?

I braced myself, and went to see.

I hadn't braced myself enough. She'd taken down all my fanfiction. In place of the links to my stories there was a brief note apologizing for the inconvenience and stating simply that the stories would be available again shortly.

I stared at this in silent misery for several long moments before I saw the bright side. At least she hadn't humiliated me in public by spelling out what, exactly, was going on. She'd put up a minimal, but strictly truthful, statement, and not deigned to confirm, deny, or even acknowledge the hurtful rumours. That was something.

I pulled myself together and messaged her. There was no point in delaying; I couldn't possibly enjoy anything else, not even *Sanguinity*, until this was straightened out. She responded immediately, flipping me a text file containing the body of all of my fics, and suggesting we work our way through it together, line by line, doing a literary post-mortem. I agreed, dully.

'You do understand,' she asked gently, 'why we have to do this?'

'Yes,' I said.

‘I think too highly of you,’ she wrote, ‘to let you, even for a moment, inadvertently help the rumour-mongers make their case. If there are any problems remaining with your fanfiction, we’ll fix them now, and then you can put this behind you.’

The chilly, scared clenchedness started to leave my stomach. I felt less as if I’d swallowed a bucket of live frogs and ice. ‘I think I’ve got most of the quotes properly referenced now,’ I said helpfully, ‘but you’re right. We should make sure.’ Under Arc’s watchful and competent eye I had no doubt I could get any remaining difficulties sorted out.

And we did, though it took *hours*, with Arc quizzing me closely, even suspiciously, and bringing up books and programs I hadn’t thought about in years. She was a veritable citation machine. I marvelled at her stamina.

‘That took forever,’ I grumbled when we were finally done.

‘Someday years from now, when you’re writing the original work I know you’re capable of, you’ll thank me,’ she wrote, and signed off abruptly, before I could respond.

I felt myself blush warmly from head to toe, and the last of the nervous, attacked-and-surrounded feelings just dissolved in the face of this unexpected praise. I mean. Quite. Wow. I felt too

happy to sit still, and paced around giddily for a while before heading in to shower and get ready for bed. I had a full shift at work tomorrow, and then had to get back to *Sanguinity* to find out what devious schemes the fascist, controlling Voices were plotting, but right now none of that seemed to matter. Minor problems, really. I could deal with them easily. I could deal with *anything*. Let the Mean Girls say what they wanted: thanks to Arc, I'd risen above the reproach of even those with the longest memories.

I snuggled under the covers, toasty warm and strangely energized.

Mina de Malfois and the Attempted Coup (part three)

It's just as well I went to bed feeling confident of victory, because when I made it home from work and logged on the next day, intending to leave a politely worded comment on Warr1or's eljay urging him to leave off the sexual slurs, I found he'd updated with a veritable *screed* of insanity. It was as if he'd nailed the Ninety-Five Symptoms to fandom's front door, and then gone off to eat worms, as is traditional.¹⁰⁶

Someday, when I have an idle hour to fill, I intend to cross-stitch myself a sampler and hang it on the wall above my computer, after the manner of the pioneers. At the top I'll set my most oft-uttered prayer: Thank you, internet, for letting me observe so many crazy people from a safe distance.

But I digress. I was looking, as I say, at an impassioned rant by Warr1or.¹⁰⁷ If I was correct in my assumption that Josh

¹⁰⁶ That's a Diet of Worms joke.

¹⁰⁷ Warr1or's ranting style is, in general, a blend of Vanceone and FPB. Some of the points he touches on—his view of sexual 'transgressions'; his distaste for slash; his favourite authors; immoral musicians; his wish for 'probability,' by which he means confirmation of stereotypes, in literature--have been addressed at length by these gentlemen. A few examples should suffice to assure you that Warr1or's rant is no exaggeration. 'You hate Alchemy, I'm sure you think Plato, Aristotle and the rest of western civilization is worthless or worse,

Amos was a spy, sent among the fen to report back to the Powers That Be, what, I wondered now, would he make of this?

some sort of evil scam meant to oppress humanity, while only salvation can be found in some sort of post-modernist critical examination and promotion of some sort of value system that is totally contrary to anything resembling sanity.” Vanceone. 04 January 2007. <http://www.journalfen.net/community/harmonywank/11878.html?thread=385894#t385894> (21 January 2007). ‘Well, just to tweak you a bit, who else but Ginny does have claim on the title of "school bicycle?"’ Vanceone. Harmonywank. 27 May 2006. <http://www.journalfen.net/community/harmonywank/4456.html?thread=97128#t97128> (21 January 2007). ‘Ginny, while maybe not dating more than normal girls, is as far as we know the most traveled girl (or person) at Hogwarts....So, in terms of "girl getting around," Ginny is as close as it gets at Hogwarts.’ Vanceone. 25 May 2006. HarmonyForever. <http://www.harmonyforever.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=1721> (21 January 2007). ‘She is also like a veela/cheerleader in other ways.’ Vanceone. 25 May 2006. HarmonyForever. <http://www.harmonyforever.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=1721> (21 January 2007). ‘Men who love men (and I think you should love your male friends) doesn't mean romance. And I'm a guy. I have no desire or concern to see homosexual activity, or read about it. It's not attractive at all to me. Femmeslash is only partially better, and that's just cause lots of men like 2 women at once. There may be Harmonian ladies who do like yaoi, but I don't.’ Vanceone. 11 May 2006. http://www.journalfen.net/community/hp_cornfield/11790.html?thread=2935054#t2935054 (21 January 2007). FPB. 05 December 2005 ‘...an imbecility of arbitrary invention.’ <http://fpb.livejournal.com/141034.html> (21 January 2007). ‘And you are so self-blind that you do not even understand that your prejudice is as brutally on display as the limp cock of an elderly pervert exhibiting himself in the street.’ FPB. 18 September 2005 http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/799872.html?thread=79642240#t79642240 (21 January 2007) ‘In that case, you are not just some casual idiot, you are mutant pond scum. Go join the Nazi Party where you belong.’ FPB 18 October 2005. http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/799872.html?thread=80038784#t80038784 (21 January 2007) ‘But who is so prejudiced, narrow-minded, and utterly incapable of reading anything except through the black glasses of her hatred, that her reading is worth about as much as that of an Al Qaeda member.’ FPB 05 October 2005 <http://fpb.livejournal.com/20834.html?thread=111970#t111970> (21 January 2007) ‘At the same time as she cultivates this entirely non-Nazi cult, she has also taken her name from one of Berthold Brecht's vilest pieces of Communist propaganda: Pirate Jenny, an odious fantasy of revenge and massacre on the evil hated Bourgeois.’ FPB 21 June 2006 ‘Everyone, by now, has read and digested.’ <http://fpb.livejournal.com/184128.html> (21 January 2007). FPB as reported by Hinky. ‘I do not want to so much be reminded that anything as foul and yes, masturbatory as you exists.’ Fandom Wank. 06 October 2004. http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/530039.html (21 January 2007).

'I am a proud *Sanguinity* fan,' Warr1or had written, 'but my devotion to the one true canon and to my fellow fans cannot extend itself to include those who, with wilful perversity, debase, degrade, and besmirch the manly, vigorous honor of Pierce and Jab. I refer, of course, to the unnatural filth that is P/J slash. Surely it is self-evident to anyone possessed of a soul or a glimmer of intelligence that only evil personages would stoop to slash Pierce and Jab.'

'Naysayers may argue in vain that P/J slashers are not deliberately embarking on their chosen course of wrongness. Perhaps the apologists, who no doubt do not resemble Satanic cannibal child-diddlers in any respect, would like to argue that the elevation of base, dirty lust over pure, loving friendship is not wrong but merely 'different.' They are wrong to make that argument. God, the dictionary, and common sense are on my side, as Chesterton, Lewis, and Tolkien would attest had they the misfortune to live in this irreligious debauched age. It is useless to plead for mindless tolerance when all points of view opposed to, or even slightly different from, my own are so self-evidently sick, wrong, jejune, perverse, and nauseating. She is a fool who even tries it!'

'Pierce and Jab exemplify a warm, caring, spiritually

correct friendship. Perhaps this is what drives the P/J slashers to soil the purity of the text with their twisted, abhorrent interpretations: never having known true friendship themselves, the slashers are driven to frenzied, jealous, furtive attempts to sexualize this portrayal of a higher, more meaningful relationship. I pity and scorn them.'

'Do not let my natural, healthy outrage mislead you into weak-minded efforts to label me homophobic, or you will surely feel my wrath! While I have not the privilege to speak professionally for the one true faith, my thesaurical and entirely logical devotion lend me the authority of the spiritually correct, and from this lofty position I can assure you that you are, once again, wrong. I myself am not averse to writing slashfic about the drunken, abusive, mentally ill members of the de Gravina vampire clan, at least not in such cases when it has been clearly demonstrated in canon that the vampire in question lacks family support, a normal father figure, a sound upbringing, or any notion of friendship, patriotism, or religion.'

'So you see it makes no sense to say I am homophobic. I won't say that everyone who has ever suggested otherwise is a Fascist, elder-murdering mealy-mouthed Liberal spinster with a festering skin disease and an urge to prostitute herself as a

cheerleader. Draw your own conclusions. I will just point out how unlikely, and upsettingly unexpected, it would be to have a manly yeoman farmer turn out to be gay. Real life may abound with such unlikely upsets: true art does not, and *Sanguinity* is art.'

'But, sadly, just as an immoral musician may so taint his compositions that all who listen to him are compromised, so, too, in its translation to the internet has *Sanguinity* been tainted. The dissolute, slyly suggestive performances of the Voices have, it is abundantly clear, hastened the corruption by encouraging P/J slashers to ply their filthy trade. The Voices have prompted a new era of fannish debauchery.'

'To help me prove my point, not that Truth requires proof other than its own rightness,' Warr1or concluded, 'I ask anyone who reads this to link me to as many examples of explicit P/J slash as can be found--the more lurid the better. Thank you.'

Well, that was certainly special. I cringed briefly at the thought that the Voices were probably laughing themselves sick at *Sanguinity* fans right now, but then common sense prevailed. There was, after all, no reason to assume they'd take Warr1or's opinions as representative of the entire fandom; there was no real reason to assume they'd even see, much less read, his post. Warr1or wasn't a BNF, or even an MNF. Surely his ranting would go unnoticed by

anyone who mattered, and with any luck his friendslist would shower him with links, leaving him submerged in P/J slash and too preoccupied to cause trouble.

I turned my attention to happier matters, and began sending out invitations. I'd decided to host a tea party and strategy session at Malfois Manor, and was inviting every avatar who seemed properly concerned with protecting our fandom from meddling by the Voices and the Powers That Be. Even the Mean Girls were on my mailing list: I'm not one to put personal disputes ahead of broader issues, particularly when I'm winning. Let them eat cake and choke on beautifully precise footnotes, was my new motto.

I set Liz to work making preparations, and she in turn set Stasia to work polishing my silver tea service. Stasia breathlessly promised me she'd spend the evening casting a circle to ensure my party's success.

The next couple of days passed in a happy blur of planning and RSVPs. Almost everyone I'd invited had said they'd be there. Of course I hadn't been worried, but even if I had been it would have been needless. By happy coincidence, a profic author notorious for both the amount of time he spent reading fanfiction and the paucity of wit in his anti-fanfic drivel had editorialized in

favour of the Voices. I say 'editorialized in favour of,' but what I mean is he'd written a fawning, compliment-strewn love letter of an editorial. It was beyond ludicrous to be chastised for writing fanfic by a man who referred to it, and quoted from it, so regularly¹⁰⁸ that he obviously fondled his happy place to RPF-induced fantasies about the Voices, but he'd long been known to hate fanfiction with a deranged energy.

This latest effort meant he was angling for one of two reactions: either he was hoping for a contract to write *Sanguinity* tie-in novels, or his recent self-googling had failed to turn up enough mentions of his own name and he wanted the fen to berate him. Both possibilities were nauseous, and several previously uncommitted ficcers had instinctively recoiled in distaste and rallied to our cause, promising to show up at my party.

The only refusal I'd had was from Warr1or. I'd invited him because I'd hoped to avoid being targeted as one of his 'enemies.' Warr1or's shippiness tended to polarize his views, not

¹⁰⁸ 'Every so often, I check out my stats to see how readers are finding their way to this blog... which is how I discovered Hurt/Comfort Recommendations , a site that explores the s&m fantasies of fanficcers who like to see their favorite characters beaten, injured, or stricken with a deadly disease and then sobbed over and soothed, preferably while the characters are nude and sticking their tongues in each other's orifices.' Goldberg, Lee. 'Please, please plunge your magnificent Starsky in my eager Hutch...' 03 July 2006.

http://leegoldberg.typepad.com/a_writers_life/2006/07/please_please_p.html

just of fandom but of politics, religion, and dating. I could sense from his latest outburst that he was only too willing to find targets for his relentless anti-slash campaign, and his shipmates were probably encouraging him. I had no intention of converting to Sammichism, so my general policy was to avoid all PB/J shippers whenever possible. Warr1or's apology--he would be unable to attend, he'd written, because he was busy showing the Voices the error of their ways--came as a great relief. I felt sorry for the trials he'd doubtless endured during his captivity amongst the Tented Tartanists, but still, there's something uncomfortable about a committed antislash PB/J shipper in possession of one's IP address. He'd asked for the day off 'to take care of things,' and I'd agreed, feeling there was no reason for a Gardener of Uncertain Temperament to put in an appearance at an indoor party. The guests would see the immaculate lawns and gardens on their way in, after all, and could draw their own conclusions about the well-staffed state of Malfois Manor.

And so on the evening of my party, or the morning of my party for those Sanguinites elsewhere on the globe, we were an entirely female gathering. We'd just gotten seated in the front parlour when I heard the front door open abruptly. Stasia, who'd

been helping Liz hand round virtual cake, dashed out to greet the late arrival. We heard her collide with something in the hall and stammer apologies to someone who neither answered nor slowed their stride, and then the sliding doors were flung wide. There on the threshold stood a pirate.

Several guests shrieked, and a teacup smashed. My own heart made a sort of attempt to escape via my throat before I recognized the dashing but heavily armed intruder.

It was Xena.

No wonder I hadn't recognized her, though. She was tanned a much darker coppery amber than when I'd last seen her. The long reddish-blond hair she'd used to try to conceal under her hat now hung in loose, tangled curls; some locks were wrapped in gold and silver thread, or adorned with tiny beads and bells and bits of ribbon. Her eyes glittered strangely. She looked gloriously, expensively trashed and debonair, and sported a new scar down her left cheek--which served more to draw attention to her cheekbone than to mar it. She was also, I saw with mild annoyance, dripping seawater onto my floor from her velvet jacket. It needed washing--her jacket, not my floor.

'What's this, a hen party?' she asked me with amusement, helping herself to a literal handful of cake. I saw that my panicked

guests had backed themselves against the furthest wall. Several were actually managing to flee via one of the windows.

“It is *not* a hen party,’ I told her indignantly. ‘It’s a resistance movement.’ She grinned at that. I admit my gallant girls had looked more *convincingly* politicized before they’d started shrieking in terror at the mere sight of Xena, but she still had no business smirking at us. ‘We’re organizing to protect *Sanguinity* fandom from the encroachment of overbearing industry representatives,’ I told her haughtily. She lifted her non-cake-bearing hand in a dismissive little half-wave.

‘Easy there, Miss Author,’ she said. ‘No offence meant. If the fen are revolting, that’s their business. I just need a bed. I promise I’ll stay out of your hair, and I don’t expect to be staying here more than a couple of weeks. Less than that, if I can track down Arc and convince her she needs some downtime.’

She’d taken the stairs--*my* stairs--two at a time and was completely out of sight and voice range before I’d even begun to wrap words around my many naked objections to her presence. My guests had stopped fleeing and were tittering and smirking. And then Stasia came in, dropped a sketchy curtsy, and announced, ‘Prince Choronzon Erik Vladimir de Gravina.’

PrinceC staggered in, looking dashing but exhausted. ‘I’m

looking for Lady Mina,' he began, prompting dark mutterings from the Mean Girls, and then he caught sight of me.

'Rough day on the high seas, dear?' I asked waspishly. My opinion of him hadn't quite sprung back to pre-Tartan levels.

He ignored this, or perhaps didn't notice; teenage boys aren't all that sensitive to nuance. Scarcely adequate to the task of rational discourse, really, I reminded myself sternly, trying not to notice just how well breeched and handsomely booted he was.

'Mina,' he said, his voice firmer, and strode manfully across to me accompanied by a chorus of hisses and giggles from the Girls' Dormitory lot, their responses polarized according to whether their affection for me or their self-insertiness towards PrinceC were uppermost. I looked up at him, telling myself firmly to ignore the tilt of his hat, and not to even think about his sword. He leaned closer, and Liz dropped her tray, shattering a plate. I hadn't the heart to scold her. Poor dear: she'd been struggling valiantly against her initial poor choice of a sky-high 'sensitivity' reading, but it would take a lot of hard-earned 'sense' points to erase her slight tendency to inadvertent histrionics. 'Have you heard what Warr1or is planning?' PrinceC asked.

I blinked. I hadn't been expecting Warr1or to come up between us just then. It took me a moment to recall Warr1or's latest

communiqué.

‘You mean the anti-slash rant,’ I said calmly. ‘Yes, I saw it, and it alarmed me too at first, but honestly: what are the chances of the Powers That Be ever seeing it? Miniscule, I should think.’

‘I don’t mean his anti-slash rant,’ PrinceC corrected me. ‘I mean his printed and bound collection of explicit Jammie slash. He’s threatening to send copies to all the Voices, and to everyone listed in the *Sanguinity* credits. And to this Josh Amos person,’ he added, an extra note of irritation entering his voice.

‘He’s going to mail them hard copies of his slash collection?’ I repeated, horrified.

‘He’s planning to mail them copies of his extremely explicit slash collection, as some sort of protest,’ PrinceC confirmed. ‘Everybody on the docks is talking about it. The minute I heard you were employing him, I came to let you know.’

‘Uh, thanks,’ I said dubiously. I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to know, really, but I suppose PrinceC was looking out for my interests.

‘We should go talk to him,’ PrinceC continued. *Not* the kind of invitation a girl feels torn about turning down, that.

‘I am *hosting* a party,’ I said coolly. ‘I don’t have time to interrogate the hired help just now.’

For the first time PrinceC appeared to notice that there were other people in the room. He apologized, and then somehow managed to persuade me to accompany him to Warr1or's cottage that evening. This sparked much hushed hilarity amongst my guests, and I'm willing to bet none of their whispered conversations were about the Voices or our anti-coup strategies. PrinceC strode out, and when he was lost to view we resumed our much-interrupted meeting.

I tried to call my remaining guests to order, but they continued to be unnervingly giggly and frivolous, and I caught a few of them composing anonymous RPF on scraps of paper. They tried to deny it, but it was perfectly clear which of them had written it.

And then a fight broke out over lawn care, during the course of which one of them insisted hysterically that another guest had threatened her with a metaphor.¹⁰⁹ Her friends, sobbing with

¹⁰⁹ 'I swear, at Numbus Anise's ass better be grass and y'all the lawnmowers, or I will be severely disappointed! :(' Sandyclaws68. Livejournal. 20 June 2006. <http://sandyclaws68.livejournal.com/69214.html?thread=264286#t264286> (24 January 2007). 'Apparently, some material has been added in response to my reporting this post to FAP. I haven't read it, because I don't want to waste any more psychic energy on this insanity than absolutely necessary. However, the Lumos organizers have taken it seriously enough to add extra security at the presentations. This entire thing is incredibly sad. It's not that I think that anyone is at all likely to actually start chasing me with lawnmowers at Lumos (snerk!), but just the fact that someone found it necessary to express themselves that

outrage on her behalf, insisted they couldn't possibly feel safe unless I banned metaphors and hired extra security, and at that point I lost patience with them all. How can you have a serious conversation, let alone organize a resistance movement, with people so steeped in silliness? I coldly informed them that I employed a *full-time gardener* who owned not only a lawn mower but also hedge clippers and gloves. A whole pack of them fled in terror at this news.

The sensible remainder, having been thus weeded out, lingered for a while to discuss the Voices, but all we could really agree on was that we *Sanguinity* fans needed to behave sensibly and create the best possible impression on the Powers That Be. It went without saying that this would mean dissuading Warr1or, and I felt more charitable about PrinceC's proposed mission.

way... they CLEARLY weren't talking about having a debate. In that case, they would NOT have used such violent imagery. They have taken themselves out of the realm of civilized discussion, and they've become thugs. It's not cute or funny (I've almost cut my foot off with a lawnmower, so I know what it's like!) Realanise. Livejournal. 01 July 2006.

<http://realanise.livejournal.com/36060.html> (24 January 2007).

Mina de Malfois and the Attempted Coup (part four)

When PrinceC and I arrived at the gardener's cottage, we found Warr1or staking out tomatoes. He looked, I could not but note approvingly, every inch the part. He was dressed in a slightly old-fashioned gamekeeper costume of dark green velveteen and gaiters. He hadn't lost his dragonherd buffness, either. He doffed his hat respectfully when he saw us.

'We were just on our way to visit the BalletChic memorial,' PrinceC told him, and Warr1or instantly offered to pluck roses for PrinceC to lay on the 'grave,' his face softening with emotion as he spoke.

'Come with us,' PrinceC said, sounding more commanding than inviting. Still, though, I was mildly surprised when Warr1or complied; I hadn't realized he'd taken the servant role so much to heart. The scent of jasmine grew stronger as we approached the shade-shrouded statue of the winged ballet dancer, and I shivered in the cool evening air. Warr1or wordlessly draped his jacket around my shoulders, unasked, which was thoughtful even if it did smell of dragons.

‘Is there anything either Mina or I can do,’ PrinceC asked abruptly, ‘to dissuade you from mailing your slash collection to TPTB? We’ll do anything to protect the reputation of our fandom.’ I opened my mouth to tell him that actually, there were a lot of things I wouldn’t do to protect the probably non-existent good name of *Sanguinity* fandom, but Warr1or spoke first.

‘You’re too late,’ Warr1or said triumphantly. ‘I’ve already mailed out the bound copies, and emailed back-up copies. No matter how much the slashers harass and persecute me, they can’t undo what I’ve done. They can denounce me publicly, they can mock my views and my religion, they can even stalk me and check my livejournal constantly, but I’ve won.¹¹⁰ I’ve revealed the Truth.’

PrinceC sat down patiently on the monument. ‘What, exactly, did you hope this would accomplish?’ he asked wearily. I sat down next to him, and Warr1or promptly sat down next to me.

‘I wanted the game’s creator and contributors to see what they were responsible for,’ Warr1or said. ‘So many young people, particularly emotionally fragile young women, are being led astray. I can’t just watch as they’re tempted down the twisted, base paths

¹¹⁰ Martyrdom courtesy of Vanceone, stalking accusations courtesy of FPB and his devoted readers (who, admittedly, do dog him dreadfully).

of slash. They need a man's guidance and protection.'

'I hardly think the game's creators had any intention of encouraging P/J slash,' PrinceC pointed out reasonably.

'It doesn't matter what the authors intended,' Warr1or insisted. 'The subtext is there. They included elements and scenes that could be interpreted as slash, and they're responsible for that. They need to be aware of the inevitable outcome.'

PrinceC sighed heavily. I knew how he felt. There's no way to argue with someone happily bent on martyrdom.

'How explicit was it?' I asked, hoping he hadn't been able to find anything really juicy. 'I haven't read much *Sanguinity* slash.'

'I know you're not interested in slash,' Warr1or said to me kindly, placing a condescending hand on my knee. 'You're a nice girl, Mina, though I worry you'll be led astray by dark influences.'

'I have no interest in slash at all,' I assured him, trying to scoot over so I'd be less pressed against him, and only succeeding in pressing myself up more tightly against PrinceC on my other side. I glanced thoughtfully from Warr1or to PrinceC and back again, wondering how truthful I was being. 'I was just wondering how bad it could be.'

'It opened with a multi-chapter fic in which Pierce and

Jab are forced to degrade each other repeatedly at a Vamp Revel,' Warr1or informed us, 'and ended with an mpreg family saga.' PrinceC groaned, looking as appalled as I felt. Our meeting broke up almost immediately. PrinceC headed gloomily down Dread Lane, looking defeated, and I walked back to Malfois Manor unaccompanied. Warr1or had said he wanted to spend some time alone, in prayer and contemplation.

When I got back to the Manor no one was visible. I followed the hushed sounds of conversation to the dimly lit kitchen, where I found Stasia and Liz seated at a Ouija board-laden table--Liz looking slightly abashed--with, to my astonishment, Arc.

'You're attending a séance?' I asked, bewildered. I nearly swallowed my tongue to keep from adding, 'with my servants?' I didn't want to appear excessively snobbish, especially not in front of the people I was being e. s. about.

'Pull up a chair,' Arc said, so I did. I admit, I was curious as to how this would work. Besides, Ciyerra had a well-developed sense of self-interest, so the presence of her employer would probably hugely increase the success of the summoning.

Stasia instructed us to join hands, which we did, and then she intoned in a solemn but ethereal voice, 'Ciyerra, dearly departed spirit of BalletChic, are you present among us?' Liz and I

caught each other's eyes, and then promptly had to avoid each other's eyes to keep from laughing out loud.

A bored-looking and nearly entirely transparent Ciyerra drifted sulkily into the room. Without ceremony she leaned over the Ouija board and nudged the planchette with her ghostly fingertips. It moved, but slowly, to point to 'YES.'

'What message do you bring to us from the other side?' Stasia continued.

'T-H-E P-A-T-I-E-N-T H-A-S M-A-L-A-R-I-A B-U-T W-I-L-L R-E-C-O-V-E-R,' Ciyerra spelled out, looking furious at the length of time this was taking.

'What patient?' Arc asked.

'She probably means Xena,' I said hastily, unable to face the prospect of having to watch Ciyerra spell this out one tedious letter at a time. 'She showed up earlier and she's been in bed ever since. She didn't mention malaria, though.'

'I brought her up some soup earlier,' Liz chimed in helpfully, 'and she did seem feverish. She said all sorts of overheated things.'

Arc shot me a bafflingly exasperated glance. 'You didn't mention Xena was here,' she said in what sounded frightfully like restrained tones.

‘But Arc, we haven’t spoken since our last conversation, which was about plagiarism,’ I reminded her helpfully, and added, ‘and she wasn’t here then. She’s only just shown up.’ Arc said nothing, but raised one graceful avatarial eyebrow. ‘Plagiarism is a very serious matter,’ I informed Liz and Stasia, by way of a conciliatory gesture.

‘So’s poaching,’ said Arc obscurely, and stood up. ‘Where is this sickroom, exactly? I think I should look in on the patient.’ Liz excused herself with a curtsy and led Arc off in the direction of the stairs.

Stasia sighed a sigh of frustrated mediumship while Ciyerra drummed silent spirit fingers impatiently on the edge of the table. ‘Do you have any helpful advice about Josh Amos?’ I asked her. ‘Or about Warr1or?’

‘T-H-I-N-G-S A-R-E N-O-T W-H-A-T T-H-E-Y S-E-E-M,’ Ciyerra spelled out. ‘W-A-R-R-1-O-R S-E-N-S-E-S T-H-E T-R-U-T-H O-F T-H-E M-A-T-T-E-R B-U-T K-N-O-W-S N-O-T W-H-Y.’ Evidently answering my questions concluded her household ghost obligations, because she faded from sight, a peevish expression on her face as she vanished.

‘Platinum RavingWench says only the spiritually gifted can hold conversations with those who have crossed over,’ Stasia

said, sounding thrilled by this evidence of her giftedness.

‘Ms. RavingWench probably never met Ciyerra, the ghost who livejournals,’ I muttered to myself.

PrinceC was plunged into a blue funk by our conversation with Warr1or, and alternated between moody silence and pessimistic predictions. I was exposed to the b.f., complete with m.s. and p.p., because we spent the next few evenings hanging out together in one of *Sanguinity Online’s* finer blood taverns. PrinceC said he preferred not to face the inevitable shutdown of our fandom while sober, and Malfois Manor lacked charm and restfulness just then. Arc had taken to storming in and out, silent and white-lipped with strain, at all hours of the day and night, and Xena, fever-ridden, was deliriously regaling the household with sea shanties of unspeakable lewdness.

But in spite of being rendered nearly homeless by these goings-on, I was feeling hopeful. Each day we sat there, crimson pints in front of us, my mood lightened perceptibly. I’d noticed, you see, that by some odd coincidence Josh Amos had taken to frequenting the same tavern, and that, far from pulling his usual centre-of-attention gambits, he was keeping as low a profile as he was able. He appeared to my attentive eye to be more or less avoiding most of his friends and hangers on. I’d seen this

behaviour before in fandom, and forgive me if I seem to gloat, but it was pretty damned obvious that he'd suffered some major humiliation or upset, and was waiting for the news to hit and then blow over. Had he had a bad review? Had a pet theory been jossed by canon? Had he fought with the wrong person, or worse yet, made a friend of the wrong sockpuppet? I longed to know.

I tried to raise PrinceC's spirits by sharing this theory, but he remained uninterested right up to the moment the pages arrived. The pages were Non-Player Characters who went round handing out important notifications to permanent paid account holders. I suppose the Powers That Be consider this cute.

The pages who showed up now were handing out envelopes so heavily embossed that they gleamed even in the murk of the tavern. PrinceC used his as a coaster, but I broke the seal and opened mine. It was a message from the game creator Herself.

'Dear Sanguinites,' it read.

'It has been recently brought to my attention that for some devoted fans *Sanguinity* is not merely a game, but a source of inspiration for your own creativity, artistry, and self-expression. Please know that I admire your devotion to the game, and laud your efforts to make it a meaningful part of your lives as you roam across its landscapes. No efforts to curtail your actions will be

officially sanctioned.'

I had to reread it twice before the full impact hit me: she was on our side. I looked across triumphantly to where Josh Amos was sitting, his own copy of the memo crumpled in front of him. He caught my eye and raised his chin defiantly.

'Of course *I* expected all along the Creator would side with the fanfiction set,' he said loudly to his companions. 'Everyone who knows her will tell you she's a total Henry Jenkins fangirl,¹¹¹ after all.' I said nothing. Let him save what face he could. I knew he was a fake, and from now on I'd be watching him.

¹¹¹ Jenkins, Henry. Textual Poachers. Routledge; 1 edition (July 21, 1992).

Mina de Malfois and the Spiritual Renewal (part one)

I peered through the telescope I'd borrowed from Xena, her trunks having ominously arrived that morning. 'What the devil is that?' I asked out loud, even though I was alone on the balcony. I mean, I could see what it was: one emerald-green island¹¹² visible from our cliff had sprouted, on the shore facing us, a number of white buildings, and the largest of these was, all too obviously, some kind of church.

I hunted down Liz, who was in her bedroom in the servants' quarters, primly pinning a veiled hat into place. 'Have you seen a sort of church thing on the nearest island?' I asked her.

'The Church of the Angels?' she said. 'Yes, it's been in the works for a while. I think it finally got the go-ahead last week.'

I was flabberghasted, or possibly flabbergasted. 'You mean players are tainting *Sanguinity* with religion?' I asked, appalled.

She swivelled around to face me, and I noticed she was

¹¹² This would be the island that the *Sanguinity* non-player characters of the De St. Aybun family (and Jab) inhabit.

wearing her Ouija-board pendant. 'Tainting?' she asked.

'*Sanguinity* is built around competing cultures of angels, vampires, and humans, Mina. Surely its scope for spirituality is obvious?'

I saw, belatedly, that I might have come across as a bit insensitive. 'Do you belong to this...ah...Church of the Angels?' I asked.

'Of course not,' she sniffed dismissively. 'I'm a Neo-Table Rapper,¹¹³ thank you *very* much.'

Clearly this particular worm was more deeply in th' bud than I'd realized. 'There's more than one in-game religion?' I continued, not so much to get an answer--the answer was obviously 'yes'--but because I was struggling to take this in. 'So, wait: Warr1or's a Sammich, right?'

'Yes,' said Liz patiently, 'but that's his ship. If you're talking about his religion you'd call him a Resonant. Almost all Sammiches belong to the Temple of Resonance,¹¹⁴ which is more or less an offshoot of the Church of Angels.'

Curiosity overtook me. 'What's Arc?'

'C of M,' said Liz, sounding respectful. 'I can't believe this is news to you. There's a huge religious and cultural market going

¹¹³ Neo-Table Rappers are probably a lot like their Victorian counterparts.

¹¹⁴ Ah, Harmonians, how we love you.

on down in the harbour. You should check it out. Walk down with me, if you like.'

The harbour didn't strike me as a terribly fitting site for religion, what with the quayside markets and roving packs of rough Jammies, but Liz was right. The southern end, where the docks turned into boardwalks and led out to a park, had sprung an array of tents and wooden booths and temporary buildings, each dedicated to some form or other of game spirituality. Liz quickly excused herself and ducked into the mist-shrouded tent belonging to the Neo-Table Rappers, so I was left to stroll about on my own.

It was amazing. Temple prostitutes of both sexes, draped in semi-transparent costumes, wandered through the crowds rattling collection boxes labelled 'feedback.' The Cult of Nice and the Cult of Mean had erected identical chapels, except that the Cult of Mean insignia featured a gun where the Cult of Nice insignia had a bottle of poison. 'Brothers' and 'Sisters' representing the Fraternity of Siblings and Cousins were handing out positively shocking brochures. Several spies flitted in and out of the Box of Shadows. The Jolly Holidays were soliciting funds for an open-air summer camp called 'Think of the Children,' and some group named WIKTT were raising money to open a special night school.

I passed outposts of the New Animist Lodge, the

Otakukin Awakening, the Reincarnated Veterans of Historic Wars, the Cult of the Gay Unicorn, the Sacred Order of Typists, the Ark of the Otherkin, and the Whispering Assembly of Soulbonds and Muses.¹¹⁵ I had just registered that I recognized some of the women struggling with poles as they erected a huge plaid tent when one of them looked up. 'Mina!' she cried welcomingly. It was Mrs. Sev.

'Looking for spiritual guidance?' she asked me. I hadn't been, but now that she'd suggested it I wondered if maybe I should be. I had a moderate to severe case of the doldrums. It wasn't fandom: I was entirely satisfied with my online life. It was offline life that had begun to pall. I'd been toying with the idea of quitting my job, but the sad reality was that if I did, I'd have to find another

¹¹⁵ Temple prostitutes were real; the Cult of Nice and the Cult of Mean need no introduction; the Fraternity of Siblings and Cousins would be 'cest-fickers; the Box of Shadows exists (it's a community on livejournal); Think of the Children is not actually a summer camp, and WIKTT is not a school (When I Kissed the Teacher is a mailing list for Snape fanfiction). The New Animist Lodge, the Otakukin Awakening, the Reincarnated Veterans of Historic Wars, the Cult of the Gay Unicorn, the Sacred Order of Typists, the Ark of the Otherkin, and the Whispering Assembly of Soulbonds and Muses are not actual organizations, though they represent 'fandoms' or philosophies of sorts. The huge plaid tent belongs to the Cult of the Tented Tartan, obviously. The less said about how they erect it, the better. For further reading on a few of these points: Avocado. 'Cult of Mean.' FandomWankWiki. 03 February 2006.

http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Cult_of_Mean (25 January 2007).

Narcissam. 'Publish and be Damned! Or maybe not.' FandomWankWiki. 02 December 2005.

http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Publish_And_Be_Damned%21_Or_maybe_not (25 January 2007). Figment Voices Livejournal Community.

one immediately. What I really wanted was to take a few weeks off and just recuperate from life for a bit, but that wasn't economically feasible right now.

'You know,' she said suggestively, 'we could always use a writer of your calibre under the Tented Tartan. Devotion to a fictional male is a more exhilarating experience than you might realize. Real men can't compare to the ruthless, desirable superiority of our ideal partners.'

'No,' I conceded politely. 'I suppose they can't.'

She put her arm through mine and clung to me, making it impossible to leave. 'I,' she said confidentially, whispering close to my ear, 'have a shrine to the Dark Schoolmaster in my room at home.'¹¹⁶

'Home?' I asked. 'You mean your encampment?'

'No, no,' she corrected me. 'Of course, I consider the Cult of the Tented Tartan my true *spiritual* home, and I only wish our village on the Produce Isle existed in the mundane world--though without those ghastly Gay Unicorn Cultists on the other shore. But no, I was speaking of my offline home.'

'You have a shrine to a fictional character in your actual

<http://community.livejournal.com/figmentvoices/profile> (25 January 2007).

¹¹⁶ Severely Obsessed: A Tribute to Severus Snape.

<http://www.freewebs.com/severelyobsessed/index.htm> (23 January 2007).

home?' I asked, confused.

'It doesn't signify that he's fictional!' she said sharply. 'What matters is that I love him, and I have pledged myself, body and soul, to be his for all eternity.'

'That's nice,' I said weakly, looking around wildly for some escape.

'He speaks to me,' she confided dreamily. 'I pray to him, and I can feel him listening. I am the only one who truly understands the Master's tortured, conflicted soul!'

'I'm sure you are,' I agreed.

'I write him poetry,' she persisted, 'and every night when I go to bed I...'

'I have to go in here!' I interrupted, frantically stepping away and pointing to a random tent.

'The Otakukin Awakening?' she cooed, looking pleased with my choice. 'That's *wonderful*, Mina. Perhaps, once you discover who you are, we at the Cult of the Tented Tartan can help you find your ideal fictional male, and you can mate forever with him, and find fulfilment as I have done.'

'Yes. Quite. Marvellous,' I said, and ducked into the tent.

Inside it was cool but dim. There were scattered pinpoints of light. When my eyes adjusted I saw these were book-lights,

wielded by variously costumed avatars who lounged on a variety of chairs and cushions, each deeply engrossed in a book. A few, less bookishly, were instead bluelit by small, flickering handheld screens.

At the far end of the tent, two girls were arguing and struggling for possession of a remote control. Their strikingly similar avatars were both clad in 80s fashions, though the blonde wore a conservative business suit and the pink-haired one was tricked out as a rock star.¹¹⁷

‘How could you?’ the pink-haired girl shrieked. ‘You know I remembered her first!’

‘If you can categorize that level of OOC-ness as ‘remembering’,’ the blonde hissed viciously, ‘then you’re obviously nothing but a misfit.’ Her pink-tressed friend burst into tears and ran from the tent. The blonde smiled triumphantly and, clutching the remote, flopped down in front of a small screen.

‘Mina,’ said a cool, low, seductive voice. I turned. Josh Amos was lounging near the entrance, dressed in blue and white and carrying, for some unfathomable purpose, a tennis racket.¹¹⁸ He stepped out of the shadows and came to stand beside me. This

¹¹⁷ They're channelling Jerrica and Jem, from the cartoon series 'Jem.' This is bound to lead to conflict, as Jerrica and Jem were the same character.

was the closest I'd ever been to his graceful, slim-hipped presence, and when he casually tossed his tousled brown hair my stomach did queer little flip-flops. The book-lights and screens brought out his golden highlights in a disconcerting way. There was satisfaction in his eyes when he saw me looking. I reminded myself that I was a BNF, but the stomach-flutters continued fluttery.¹¹⁹

'It's wonderful to see you here,' he purred.

'Thank you,' I said, but his friendliness was making me suspicious. 'I see *Squid and Squickability* is getting good reviews.' As well it might, I thought; I'd recc'd his fic in glowing terms myself. Some might wonder why I would lavish praise on *Sanguinity* fic other than my own, but that's just the kind of selfless BNF I strive to be. Besides, I wanted some of fandom's attention focussed on Josh Amos. He was, I was sure, up to something.

Just then the clock above my desk chimed a warning. 'I have to go,' I said to Josh, with real regret at losing this opportunity to speak to him. 'I have--um--commitments back in the real world.'

'Such an inferior world in so many ways,' he said sympathetically. 'I look forward to seeing you here again, Lady

¹¹⁸ Josh Amos is dressed like a Prince of Tennis character.

¹¹⁹ The construction of this sentence is a shameless act of highly-disguised homage to Oscar Wilde: 'Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming.' ('The Importance of

Mina.’ His avatar gave mine an appraising glance as she faded from game space.

I’d done the evening shift at work for six days in a row before I finally had a day off. That night I got off my last shift feeling sticky and exhausted, and wanted nothing more than a cool shower and bed. The heat had been so oppressive I had no appetite. A long sleep, I promised myself as I stepped out of the shower, and tomorrow morning I’ll have something healthy for breakfast.

Of course, all that gang aft agley.¹²⁰ At around two in the morning my stomach rumbling woke me, and I couldn’t get back to sleep. I fixed myself a bowl of strawberries and cream, because it was the most refreshing thing I could think of, and absentmindedly logged in to *Sanguinity* while I ate. Malfois Manor was gorgeous in the moonlight, and deserted, so my nightgown-clad avatar wandered the halls holding her lantern aloft just like a heroine in a Gothic novel.¹²¹

I frowned, and turned up the volume. Had someone else logged in? I could hear sobbing coming from the attic. My avatar went up the narrow wooden stairs, and the hair at the back of my

Being Earnest,’ Act Two).

¹²⁰ ‘The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley,’ according to Robert Burns in ‘To A Mouse.’

¹²¹ See also Diogenes of Sinope.

real-life neck stood on end. I'll say this for the Creator of *Sanguinity*, she really knows how to convey atmosphere. The floorboards creaked, the crying echoed eerily, and my heart hammered just as if I was really there.

Mina de Malfois and the Spiritual Renewal (part two)

I pushed open the trap door and climbed into the attic, holding up my lantern. I saw velvet tapestries, old-fashioned cabinets, locked chests, and a dusty portrait of some handsome warrior, all of which seemed strangely familiar¹²²--and then I saw Ciyerra, curled up on a window ledge, crying translucent tears. Her bare, and barely visible, feet poked out from beneath what looked like a white ruffled nightgown but which was, I realized with a shudder, a Victorian burial gown. She lifted her pale face from her knees and gazed at me, terrifying but piteous.

I felt my own eyes tear up in inadvertent sympathy. I mean, I suddenly saw the truth of her situation, the sheer ghastly loneliness of it all. Granted, she'd behaved like an utter idiot, but Arc had *said* she was working to repay the people who'd chipped in money to fund her madness. If I knew Arc--and I felt I did--she'd be firmly in control of that whole sitch, making damned sure each and every former friend of BalletChic's got his or her pennies back.

¹²² These items are familiar because they're the same things Henry Tilney lists for Catherine in chapter twenty of Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey.

And yet here she was, Ciyerra I mean, voiceless and disembodied, unable to enjoy the fullness of life in *Sanguinity*. She couldn't talk, or leave the Manor and explore, or have sex, or, well, *anything* decent really.

Without stopping to consider her avatar's sheer creepiness I sat down next to her and laid a sympathetic hand on her ghostly arm. 'Don't cry,' I urged her gently. 'When I log back in tomorrow I'll find out if there's some solution.' She looked as sceptical and haughty as a teenager, as if she thought I didn't understand what was the matter *anyway*, and so shouldn't be promising solutions, so I went on, '*Sanguinity* has spiritualists; they must know something about helping ghosts. It's ludicrous, you're being isolated like this when all you did was kill your own...uh...self.' I'd been going to say 'persona,' but that seemed heartless, as though I wasn't taking her pseuicide seriously.

She left off the eerie sobbing and hugged me, which I imagined felt like being gripped tightly by a cold, damp cloud. I patted her gingerly on the back, gave her a few moments to pull herself back together, and logged out, explaining before I went that I needed a few hours' sleep before returning to the game.

When I did return, several deeply refreshing hours later, I went straight back to the fair, landing just inside the Otakukin

Awakening tent again. Josh Amos curtly dismissed a sailor-suited blonde,¹²³ who burst into theatrical tears when he shook her off his arm and strode towards me. 'Friend of yours?' I asked sardonically, watching as four similarly dressed girls flocked to comfort her.

He shrugged. 'It's because of the way I look,' he explained, which struck me as pretty bloody arrogant. 'She thinks we should cosplay together again.' Ah. That made sense, for a given value of sense. Not my scene, but of course I'd heard about these people.

'We were perfect together,' the girl was wailing to her friends.

'You must know PrinceC then,' I said. He hesitated.

'No,' he said. 'I know him to see him, but I'm sure he doesn't know me.'

'So will you?' I asked, more to be polite than because I cared in the slightest. 'Cosplay together, I mean.' He eyed me thoughtfully. In the background the sobbing dropped in volume as the blonde listened for his answer.

'I doubt it,' he said calmly, and the wailing resumed. 'Contrary to what her posse say, Rabbit's not the best partner I've had, and anyway,' he shrugged again, 'I have other plans.'

¹²³ The sailor-suited blonde is channelling Sailor Moon (Princess Serenity).

That would have been interesting if I were interested, I guess, but I was in a hurry. 'I have to go find Liz,' I explained, 'and she's probably with the Neo-Table Rappers, if she's anywhere.' He seemed to regard this as an invitation, and tagged along with me.

The N-TRs, Liz included, were in their tent, sitting around a gleaming wooden table--it looked almost golden--sipping tea. I slipped into an empty chair beside her, and asked her if there was anything that could be done to give Ciyerra slightly more freedom and interactivity. Several of the others around the table broke off conversations or set aside their knitting to listen helpfully. 'I'm worried she's feeling lonely,' I explained, and added honestly, 'and I don't want her getting bored and quitting the game.'

'Well,' said Liz, 'you could host a spirit-raising, and if there were a sufficient number of people in attendance, and they all donated energy points, Ciyerra could theoretically accumulate enough ectoplasm to be embodied one day a week. You could give her that day off.'

'Oh, how exciting!' said the woman sitting on Liz's other side, clapping her hands together. 'I haven't seen anyone throw a resurrection party yet!' The others murmured in agreement.

'So for one day a week she'd have a real avatar, and she could hang out with her friends or whatever?' I asked. That

sounded reasonable. After all, the rest of my staff got days off.

Liz nodded. 'Basically, yes,' she said. 'She'd still be restricted to grave clothes or Victorian-era costumes, I think, and indentured to you, but she'd be able to talk and post normally on her days off, and leave the Manor and all that.'

'Let's do it,' I said impulsively, and then hesitated. 'Wait, are ghost-raising expensive?'

A cadaverously thin gentleman with a drooping blond moustache cleared his throat and interrupted in genteel, apologetic tones. 'You'd have to hire a qualified medium,' he said. 'I'd be pleased to oblige, if you haven't anyone on retainer. Of course, you'll need to invite people who are willing to donate enough cross-spectrum points to enable your ghost to materialize, and your guests will expect apposite hospitality. But you could charge a small fee for admittance to your property, to allow interested persons whom you haven't personally invited to attend. And believe me, *everyone* will want to be there. You'll be turning them away at the gate.'

It sounded reasonably likely that I'd break even, then, especially since Liz whispered excitedly, 'That's Dr. Zerubbabel.'¹²⁴

¹²⁴ I can't tell you where Dr. Zerubbabel's name comes from, because a secret society would send out trained assassins, or at least trained book thieves, if I dared list my source.

BalletChic's mourners *adore* him--he's said to be the best there is!

When I stood to leave, Josh, who'd been leaning against the back of my chair, unfolded himself and followed me outside. 'I'll walk you home,' he offered.

'That you won't, laddie,' said a familiar voice, and I looked up to see Xena, as dazzling as ever and rather more clean than when last sighted. PrinceC was with her.

'You're out of bed,' I said, and she winked.

'Perpendicular for the nonce,' she agreed, 'and hale and hearty, nursed back to full strength on a diet of Arc's lectures and your servants' gossip. I need to have a few words with young Josh here.' Josh looked appalled. 'Perhaps a little rum, judiciously applied, will loosen his tongue.'

'I was walking Mina home,' he began, but Xena cut him off.

'PrinceC will see her safely home. You, on the other hand, can escort me to the nearest pub for some private conversation. Unless of course,' she went on threateningly, 'you'd prefer a public scene?'

Josh looked several degrees more appalled at that, and well cornered. Without another word he followed her, lamblike,

towards the *Mint and Shift*.¹²⁵ PrinceC frowned after them, then made a low bow and offered me his arm.

We trudged along silently for a bit. 'What were you doing with Josh Amos?' PrinceC asked abruptly, his voice much less chivalrous than usual, and I jumped, because I hadn't been expecting him to speak.

'Arranging a séance,' I said stiffly. I'd have gladly explained that I'd only been with Josh by accident, and that he'd been following me around uninvited, but PrinceC's newly sullen demeanour irked me so much that I had difficulty getting started. An awkward silence fell and pursued us all the way up Dread Lane.

Warr1or was waiting as we were walking in my front gate. He waited until we were practically on top of him, and then said abruptly, looking at his feet, 'I want to apologize to you.'

I froze, one hand on the gate, dreading some new revelation, but he meant for the last thing. 'I'm really sorry about that rant of mine,' he went on. 'I went too far, and said things I shouldn't have. I guess I...I have trouble dealing with people who are different from me.'

¹²⁵ There's rather a lot of lambing going on in that sentence. Google 'Mary had a Lamb,' recipes using mint sauce, and 'Lamb Shift' to learn more.

PrinceC's lips quirked up in an odd little grin. 'I'd say you have more trouble dealing with people who are just like you.' Warr1or looked up, confused and blushing.

I pushed the gate open, and stepped into the tree-shaded walkway. 'I always thought that gate opened outwards,' PrinceC said, changing the subject to spare Warr1or further embarrassment.

'It swings both ways,' I told him, admiring the profusion of oaks we'd laid in.

Warr1or looked horrified. 'Lady Mina, I'm so sorry! I must have neglected it. I'll fix it at once!' he said, sounding shocked by this, his first failure as groundskeeper. I hastened to reassure him.

'No, no, it's *supposed* to swing both ways,' I said soothingly. 'That's how it's made.'

He stared at me curiously, and then blurted, 'I have to go!' and bolted off in the direction of his cottage. Thoroughly strange chap, that Warr1or, but devoted to his work, and it *was* decent of him to apologize for his recent temporary insanity.

'That was odd,' I remarked to PrinceC, forgetting for a moment that we'd been not talking.

He looked at me fondly. 'I think he's been under a lot of strain lately,' he said. 'Just before Xena and I went to look for you,

he was insisting you needed to be rescued from the clutches of Josh Amos.'

I was baffled. 'Because of the thing with the Voices, did he mean?' I asked. 'Did you tell him that's been resolved?'

PrinceC frowned. 'It wasn't that,' he said. 'He was going on about webs of deceit and lies and pernicious influences leading you astray--he actually managed to worry me. He made it sound as if you and Josh were embarking on a crime spree together, or something.'

'I can assure you we're not,' I said. 'Or at least, I'm not.' I looked at him closely. 'You think Josh is a criminal?'

'I don't know what Josh is,' he said grimly, 'but I don't trust him.'

I didn't, either, but I didn't say so. I wanted to hear someone else's opinion. 'Why not?' I asked.

He shook his head slightly. 'I don't know for sure,' he admitted. 'I've seen him around, but only at a distance--he was at KawaiiKon last year with a pack of absolute nutcases.¹²⁶ There's

¹²⁶ Without in the least meaning to suggest that I share PrinceC's opinion, I will just say that one hears interesting stories about Sailor Moon cosplayers.' Usagi Kou: Scott's Testimonial.' Sailor Moon Pocky Box. <http://www.sm.mypockybox.com/frame/UsagiKou-Scott.php> (26 January 2007). 'Eudial's Investigation.' Sailor Moon Pocky Box. <http://www.sm.mypockybox.com/frame/UsagiKou002.php> (26 January 2007).

just something about him. And I think Xena suspects him, too.'

Mina de Malfois and the Spiritual Renewal (part three)

On the evening of the spirit raising, it was overcast and gloomy in game, the first unseasonable hint of fall being the wind that rustled through the trees and tore off twigs and leaves. The cybermoon was full, gleaming eerily as clouds scudded across it. It was, in other words, perfect, and I wondered if the huge number of players who'd showed up for this ghostly event had somehow reset the atmosphere to 'haunting.'

Because the number of avatars who'd paid to enter the grounds of Malfois Manor was astounding even by my standards, and I'm used to a lot of attention. They milled around in sombre mourning attire,¹²⁷ more or less traditional: jet beads and hair jewellery were everywhere, along with frock-coats and top hats and pearls, but there were also lots of black ballet shoes and Ouija-board pendants, which I'm pretty sure people don't wear to real funerals. There was a huge crowd milling around in Dread Lane, too broke or too unknown to have gained admittance, but still

¹²⁷ Hell, Kyshah. 'Victorian Mourning Garb.' Morbid Outlook. http://www.morbidoutlook.com/fashion/historical/2001_03_victorianmourn.html (26 January 2007).

appropriately dressed and whispering excitedly among themselves as they stood *en pointe* and strove for a glimpse of Dr. Zerubbabel. I knew, I just knew, that somewhere out there in the real world all these people had gathered in tearful awe at their keyboards, drenched in appropriate scents and probably playing BalletChic memorial podcasts in the background as they willed Ciyerra into full game participation.

Sanguinity's religious factions were out in full force. The C of M and the C of N were being icily polite to each other, but were taking notes for later. There were also furies everywhere, sporting sombre-hued pelts. The blonde who'd wanted to partner Josh was there, surrounded by her friends. They were rather prettily attired in black sailor suits, each with a single band of colour adorning their skirts and collars. 'You need to calm down,' one was saying, sounding more scornful than comforting.

'I am perfectly serene!' shrieked Rabbit in response.¹²⁸

Once they'd moved past, Josh himself stepped out from behind a nearby oak. I snickered. 'It just seemed better to avoid her than to set her off again,' he said, coming to stand beside me. 'Everyone's overwrought enough without that.'

'Maybe you should just agree to attend Kawaiikon with

¹²⁸ A Princess Serenity pun.

her again,' drawled a deep voice behind us, and I spun around to discover PrinceC looking absolutely to die for in full Victorian mourning. Really, top hats ought to come with warning labels. He reached for my gloved hand with both of his and lifted it to his lips, causing my knees to liquefy. 'Lady Mina,' he said theatrically. Josh Amos made a choking sound.

'Do you know one another?' I babbled, remembering as I spoke that they did.

'We've seen each other at cosplay events,' Josh said coolly. He made a slight bow in PrinceC's direction. 'Your costumes, allow me to say, are always impeccable. You gave a very masterful performance at KawaiiKon, I recall.'

'I give a very masterful performance everywhere,' PrinceC said sardonically. There was a sort of strangled group shriek from some women standing next to us, and Mrs.Sev gave me a little wave and a half curtsy when I glanced their way.

Josh looked annoyed. He gave one last bow, in my direction this time, and murmured, 'If you'll excuse me, Lady Mina, it's getting a bit clichéd around here. We'll talk later, I hope.' He headed off, soon disappearing into the crowd. I noticed a couple of the Tented Tartanists detached themselves from their group and trailed hopefully after him. Not that I was particularly

watching him walk away, or anything. I just happened to notice.

PrinceC snorted quietly. 'What an ass,' he remarked, momentarily startling me into a mistaken belief that he was psychic. 'An utter young idiot,' he went on, unconsciously clarifying the matter. 'If I recall correctly, he spent his time at KawaiiKon too embroiled in ridiculous scandal and hysterical females to have possibly noticed my costumes.'

'What sort of scandal?' I asked, interested in spite of myself.

'The sort no gentleman should allow his name to become attached to,' PrinceC said firmly but uninformatively. He tucked my hand around his forearm. 'We should make our way to the monument,' he declared. 'The ritual must be starting soon, and you *are* the hostess.' I refrained from pointing out that he *wasn't* the host. He made an awfully handsome escort, and a fittingly dressed one; well worth a ringside seat, really. We weaved our way through the masses, PrinceC's broad-shouldered presence seeming to part the way with miraculous ease, until we were standing in front of the winged ballet dancer. Dr. Zerubbabel was there, flanked by Neo-Table Rappers and various cultic representatives. They were standing around what looked like a freshly filled in grave. Warr1or stood at the foot of this, leaning on a shovel and

looking impossibly rustic. We emerged from the crowd to stand next to him, and he tugged his cap to us and nodded. Dr. Zerubbabel cleared his throat.

The ceremony proved much more subdued than I'd expected. Dr. Zerubbabel gave us a short homily on how one of the paradoxes of online life is that the pursuit of universal popularity often leads to isolation, but by being oneself one can find a supportive tribe. Then he muttered a short chant in some arcane language, and Ciyerra's ghost was suddenly in front of us, hovering just high enough above the grave so that everyone could see her.

'And now let us have the grains of salt,' instructed Dr. Z., and one by one each of the religious and cultural representatives stepped forward: Arc, a C of N counterpart, a multiply-breasted catwoman, Darla, a Gay Unicornist, an enormous wolf in a wizard's robe, what looked like twin boy scouts, a knight in chainmail, a Druid Priestess, three uniformed schoolgirls, and a gauze-clad feedback whore.

Ciyerra, who had started out in her usual misty form, grew more and more solid, and less ethereal and idealized, as each representative dropped a single grain of salt on the grave.¹²⁹ Her

¹²⁹ Those are the proverbial grains of salt. They go well with the internet.

avatar bobbed lower and lower until finally it was firmly on the ground: a perfectly ordinary looking young woman, standing there like the rest of us. She looked tear-stained but relieved, and a pack of her friends raced forward to hug her.

I was gratified that we'd had such a spectacular, and well-attended, success, but once it was over I was left feeling a bit flat. It's like throwing a birthday party for someone else: a lot of fun to plan, and of course you're happy for them and everything, but at the end they leave with the gifts and you have to clean up.

Arc must have noticed my avatar was moping. 'What's wrong?' she asked. I explained as best I could.

'I suppose I'm an awful person, really,' I concluded glumly.

She smiled. 'Of course you're not,' she said. 'Everybody feels a bit that way sometimes. You'll feel better once you throw yourself into the next thing.'

This cheered me slightly. 'You're probably right,' I agreed. 'Tomorrow I'll head down to the harbour, and check in with the others. It's about time I got to work on remembering who I am.'

Her smile widened in a way that gave me the distinct impression she wasn't taking my new spiritual interests seriously,

an impression bloody well confirmed when she replied, 'Remember who you are? Mina, if there's one thing I knew about you right from the start, it's that you have a firm sense of who you are. It persists even in the face of who you *want* to be.'

She had to leave soon afterwards, so I didn't get time to formulate a rebuttal, but I reopened the conversation the next time I caught her on IM.

'Are you familiar with the phenomenon of soul bonds?' I asked her haughtily.

'No, but I'm conversant with the phenomenon of imaginative young people spending too much time indoors and needing to get out into the fresh air,' she replied. 'You don't know anyone who'd be interested in a four-week stint as co-counsellor of Computers and Creative Writing at a summer camp, do you?'

I paused in mid-indignation. 'What sort of summer camp?' I asked.

'It's an all-girls camp for ten to fourteen year olds. Eva Hamill runs it.'

'PrinceC's mother?' I asked, both intrigued and horrified.

'Yes,' said Arc. 'She's been involved with summer camps and after-school programs for years. All her projects are aimed at supporting and empowering young girls, and she's pretty rigorous

about keeping her son well away from it.' I fancied I could sense Arc smirking, but her font remained impassive.

'Would this co-counsellor have to have a lot of experience?' I asked, my hopes rising in spite of my best efforts to suppress them. I'd never been a counsellor, but I just *knew* I could do this. And it would be the perfect break from my routine--I could always pick up another McJob in the fall.

'Not if she came with strong recommendations,' Arc typed. I held my breath. 'Are you interested?'

'YES!' I said.

Mina de Malfois and the Reality Check (part one)

I spent the bus ride to Camp Silver Lake¹³⁰ wondering whether I was experiencing full-blown paranoia, or if I really had caught a fleeting glimpse of some sort of behind-fandom machination. I mean, I've always prided myself on being sensible in spite of my BNFdom. I'd made rather a point of not falling for the more sensational fandom rumours and fads, and I'd always dismissed the whole 'Secret Masters of Fandom' wheeze as a slightly lame joke. After all, if a fanfic author as well known as I am wasn't pulling invisible strings, then surely no one was.

But jouncing along the near-interminable highways, byways, and dirt roads I had plenty of time to ponder, and ponder I did. Assuming I survived the trip, I was about to embark on the strangest employment episode ever, and I speak as one who's had to acquire experience in the, if you'll excuse the phrase, service industry, which is neither as pervy nor as industrious as it sounds. The 'information package' the camp had sent me had included, to

¹³⁰ Camp Silver Lake takes its name from Gordon Korman's brilliant I Want to go Home. Korman, Gordon. I Want to go Home. Scholastic Canada (Mar 1 2004). 221

my bewilderment, application forms for a university called St. Scholastica's.¹³¹ Further puzzled shuffling had disclosed a letter promising that the Computers and Creative Writing posish offered, along with the expected minimum-wage reimbursement, a full scholarship.

A full scholarship, that is to say, to a uni I'd never heard of but was now being invited to apply to, and all because of a job I'd only gotten, if I may be perfectly frank, because of Arc's friendship with the woman running the camp.

It was all a bit peculiar. Peculiar in a good way, obviously. I mean, I was looking forward to the camp, and I'd filled out the uni app in a spirit of mild optimism; if I lucked out and they

¹³¹ St. Scholastica was the foundress of a convent, and the sister of Saint Benedict of Nursia.' The siblings were quite close. The respective rules of their houses proscribed either entering the other's monastery. According to Saint Gregory, they met once a year at a house near Monte Cassino monastery to confer on spiritual matters, and were eventually buried together, probably in the same grave. Saint Gregory says, "so death did not separate the bodies of these two, whose minds had ever been united in the Lord." Saint Gregory tells the charming story of the last meeting of the two saints on earth. Scholastica and Benedict had spent the day in the "mutual comfort of heavenly talk" and with nightfall approaching, Benedict prepared to leave. Scholastica, having a presentiment that it would be their last opportunity to see each other alive, asked him to spend the evening in conversation. Benedict sternly refused because he did not wish to break his own rule by spending a night away from Monte Cassino. Thereupon, Scholastica cried openly, laid her head upon the table, and prayed that God would intercede for her." <http://saintbenedict.org/stscholastica.htm> (26 January 2007). St. Scholastica's is the rival of the Chalet School. Brent-Dyer, Elinor. Rivals of the Chalet School. HarperCollins

recognized my as-yet-undisplayed academic potential, naturally I'd be *happy* to accept the Camp Silver Lake scholarship. But I admit to being puzzled as to why I'd been offered it. I had the strangest sense of wheels within wheels, as though some unseen hand were reaching out through fandom to...

...to do what, though? Give out scholarships? It was an awfully benign conspiracy, if that were the case. Unless maybe I was being recruited for some sort of espionage, in which case I really *must* start exercising regularly, and learn to climb ropes and things.

I'd come to no firm conclusions beyond the necessity of losing a teensy bit of weight, we'll say ten pounds, and then of toning up the remainder, when the bus pulled up at camp. We were hustled off, shown our cabins, and then started right in on a series of meetings about camp policy and responsibility and schedules and I don't know what all--I was barely listening, honestly. My co-counselor wasn't there yet; our chief of staff mentioned in passing that my partner was an 'old girl,' a former camper and junior counsellor, and so was being allowed to arrive later that day. And speaking of our chief of staff, Eva Hamill was disconcertingly cute, with bobbed black hair and a glowing tan. She

bore a definite family resemblance to her photogenic son.

When we left the dining hall the parking lot had filled with cars and busses, all of which were disgorging horrifying numbers of girls. They milled around us like that scene in zombie movies where the few surviving humans are trapped by the brain-munching hordes, although I guessed that shooting my way out would be frowned on. It was more or less terrifying, though. Until that exact second I hadn't fully understood that children would be involved. I'd always assumed I'd get on well with children, but I'd never felt much inclined to test that theory, and now the realization that I'd be amongst them for weeks hit me like the slap of a cold wave.

I set off through the sea of girls, charting a course back to Cabin 13. Cabin 13, I'd seen earlier, contained six bunks for campers and, in a small adjoined room, two beds, one each for self and counterpart. I'd already claimed one bed by dumping my luggage on it. When I entered the cabin now, I found an impromptu fan club had formed: a girl of about my age, presumably the other comp person, stood blocking my way, surrounded by a gaggle of young teen-things.

The girl standing in the doorway was boyishly slim-hipped, depressingly tall and slender, and had a mass of short,

dark, curly hair that reminded me of fauns. What really caught my eye, though, was the *Sanguinity* t-shirt she wore. 'Are you Mina?' she asked, and I temporarily lost my head.

'Are you one of my fans?' I gushed, and impulsively hugged her. Several of the dratted campers giggled. The girl didn't hug back. She didn't stiffen or pull away in revulsion or anything, but she came as close to *ignoring* me as anyone can while actually being embraced. I realized at once I'd made some sort of ghastly error, and stepped back, trying but not *quite* pulling off an air of nonchalance.

'No,' she said, raising one eyebrow. 'I was told my co-counsellor was here already, and that her name was Mina. I wasn't told she had fans.' She achieved a level of sardonic amusement on that last line that put me in mind of Mrs. Sev's Dark Schoolmaster. I could have admired it in a fictional character, but it's a lot less attractive when you're the recipient, somehow. The campers giggled again. You know, those people who babble about the innocent laughter of children have probably never met a child. This lot were gazing at Sarcasm Girl with a kind of fearful, sycophantic devotion that filled me with foreboding. Visions of homicide danced in my head. I struggled to regain control.

'My mistake,' I said frigidly.

She shrugged. 'No problem, doll,' she said, sweeping me with a slow glance that lingered pointedly along the way. That glance couldn't have been any more intrusive unless it had somehow sprouted tentacles. She reached out and shook my hand firmly, holding it just a fraction of a second longer than protocol required, and smiled knowingly. 'I'm Jen,' she said. 'Ami Jenever.'¹³² Let's head over to the computer lab, shall we?'

The door to the computer lab had, we were informed by the deputy head, to remain locked at all times, not because of the value of the equipment--some of the computers were so old that in place of a scroll key you expected to see actual parchment--but to keep the campers from unsupervised net access. Jen and I accepted our keys, nodded agreement to the rules, and gazed over our domain proudly. Well, reasonably proudly. I'd lost better electronics than these, honestly.

Still, internet access was not to be sneered at. I missed everyone already. Of course, I wouldn't be able to spend time in *Sanguinity* from camp, but I *hoped* to be able to touch base with everyone at Penn'd Passion regularly. They'd all been awfully nice

¹³² The Jenny-short-for-Jenever thing is a blatant homage to JKR's Ginny-short-for-Ginevra. For more on LotR fandom's most infamous Amy, see: Renne, Jeanine. When a Fan Hits the Shit: The Rise and Fall of a Phony Charity. Heisenberg Press (September 2004).

about my summer plans, offering heartfelt congratulations and best wishes. One of the Tolkien purists had shared, at length, his tales of the 'good old days' (a phrase I assume he used ironically) when their summer vacation had consisted of playing tennis in somebody's attic.¹³³ The Girls' Dormitory set, both Hockeystickers and Holidays, had been 'no end of chuffed' that I'd be at a real, live girls' camp, and had made all sorts of predictions about japes and pranks that I hadn't the heart to tell them were unlikely ever to occur outside of books. In fact I half hoped the camp infirmary would burn to the ground, requiring one girl to daringly rescue another, just so I could thrill the Jollies by confirming their fondest expectations.

But I didn't get much time online. I was *around* computers for much of every day, but not able to give proper attention to keyboard or screen. The darling children, or little demons--usage varying according to whether you were a parent, or one of the people hired to care for their spawn--couldn't be left alone for a second. I hadn't had a clear idea of what sort of interests I expected girls from families well-enough off to afford Silver Lake to share, but I certainly hadn't guessed the primary one would be porn. In

¹³³ It was actually Ghoodminton. Berry, John. 'I remember him—a tribute to Walt Willis.' <http://www.jophan.org/mimosa/m25/berry.htm> (26 January 2007).

the first day alone I had to block three sites I hope to entirely erase from my memory, and one I secretly bookmarked to look at later. Jen didn't help matters. The girls leapt to obey her every order usually, and fought for the privilege of making her bed and doing her chores, but her 'don't browse porn' lecture lacked conviction, and they bloody well sensed it.

I swear, nothing they were supposed to be doing, like writing letters home or keeping an online camp diary, held *half* the fascination for them that illicit sex did. When I wasn't pacing back and forth nervously and peering over their shoulders to monitor the level of filth on the screen, I was escorting herds of them to and from their other activities--a precaution I'd thought silly when I'd first heard it, but not any longer. Now I'd seen them in action I knew they were fully capable of charging a pack of gigolos to their parents' credit cards and having them shipped up by express post. Jen's frightening theory that the girls 'needed their privacy,' and her insistence that we 'relax and enjoy ourselves,' were entirely irresponsible. They couldn't be left alone for a *second*.

Jen was a computer genius, though, and a much worse addict than I am. Every time I turned my back on her she was logged in somewhere. I could never quite see what she was doing, either, as she logged off and shut down the instant she sensed

anyone looking. I fervently hoped it wasn't too pornographic or illegal, and left it at that. On the bright side, she did seem able to write well, and the sessions where we helped the girls compose and edit stories were enormous fun. The Jenny-worship got old fast, but the girls were gratifyingly willing to like me as well. One grew fond of the campers in spite of oneself. They were such bright, enthusiastic, amusing creatures, determined to enjoy everything--a bit like our online selves, only offline. I envied them a little. They hadn't learned to be insecure yet. Not that *I* was insecure. Not at all. But, you know...most other people are.

Speaking of which, I'd had an envelope from St. Scholastica's.

Mina de Malfois and the Reality Check (part two)

‘And you mean nothing’s burnt down yet?’ Ciyerra messaged.

‘Not a thing,’ I confessed, hating to disappoint her.

‘Never mind, dear,’ she typed, as though she thought *I* might be disappointed. ‘A group of girls are planning a sea voyage to the Patricic Rim¹³⁴ for some time in September. I’ll put in a word for you and see that you’re invited along.’

It was the last week at camp, and reality continued to be less well-plotted than the Girls’ Dormitory set had hoped, although some of my campers had formed friendships and played smallish pranks, so there was that to report on. The daily routine of camp was as reassuringly timeless as any Hockeystickser could have hoped, but the casual motley of the ‘uniforms’ had been a sad disappointment on the one occasion I’d managed to upload pictures, and without a single fire or life-threatening drowning to report I sensed I was letting the side down.

¹³⁴ The Patricic Rim somewhat resembles Aristasia (using ‘Patrician’ instead of ‘Aristocratic’). <http://www.aristasia.co.uk/> (26 January 2007).

They, on the other hand, had behaved marvellously, sending me a Girls' Dormitory Care Package complete with cookies and a bound copy of this year's Virtual Girls Annual.¹³⁵ It was particularly touching when you remembered that I'd never posted at their corner of Penn'd Passion. I suppose they viewed me as part of their wider circle of acquaintance, or maybe my hosting Ciyerra's spirit-raising had won them over. It was sweet of them, and I was a little bit homesick for the web, and therefore inclined to get teary-eyed over kind gestures; I'd sniffled over that Annual more than one likes to admit.

My reduced net access had made it even more difficult to open the envelope from St. Scholastica's than would otherwise have been the case. Say what you will about the limitations of online friendships--such as how one never really *knows* who's at the other end of those electrons--the fact remains that they're a source of moral support. It's easier to face real life disappointments if you know the squees of happy fanfic readers await you. It kind of takes the edge off rejection.

I'm sure I'd have *eventually* worked up the nerve to open the dratted thing, but as it happened Jen sprang unexpectedly into

¹³⁵ The Virtual Girls' Annual is a reference to Girls' Annuals generally, and specifically to Ju Gosling's brilliant Virtual Worlds of Girls. Gosling, Ju. Virtual Worlds of Girls. 1998. <http://www.ju90.co.uk/start.htm> (26 January 2007).

our bedroom and caught me gazing at the still-sealed envelope. I'd been counting on privacy for the nightly ritual of not reading my mail--she usually disappeared after we'd got the girls settled and the lights out, and returned after I was asleep. But, as I said, on this night she caught me suspended inertly between hope and despair. She plucked the envelope out of my fingers, glanced at the return address, and said easily, 'College admission jitters? Want me to open it for you?' She hit just the right note of callous compassion, and I nodded.

'Well done Mina,' she went on, once she'd glanced at the contents. She handed over my acceptance letter, laid the rest of the contents on the bed beside me, and ruffled my hair with a casual intimacy that in other circs would have irritated me enormously. 'St. Schol's have let you in. Very elite school, that: they don't take just anybody.'

I almost couldn't believe it. Of course it seems silly *now* to think they could ever have turned me down, but the truth was, I'd been worried. I know it's difficult to believe, but I'd had a crisis of faith once I'd sent off the forms committing me, should they accept me, to my place at St. Scholastica's and my half of a dorm room. I'd been out of uni for a while now, and not exactly improving my mind via my career, either. St. Scholastica's looked poshly austere

and *serious*. What if I just wasn't good enough?

The relief was so enormous I was trembling. Jen noticed, and though she quite decently looked quickly away and pretended not to have seen, she did say, 'You shouldn't care so much about other people's opinions.'

Bloody cheek! It's not as if she knew me well enough to make that sort of enormous judgement--and anyway, who was she to talk? It was probably easy for her to shrug off things like university acceptance, but *I* had a reputation to keep up. I'd have felt *awful* if I'd had to admit to Arc that I'd been turned down, after she'd got me this job. And since the camp had put me up for the scholarship, if I'd been rejected by St. Scholastica's I bet they'd have told Ms. Hamill. I'd have had to worry that she might accidentally have told PrinceC, in which case I'd have literally *died* of embarrassment, or that she'd discuss it with Arc, which would have been too utterly awful for words. I glared at the back of Jen's head. She'd probably never had to keep a secret or worry about her reputation in her life.¹³⁶ She couldn't *begin* to understand the sort of strain I'd been under.

Still. She had opened the envelope. I relented, though she'd been irritatingly oblivious of both the glare and the relenting.

¹³⁶ This is completely inaccurate; Jen's life *consists* of secrets.

'I really wanted to get in,' I said, as calmly as I could manage.

'To an all-girls university?' she asked mockingly. 'Where, no matter how stellar the education you'll be getting, you'll be surrounded day and night by a pack of women? Hard to tell if it's worth it.' I hadn't really asked for her input, so it took a rather major effort not to snap at her. It never so much as crossed my mind that she mightn't be addressing me at all. I knew very little about my co-counsellor, really, other than that the campers senselessly adored her.

We endured one afternoon when we couldn't get the girls settled down at all. They didn't want to do anything online, not even browse teen wizard porn; they just wanted to surround us at the front of the room and gossip about the mysterious stranger who'd arrived by landing a seaplane on the lake, and who was now shut up in Ms. Hamill's cabin. Jen and I had missed all this excitement.

As soon as we had a free period Jen grabbed me by the hand. 'Come on,' she said. 'We have to go ask Ms. Hamill when we can expect our pay stubs to be mailed out.' It was as good an excuse as any. I followed her.

We'd no sooner stepped onto her porch than Ms. Hamill's door swung open. 'But how did you guess?' she was saying, and

then fell abruptly silent when she saw the two of us. She eyed Jen curiously, almost as if she didn't recognise her.¹³⁷ 'Did you want something, girls?' she asked, still with that strange expression on her face.

'No, Ms. Hamill,' Jen said meekly, abandoning our alibi without warning. I couldn't have spoken, myself. I was rendered temporarily speechless by the sight of the person who'd followed Eva Hamill through the door.

The stranger was tall, broad shouldered, and dressed in a black tuxedo and a ruffled white shirt.¹³⁸ It took me a confused couple of moments to realize she was female. Her hair was mostly reddish-blond, but there were locks and strands of every shade of gold and silver and copper.

'It's nice to see you,' she said, sounding amused. She seemed to speak to Jen, but then she grinned at me. My knees wobbled, and I had a moment of not knowing where to put my hands, and feeling that my feet had grown to gigantic,

¹³⁷ Ms. Hamill is, understandably, perplexed to learn what Mina will learn shortly, and Arc shortly thereafter: Jen (who has been a camper and counsellor at Camp Silver Lake, and thus known to Ms. Hamill for years as Jen) is known online as Josh. Xena doesn't know the full truth, either; she has 'seen through' Josh's online persona, but 'Jen' isn't the full story either...

¹³⁸ She looks something like Rei Asaka (Hana no Saint Juste). Riyoko Ikeda. 'Oniisama e.' July 1991 to April 1992. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oniisama_e (26 January 2007).

unmanageable proportions. 'Perhaps you two could row me out to the Otter?'

'I'll row you out to the Otter,' Ms. Hamill said firmly before we had a chance to agree, and the stranger's grin deepened. She made a very neat, formal bow to our chief of staff, sort of both courtly and mocking, and the two of them left. We watched them closely all the way down the trail, but they walked without speaking, at least until they were out of view.

'Well,' said Jen, sounding awed. I didn't answer, but I knew *exactly* what she meant.

On the last evening at camp the computer lab was almost deserted--I guess the campers preferred to spend their last bit of time with each other rather than emailing people they'd see tomorrow anyway. I slipped into a seat and messaged Arc.

'I'm having a bout of nerves,' I confessed, my fingers trembling on the keyboard.

'Don't,' she advised, calmly and impossibly. 'Don't even think about it. Just get back to your apartment and concentrate on all the things you need to do--terminate your lease and pack up your things and sell the things you can't pack--and before you know it you'll be there.'

'But what if I'm not good enough?' I typed. 'I mean, who

am I, really?’ Then I looked in horror at what I’d written and logged off, even reaching out one ice-cold hand to shut down my computer, making absolutely certain I wouldn’t see her answer. What had I *done*? Why had I *written* that?

Jen stood up from her own computer near the door, looking distracted. ‘Turn out the lights before you leave, will you, Mina?’ she asked, hurrying out before I even answered. She must have been having as bad an image-management night as I was; she’d forgotten to shut off her computer. I leaned over to flick it off on my way out, and inadvertently read the screen. ‘Please click to complete *Sanguinity Online* logout, Josh Amos,’ it said. I nearly shrieked out loud from sheer shock.¹³⁹

I was, as you can imagine, entirely distracted from my own problems for at least fifteen minutes. It wasn’t until I was getting ready for bed, against a backdrop of overexcited chatter from the tightly-wound overly-energetic denizens of Cabin 13, that it hit me. ‘Just get back to your apartment,’ Arc had written.

But that meant--that meant--Arc knew I really lived there. She knew I’d been lying all along. Why was she even friends with me, then? How could she even *stand* me?

¹³⁹ This, obviously, is the point at which Mina learns Josh is also Jen.

My heart felt like lead.

I crawled into bed hoping to die in my sleep, and eventually fell into troubled dreams, and woke at some ghastly hour of the morning. I couldn't re-achieve drowsiness, so I gave up on it and got up, dressing quietly so as not to wake 'Josh' or the campers, and went for a walk along the lake.

Now that I was awake and, if not bright-eyed, at least clear-headed, I thought I understood. She'd alluded before to her expectations that someday I'd move on to creating original fiction. Perhaps Archivist12 had got in on the ground floor, so to speak, by friending a future Real Live Novelist. That, I thought, had to be the answer.

I went on thinking that I'd figured it out all through helping the campers with last minute packing, and hugging them goodbye as their parents drove up, and gathering my own things together. I was waiting for the bus when Jen caught up to me. I'd been carefully avoiding her all day, out of the sheer awkwardness induced by knowing the truth about her screen name, but she just thrust something at me. 'This arrived for you at the main office,' she gasped, and dashed off to the carful of friends that had come to pick her up.

I turned it over in my hands, curiously. It was a telegram.

I'd never had a telegram before. I hadn't been sure they still existed, even, outside of books. I waited until I was sitting on the bus to open it. If it was something bad I wanted to be sitting down.

'Who are you, really?' it read. 'You're Mina, of course: the girl who can sit all alone in a grotty little apartment and still summon up the will to build Manors in the clouds, and then fill them with friends. Of course you're good enough. Much love, Arc.'

From the Desk Of Archivist12

From the Desk of Nancy Easton

Judy, darling, it's kind of you, but no. Two weeks of strained, polite 'inclusion' and poorly disguised boasting about Eva's husband are not my idea of a vacation, no matter how much sand, sun, and sangria you add to the mix. Give my regards to everyone in as plausible a form as you can concoct, and have fun. I've already written to Val seconding your nomination of Mina and naming my own nomination. If you need me for anything else, you have my cell number.

~xenalor

I shook my head. That Nancy was signing letters with her online pseudonym was a bad sign of fannish overinvolvement; that she still imagined any of the others accepted her only grudgingly was a worse. I *know* the subtext vs. friendship arguments had been heated at the time, but really, she needed to move on from X:WP and stop projecting it onto her own life so persistently. After all, the Council have been friends since prep. school--it's not as if we hadn't known about Nancy all along. The periodic and very public

crying jags of her many favourites would have been an adequate tip-off in themselves, not to mention that her dorm. room always overflowed with flowers from her conquests and admirers.

I was pleased that she'd seconded Mina for one of the scholarships, though. I assumed she'd put one of the Tented Tartanists up as well--though as it turned out, I was mistaken about that.

I let myself into Val's beach house, and saw that I wasn't the first to arrive. From the window I could see someone sprawled on a beach chair. A pitcher and glasses were placed on a table close at hand, so I grabbed a chair from the deck and accepted the unspoken invitation. The corpse proved to be Eva; she sat up when I approached.

'About time somebody else got here,' she said approvingly. 'I was in imminent danger of having my conscience kick in over the whole 'drinking alone' thing. Are all four spots filled, d'you know? Because I've got two probables, and I'd dearly love to squeeze them both in.'

'I'm putting Mina up, and Nancy's sent her candidate in,' I said, pouring myself something horribly neon but blessedly ice-laden, 'so I suppose it's up to Val, really.'

Eva dug her toes into the warm sand thoughtfully. 'Poor

old Valerie,' she said. 'D'you suppose she *minds*, Judith?'

I knew what she meant at once, because we'd had this conversation before. We had it regularly, really, returning again and again to this question of whether we were somehow taking advantage. None of us wanted to, of course, but we couldn't quite shake off the worry. There was Valerie, the only one of us who'd chosen not to pursue any form of higher education --'St. Ursula's was enough for me, darlings,' she always said; 'I vowed that once my deb ball was over I'd be done with obligations and live only for pleasure, and that's what I'm doing,'-- underwriting the whole cost of our scholarship scheme. We all could easily have contributed, especially Eva and I--no one knew precisely what sort of income Nancy had, much less where it originated--but Val would have none of it. And yet more often than not she didn't bother to put up a candidate. 'You're the bookish types, *you* choose our four promising fanwomen,' she'd insist. 'I'm happy just writing the cheques and watching the fireworks.'

'I don't know,' I answered Eva truthfully. 'She says not...'

'And the only one she's likely to confide in wasn't here four years ago, and isn't coming now, is she?' Eva said shrewdly. I sighed.

'I tried,' I said defensively, 'but you know Nancy.'

‘Not as well as some,’ she said, smiling slightly. I scowled, and she went on innocently, ‘I think my *son* talks to her more often than I do, lately, what with that game of theirs.’

‘I’m surprised you haven’t taken it up,’ I said. ‘*Sanguinity*’s marvellous. Val was right when she said it was a shrewd investment.’

‘Val always is, about things like that,’ Eva agreed. ‘Financial genius, that’s what it is. I wish some of it would rub off on me. But no, to answer your question: my son and I try not to cross fandom paths too often. It’s inevitable with the classics--I raised him right, after all--but for the newer stuff, I let him have his space. Frankly, I’m happier not knowing or seeing too much of what he gets up to.’

‘Something like Nancy and I,’ I pointed out wryly, and she laughed and refilled her drink.

‘Something like. My son speaks highly of her, you know--he has a kind of idea she’s looking out for him, out of loyalty to me, and he might be right. It *sounds* like her. I just wish she wouldn’t be so pig-headed. She was wrong about Gabe and Xena, but really, it’s past time she forgave me for being right, *and* for my blatant heterosexuality.’

‘Darlings!’ cried a voice from behind us, and we looked

back to see Val on the deck, wearing an enormous floppy hat and dark glasses. I sometimes suspect Val of a slight degree of deliberate self-parody, but I suppose it's harmless. She dashed down and hugged us both, and then sat down cross-legged in the sand, looking wistfully at the empty pitcher.

'I'll get you a deck chair, and mix us up more drinks,' Eva said promptly, grabbing the pitcher and heading up the path.

'So are we all set, selection-wise?' Val asked me happily. 'Nan's gone with someone from *Sanguinity* fandom--'

'So have I,' I confessed.

'Oh, dear,' she said. 'Well, with any luck we can rely on Eva to come up with two girls from two *different* fandoms. Should be a breeze for her, she's into everything. Remember the last lot? Beyond tiresome, all that shippy squabbling.'

I did remember, vividly. We'd erroneously thought that in awarding the scholarships to four women in the same fandom we'd be fostering solid friendships based on a shared interest. Unfortunately they'd all belonged to the wankiest fandom ever, and we'd ended up fostering internecine warfare and simmering paranoia. We'd all sighed with relief that all four, upon graduating last spring, had announced their intentions of finding work, thereby clearing the decks for four new people. If they'd applied to

do further degrees we'd have felt honour-bound to fund them, as they were all scholastically brilliant even if they were deeply socially impaired.

'Here's to smooth sailing for our new girls,' Val proposed when Eva returned, and we clinked glasses.

'Speaking of schools,' Val said, setting down her drink and struggling to open her chair, 'your son must be starting this fall. Too bad St. Scholastica's is still all female.'

'He wouldn't have chosen it anyway,' Eva said. 'He's got his heart set on eventual specialization in entomology, and chose on that basis alone, as far as I can tell.'

'So, let's see our four bright young things, then,' Val suggested, and Eva and I pulled out our neatly-typed suggestions. We laid them out on the table alongside the handwritten note from Nancy that Val produced, and studied them in silence. Eva's choices looked good: one Age of Sail-er with a focus on Austen, and one SciFi-er with a passion for television series. I didn't recognize either their names or their pseudonyms, and the name of the woman Nancy had suggested was an unknown as well...but Nancy's candidate's screenname was quite familiar. I almost gasped.

Josh Amos.

I almost said, 'There's been a mistake,' but then I paused. It wouldn't be the first time Nancy had realized something the rest of us simply hadn't.

Sanguinity Fanfiction

Title: **At His Lordship's Behest**

Fandom: *Sanguinity*

Pairing: Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina/ Princess
Beta Bonafilia de St. Aubyn

Author: Mina de Malfois

Chapter: introduction

Princess Beta Bonafilia de St. Aubyn paced the balcony outside her bedroom, feeling caged. She was reluctant to join the others, although she had probably delayed as long as was possible; she expected, at any moment, one of the servants to appear, bearing her father's summons to the table. She knew he would be saddened, not angry, and it pained her to be such a constant source of worry and disappointment to him in so many little, unimportant things. 'If only,' she thought despairingly, 'I could be the good, obedient, contented daughter he wishes me to be.' Instead, she knew, she was ambitious, and restless, and willful. 'If only silk could smother sorrow, or absinthe drown it, or jewels conceal it. If only I could be calm, and tame, and learn not to chafe at our fallen condition. I wish I could forget our enslavement, and not feel the

insult of being *permitted* to wear the crown.'

'Or else,' she thought, entering her lavishly appointed rooms and crossing to the oak-panelled hall, determined to be downstairs before she was sent for, 'I wish I had been trained to fight, and at least had the consolation afforded the men of this family.' Pierce, though her distant cousin, and so unlikely to ever inherit the throne, had at least been equipped and educated to defend the St. Aubyn name in honest combat. Even the commonplace friend Pierce had brought home with him, some mannerless peasant named Jab Ackerman, was probably better able to wield a sword than she was. Better to ride out and die, better to face the magnificent, powerful darkness and admit defeat, than to cling to safety here, shamefully sheltered and protected on these sweet, green, pretty, damnable islands.

But Pierce, she reflected bitterly, was too fond of fine things and beautiful surroundings to fret at any limits on their family's power. She would never criticize him in front of outsiders, not even the servants, but she was all too aware of his lack of ambition. Enough, for him, to have ample means to slake his various hungers. He would raise no blade until such time as battle-lust fired his veins--and thus far, the princess knew, there'd been no room for that among his other lusts.

At least I have one hidden strength, she consoled herself, hurrying down broad stairs past tapestry-shrouded walls. Wulfwyn, Beta's loyal servant, understood her despair. It was Wulfwyn who had slipped her the delicate glass bottle that now nestled among Beta's perfumes, hidden from prying eyes. 'One drop,' the princess consoled herself, 'buys me victory over any human enemy, or release for myself.' Her pales cheeks were stained with crimson anger when she remembered the one glorious enemy she could never kill, but she pushed him resolutely from her thoughts.

This life was stifling her with its cloying falseness and its pretence of graceful power. They had long since lost their control of the better portion of their lands. Her family didn't rule; even their reign of this constricted realm only continued because *he* permitted it. Everything they owned--the jewels and silks and even her beloved pet crow--were merely baubles, tossed carelessly to them by *him* like toys given to placid children. They had bought the continued security of some worthless peasants at too high a price, sacrificing their pride and high estate for a pointless, though 'moral,' treaty with an enemy who scorned their weakness. Her thoughts flew to the dark cliffs across the water, and the fiend infesting the old castle, and she shivered.

Chapter: One

Princess Beta Bonafilia de St. Aubyn tossed her hair and shot a scornful glance at her handsome and athletic third cousin twice removed. Pierce had had the temerity to ask her, in front of her three assembled guests, what it was she hoped to accomplish by holding a séance. It must, she supposed, be the fault of his blood that had left him with so little interest in the occult arts, for Pierce, in spite of the fine blue veins that visibly threaded like expensive lace through his pale, aristocratic wrists, had at least one antecedent whose pedigree was suspect. The de St. Aubyn blood was not, in him, perfectly pure, and it told in his lack of respect for the hidden mysteries. Not, she reflected bitterly, that it made any difference. He was male, and therefore treated with the respect and seriousness unjustly denied to her. She glared at his well-filled breeches.

‘Never you mind,’ she told him now, and her friends shrieked with laughter at her skilful rebuttal. ‘Who knows what we may accomplish if we succeed in lifting the veil and communicating with those that lurk in the darkness! They may have powers to bestow that would win us an easy victory over our foes.’

‘Better to struggle in light, and be defeated,’ Pierce’s

friend Jab told her, 'than to make pacts with corruption and darkness for the sake of power and easy victories.' PrincessB didn't bother to respond. She found Jab tediously moral, and couldn't understand what Pierce saw in him, or why he chose to spend so much time in the company of a muscled peasant who stank of sunlight and musky, labour-intensive sweat. If she could find a use for him, she'd have willingly employed this stallion-strong tool, but what possibly use could anyone make of him?

'Let's go,' she told her friend and confidant, the governess Lady Wilhelmina, and hustled her three companions up the staircase to the privacy of her rooms. She closed and locked the door with a sigh of relief at being able to shut out the rest of her tedious, though of course beloved and well-bred, family. Not one of them truly understood her, or appreciated the depths of her suffering every time she contemplated their fallen state--which was often! If only the de St. Aubyns could be restored to the throne! She hugged her fierce ambitions to herself in silence, and conducted her friends to a small table, on which a Ouija board and several candles had been arranged.

'This is so exciting!' sighed Archangela DubhGilla.

The fourth member of the party, PrincessB's favourite servant, Wulfwyn, looked apprehensive. 'We ought not to be doing

this, milady,' she said now, shivering. 'Who knows, Princess, what evil we may stir by penetrating the sacred silences beyond the veil?'

'Who knows, indeed?' replied Princess B, more bravely than she felt. 'But I intend to find out. If the dead hold secrets that will empower me to seize back the throne, I am determined to find them out!' But her heart pounded with terror as she spoke, and she sat quickly, feeling dizzy with apprehension now that the moment had arrived. Her friends quickly followed suit and sat around the table, looking suitably impressed and terrified.

None of them save Princess B's pet crow heard the measured tread from beyond the room's velvet curtains as Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina crossed the balcony to watch them, with gracefully-folded leathery wings, and wearing a superior smirk on his handsome face. His fangs shone in the moonlight, and his loins pulsed with what would have been, in a lesser man, inadvertent excitement, but was in him a carefully-controlled response to the purity of the princess' blood wafting to him, a sweet enticement of scent that added piquancy to her delightful, yet pointless, urge to rebel against his stern dominance of her family.

Chapter: Two

‘How shall we begin?’ Archangela asked breathlessly, giving Lady Wilhelmina’s hand an excited squeeze.

‘We must sit around the table--like so,’ said PrincessB, ‘and place our hands on the planchette. Be quiet and respectful, and banish all doubts from your mind. Spirits,’ she said softly, ‘are you with us?’

There was a gust of wind, and the candles flickered. Wulfwyn uttered a small inadvertent shriek, and Archangela shushed her.

‘You must have left a window open, Princess,’ Lady Wilhelmina said calmly.

PrincessB frowned. ‘I thought I had the windows locked,’ she began, but her voice trailed off as she saw that a white fog was swirling into the room, creeping around their ankles and then climbing slowly higher. One of the servants, she realized, must have interfered with her preparations and unlocked a window. She would speak to them about it in the morning. It was beyond lax that anyone should have left an entry to the castle open to the dangers of the night! She shook off her annoyance with their selfish incompetence and struggled to focus on the séance. ‘Is anyone there?’ she asked, watching the Ouija board closely, her fingers trembling as she waited for a response.

Instead a low, melodic voice answered her, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. 'Who are you, that you seek an audience with the spirits?' it asked.

PrincessB shivered, but she answered with a confidence born of fine breeding and strict training. 'I am Princess Beta,' she said, 'and my father is the ruler of this island.' Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Wulfwyn was giving her a concerned look; doubtless the faithful but superstitious servant was still worrying about the wisdom of trying to contact the other side.

The voice chuckled softly. 'Your father rules nothing at all, child, save easily led peasants, and a handful of noble families who have long since lapsed into drowsy compliance.' The voice was sensuous, and its tone maddeningly superior. For some reason it made her knees weak.

'And yet you came to answer me,' she pointed out, 'so I must count for something.' Now all three of her companions had turned to her with puzzled expressions.

'My lady, who are you speaking to?' Wulfwyn asked gently.

'Can you not hear him?' PrincessB exclaimed.

'They hear nothing,' the voice said, and the fog flowed up suddenly, shoulder high. The four women gasped and leapt to their

feet. Wulfwyn crossed herself, closed her eyes, and began to mutter a prayer. Lady Wilhelmina and Archangela clutched one another tightly, their bodies pressed closely together. PrincessB, however, turned this way and that, seeking the source of the voice.

There by the window she saw him, his form silhouetted against the moonlight: a tall, broad-shouldered man, his long hair blowing in the wind. His shoulders looked hunched and unnatural. She stared. He bowed. It was impossible to tell if this were courtesy, or if he was mocking her. She strained to see him, but could not make out his features.

‘May I come in?’ he asked, and his voice must still have been only in her head, because the others did not look up. When he saw her glance at them he continued, ‘Perhaps I should ask again tonight, when you are alone?’

‘I...no,’ she said, confused. She blushed, and even through the fog and the darkness he saw, and chuckled again, knowingly.

‘No, because when your good attendants have left you for the night, and you have no female companions to guard you, you will not be alone in your bed for long, will you, Princess?’ he said. PrincessB gasped.

‘My lady, what is it?’ Wulfwyn asked, hurrying to her side, and in that moment the man backed away and then was gone,

his last words still ringing in PrincessB's head:

‘Perhaps I should come back and seek admittance from you both, then.’

Title: Of Vice and Velvet

Fandom: *Sanguinity*

Author: PrinceC

Dedication: Dedicated, with devoted affection, to Mina de Malfois, whose fiction inspires and moves me, and who haunts my fondest and most private dreams.

Of Vice and Velvet (introduction)

Lady Horatia Marianna Wilhelmina de Malfois sat before her looking-glass, brushing her long, silver-blond hair. Her skin had the icy perfection of untouched snow, and her green eyes were cold and expressionless as she prepared for bed. Hers was the practiced lack of expression of an accomplished spy, well-versed in the act of concealment, most particularly wherein her own thoughts and emotions were concerned. She looked a model of the feminine graces; few would have guessed she was both a crack shot and a seasoned sailor, or that her firm but slender form concealed an iron determination. Lady Mina had oft proven that she was willing to use any tools at her disposal to achieve her goals...and most men were such eager tools. Her thoughts turned, briefly, to the well-muscled Jab Ackerman who was installed in rooms near the princess' quarters, rooms even more sumptuous than Lady Mina's

own--but then he, peasant thug though he looked, was Prince Pierce's honoured guest.

Night brought the relief of darkness, under cover of which she could relax just a little, knowing temporary freedom from the suspicious glances and the thousand small daily slights from those fools who mistrusted her intentions even as she risked her life to preserve their safety. She stood, draped in white silk that caressed her form like wisps of moonlit fog, accentuating rather than concealing her tiny waist and full, round, high breasts. Her nipples hardened as the night breeze toyed with the delicate fabric, causing it to ripple against her skin. She stretched, cat-like, supple muscles moving in unconscious enticement under milky skin. The tiniest of scars, almost more decoration than flaw, was visible on the soft skin of her left inner thigh.

The royal house of the de St. Aubyns could not, whatever their pretensions, boast a bloodline any more noble than her own. Her present straightened circumstances belied her breeding, perhaps, but only to those who, obsessed with surfaces, saw their own reflections in place of every truth. She tossed the mirror a chill, wry, scornful smile. The proof, after all, lay in her cunning, her daring, her manipulations: blood will tell. Whereas the de St. Aubyns, for all that they had held the throne for centuries, had too

often stooped to dalliances that ill-befit a noble house. Not one of their current generation could ever have managed the multi-layered deception by which she, nightly, saved their pitiable throats.

Anointing her pulse-points with an elixir brewed in sacred silence by a well-debauched initiate of a cult believed by the forces of 'light' to have long since been extinguished, Lady Mina blew out the candleflame and climbed into bed. She was a more willing sacrifice than she had yet admitted even to herself.

Of Vice and Velvet (chapter one)

Prince Choronzon Erik Vladimir de Gravina stepped lightly onto the balcony, cloaked by night and velvet. His clothes, though elegant, bore a faint scent of mold and decay. It was, he knew, an affectation to keep his burial clothes, but they had sentimental value. He had not just been buried in these garments: he had been Made in them, chosen by his Lord de Gravina, renamed, and elevated to a place of pride and power within the clan. Lady Wilhelmina shrank from the scent of death and damp in an instinctual mortal horror. Had she but known the honour he did her by so dressing for their assignations, perhaps she would have reacted differently. And tonight he came to her unwashed, bearing a heady concoction of pheromones to further grace her weak,

human flesh.

He stood waiting for a silent moment, savouring the tension that built within his marble-cool body as he scented her like a hunter scenting prey. She was in her bed, but not asleep. He could sense her trembling; he could smell her excitement. She was exactly as he wanted her: terrified, determined, and aroused. Her fear was as delicious as her unwilling eagerness. She struggled, he knew well, to remain in control. She tried to tell herself that she acted out of calculated necessity, and that she had some measure of control over the inevitable outcome. They both knew otherwise. He could strip away her will with ease, leaving her begging for his touch, his attention, even his abuse. In her soul of souls, she already belonged to him. She *wanted* him to use her.

Choronzon entered her room soundlessly. Her first awareness of his dark presence came with the chill that crept like fog through her chamber. She lifted her head from the pillow, and saw the man-shaped absence of light. Only when she lit the lamp beside her bed did his pale perfection become visible in the light from the flame. She'd noticed that before: for some reason, the light of the moon had no power to illuminate him.

He moved to sit beside her, smiling mockingly, as though amused to imitate a human lover at his lady's bedside. This close,

he frightened her. Her heart hammered, and she felt her legs shaking with fear. She forced herself to stay where she was, even though her senses screamed at her to shrink away in revulsion from this perversely wilful corpse that would not rest in peace.

He smiled, enjoying the moments when her terror reduced her to her inchoate animal self, nothing more than flesh and sensation, incapable of intrigue or complexity. He reached out and stroked her cheek with one cold, clawed finger, taking care not to mar her skin by scratching it. Her complexion was as fine as any mere mortal's could be, and it pleased him. The high, firm fullness of her breasts filled him with appreciation for the fleeting beauty of this ephemeral creature, and the narrow grace of her waist roused his desire to feel her, soft and compliant against his unnatural strength.

Her nostrils flared, and he saw a puzzled awareness enter her eyes as she took in his new scent and reacted to it involuntarily. He laughed quietly at her perplexed arousal, watching as the mustiness of his grave-garb lost out to the musky, overwhelming scent that covered his body beneath the clothing. He noted, too, that her curiosity and lust awakened, a silvery contrast to her dark fear. Perhaps, he thought now, she was worthy of uses beyond the momentary pleasures afforded him by trembling, milk-white

thighs and sweetly perfumed excitement. Perhaps she could be shaped into a pawn, a weapon in the endless power struggles of their clan.

‘Do you enjoy the scent, my dear?’ he teased, amused. He saw that she did, even if she couldn’t understand why. Her perky nipples strained against the fabric of her nightgown, and he knew they ached for his touch. He laughed again. It was the first time he’d ever come to her fresh from Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina’s chambers, and her reaction was even more transparently needy than he’d expected. She thought herself a sophisticate--and compared to the de St. Aubyn princess, he supposed she might be--but he knew she’d never guessed at how the young bloods of the de Gravina clan pleased themselves and each other.

Title: **The Dreams of Angels**

Chapter: Introduction

Author: Warr1or

Pairing: PrincessB/Jab. Sammich forever!

Dedication: For all my fellow Sammiches: may the purity of PB/J illuminate your own lives.

Jab Ackerman, rough-woven shirt open to reveal a broad, muscular chest, stepped inside the cool shade of the castle of the de St. Aubyns. His honest, brown eyes took in the high-ceilinged hall as his boots carried him silently across the threshold. He had been reluctant to come here. He instinctively mistrusted the elite, who were so often led astray by their own wealth and power. The people of Little Edmead, the village nearest Jab's own farm, were steeped in simple gratitude for the sacrifices the Royal family had made. Jab wondered, sometimes, if his own more suspicious stance was warranted. This family had done nothing to earn his mistrust. None of their women were noted for callously heartless, wonton behavior. And yet he knew full well, at a fundamental level, that the de St. Aubyns did not deserve the glowing praise bestowed upon them. Jab had too much common sense not to see the obvious. They had acted from self-interest.

No, he had not wanted to come here. But in this instance, the strong, unbreakable bonds of pure manly friendship took priority. He glanced affectionately at Pierce de St. Aubyn, his loyal and most trusted friend. Jab did not love easily, nor blindly. He was aware of Pierce's weaknesses--more fully aware, in truth, than Pierce was himself. Jab, though, saw with clear-eyed certainty the strengths to which Pierce could rise. His privileged background had not tested him, but Jab pitied more than blamed him for that.

Now, he saw, Pierce's silk shirt clung to his sweat-drenched frame. They had put in a day's hard riding to reach the castle, under a pitiless sun, but Jab had insisted on riding hard, pushing themselves forward. No roadside inn was safe in these perilous times, and the open roadside was worse. Wordlessly, Jab lifted the strap of his leather flask over his head and strode to Pierce's side, proffering a gift of cool water to ease his friend's suffering.

Pierce drank deeply. Water trickled from the corners of his mouth when he laughed and handed back the flask. 'There are a hundred servants here,' he teased, 'any one of whom could have brought me colder water than that. You've been carrying it all day.'

'Colder, maybe, but not sweeter,' said Jab. 'That water is from my own well.'

Above them, the Princess Beta, affectionately known to her friends and family as PrincessB, knelt at her prayers. The slanting rays of the evening sun touched her hair, which shone golden in the warm light. Her rooms, unlike the rest of the castle, were simple and uncluttered. Her bedchamber had an almost monastic lack of decoration. Hers was a sweet, simple, devout nature, which scorned display in favor of daydreams. She was barely in her teens, and had never been in love or known a man's kiss. She was yet too young to understand the implications of her title, and she shrank from the politics and intrigues of the court. For as long as she could she intended to linger in the safety her childhood afforded her.

Although she was very young, and surrounded by the dissolute upper class, PrincessB's dreams brought her promises of a better life. Her beautiful nature had not been stained or corrupted by her upbringing. She had always valued intangible things such as friendship, love, and spirituality. She couldn't explain how she knew that these were worth more than all her family's wealth. But she did know, and she clung fiercely to that knowledge. Her dreams spoke truths that rang out above the falsehoods that adults so often mouthed.

She longed, above all, for someone who might

understand. Now that she, reluctantly, was growing up, her dreams had deepened to include an ideal man, heroic and noble. She imagined he would value her for her mind, heart, and soul, not just for her body. Theirs would be a friendship of shared, innocent pleasures. He would share her love of books and music, and, like her, would treasure simplicity and purity. He, too, would love to walk, scorning modern bicycles. In the evenings, she fondly imagined, they would sit before a simple fire and share slices of buttered toast. The young princess sighed. Her older cousin Pierce had done his best to be a companion to her, but now that she was growing in instinctive, womanly wisdom, she knew that she needed a true soulmate and equal. She lifted her face, bathed in the fading sunlight, and wondered if it was selfish to pray that such a man existed.

Meanwhile, her handsome cousin Pierce was manfully hugging his best friend in uncomplicated gratitude. He couldn't help but admire and envy Jab's rock-hard, muscular body, unaware that Jab's physical strength was but a pale reflection of the moral fortitude beneath the flesh. Jab, Pierce realized, would be the ideal protector for the innocent PrincessB.

'You may doubt our water's sweetness,' Pierce said lightly, stepping back from the warmth of Jab's body, 'but I promise

you this castle contains one treasure worthy to stand up even to *your* judgment.' His bantering tone could not conceal his worry. 'These are dark times,' he went on, 'and I fear what will become of the young princess should anything happen to me. Beta is an innocent, and this world does not deal fairly with innocence.'

Steady brown eyes met and held anxious blue ones. 'If she is of value to you, then I will protect her,' Jab said calmly. His voice was resonant with firm purpose.

the Dreams of Angels (Chapter One)

On his first night in the de St. Aubyn castle, Jab was woken by a noise so faint a less cautious man would have dismissed it as part of his dreams. He lay for a moment on the floor of his room (featherbeds were a pleasure he didn't often choose to indulge in while maintaining his training), listening. There it was again, on the balcony. Jab rose silently, letting the white sheet slip from his taut belly, and walked out into the moonlight.

The creature standing there was like a man, but for the huge leathery wings that unfurled to beat the air when it took flight. It hung there, grotesquely, for a moment, looking hungrily at Jab's naked form. Jab gazed back, upright and unafraid. Then the vampire for some reason made an admiring bow, laughed lightly,

and flew away.

‘This castle is under siege,’ Jab informed Pierce the next morning while they broke bread together. He described what he had witnessed in the night.

‘I’ll set a watch tonight, and slay any of the creatures that dare approach here,’ Pierce swore, half rising from the table in his anger. Jab reached out, and laid a calming hand on Pierce’s arm, wordlessly pulling him back down on the bench they shared.

‘I admire your bravery, my dear friend,’ Jab said, ‘and the anger that heats your blood is a righteous anger. But we must prepare. This could be a long, hard battle, and it will take more than valor and physical strength to win it. You must prepare for all eventualities. If we were killed, my prince, the princess and your father, and all your household servants and retainers, would be defenceless. We need to proceed slowly. These people rely on you. We can stockpile food and water so that, however long we are occupied elsewhere, we at least know the castle can shut itself up safely. We can begin to train men at arms, but secretly. And we can get word to the households of this island to store food and water, and supplies, and to keep their locks and shutters in good repair. Before we can fight darkness, Pierce, we must look to our own standards and correct our own weaknesses.’

Pierce sat beside his friend, and hugged him manfully for a long moment, too overcome with emotion to speak. At last he released his tight hold and sat back. 'It shall be as you have outlined,' he promised. 'My dear Jab, you're right: we are under siege. The bloodsuckers aren't content with their stranglehold of the mainland. They envy what we possess, here on this island, and they hunger for us. I think our very lack of corruption tempts them somehow, and it enrages them that we set ourselves apart and hold to a higher, more pure ideal. We must make plans to protect ourselves, before we engage with them.'

He broke off quickly when PrincessB entered the room, not wishing to frighten her, but her gentle gaze saw the worry in his face. 'Cousin, what troubles you?' she asked, reaching for the blue stoneware jug full of fresh, still-warm milk. She poured a mug for Jab, and then one for Pierce, before filling her own.

'Nothing you should trouble yourself with,' Pierce said, but Jab shook his head.

'The child should know, Pierce,' he said, his voice low and somehow reassuring. 'How can we trust her not to stray from the castle's safety, unless we give her some good reason? Princess Beta,' he went on, turning to her. She blushed, unused to being addressed by men, especially commoners, but he could tell from

her expression that she was listening intently to his words. 'The creatures of the de Gravina clan, who infest your father's former stronghold on the mainland, hover around this castle at night.'

'You must be very careful,' he warned her. 'We all must take precautions. Do not go outside after dark. No one should sleep alone. Even by daylight you should not go outside unaccompanied. We don't know what their precise intention is, but it cannot be good. They are evil beings. They know hungers you cannot begin to understand; they are in the grip of appetites such as you have never even imagined.'" He fell silent abruptly, sweat beading his handsome face. His strong arms, which looked to her frightened eyes near as thick as Beta's own waist, trembled slightly.

He must, she thought, be shaken by his loathing and disgust for the fiends that flocked through the night air. She, too, had seen them. They flew past her windows; she had crept from her bed to watch them, curiously. They looked, she had decided, like her cousin Pierce, but their skin was even more pale, and of course the creatures were winged.

'I wish I could make you forget all about them,' she said impulsively, moved by a sudden sympathy for this rough-clad stranger who valiantly struggled to conceal how badly the vampires disturbed him. She blushed then, confused and

embarrassed to have spoken, and even Pierce looked taken aback by her boldness. Jab, however, merely smiled.

‘Your cousin will help me,’ he assured her, and gave Pierce an affectionate glance. ‘Not help me to forget them, but help me to resist them – and, if our hearts are pure, to defeat them, and rise above them to our own triumphant victory.’

PrincessB, though frightened by the memory of how the vampires outside her window had looked, felt reassured to be in the presence of men possessed by such simple, yet noble, virtues. It was as she had always thought: simplicity was united with true worth. With Jab and her cousin Pierce in the castle, surely no harm could befall them. ‘I shall pray for you,’ she said, her still-childish voice solemn.

‘To whom do you pray, little cousin?’ Pierce asked her playfully, and she tossed her hair.

‘To the angels, of course,’ she told him. If we are in danger from winged demons, then surely the angels will come to help us.’

‘We must help ourselves,’ Jab said, seeming to answer her, but looking meaningfully at Pierce as he spoke.

Pierce laid one hand on Jab’s rock hard thigh. ‘I’m willing to do all that I can,’ the prince promised. ‘Honorable men may still

achieve memorable deeds, Jab, even in these troubled times. We shall protect the Princess, and those who live on this island, at all costs.'

'Are you sure these creatures are a danger to me?' PrincessB asked, as she buttered a slice of toast. 'They're only ever here when you're home, Pierce. I don't think they mean me any harm at all, even if they are evil.'

For a moment the prince did not respond, ignoring her prattling voice, but then he realized what she'd said. Tearing his gaze from Jab's, he turned to her. 'What do you mean, they're only here when I'm home?' he demanded.

She shrugged. 'Just that. When you were last here, the servants whispered that they saw the vampires at night. The whole time you were away, no one reported any sign of them.'

Jab looked concerned. 'Perhaps, my prince,' he said to Pierce, 'it is not your young cousin who is in the gravest danger, after all.'

Title: Squid and Squickability

Fandom: *Sanguinity*

Author: Josh Amos

Summary: A one-shot in which I attempt to envision the reunion between PrincessB and Pierce after the latter has been away at school.

PrincessB gave the punt one last hard shove, and felt it suddenly lighten as it entered the water and bobbed to life under her hands. Her skirts were wet up to her waist, even though she was only standing in knee-deep water--why, she wondered irritably, did water do that? The fabric clung to her, cold and heavy and in the way, making her struggle for a ridiculous length of time before she was finally able to climb into the little boat. She lost both her shoes in the process, and damned near unshipped an oar. But it didn't matter.

As soon as she was certain she couldn't be seen from the castle, she hauled off the layers of sopping silk, towed herself dry with the upper part of her shift, and pulled on the things she'd stolen from the back of Pierce's wardrobe. These clothes hadn't fit him for years, since long before he'd gone away to school, so she knew he'd never miss them. She almost tossed her own clothes

over the side, but then decided it would be more sensible to hang onto them, and settled for bundling them out of sight under the seat. After all, however impractical they were as clothes, miles upon miles of silk might be somehow useful.

She felt an unexpected pang of regret when she cut off her hair, but it had to be done. Boys didn't usually wear theirs much beyond shoulder length. She hacked hers off even shorter, just about level with her cheeks, reasoning that it was better to wear as unfeminine a style as possible within the bounds of acceptable fashion. Her thin face and slender body were liability enough, even with the short hair.

When she stopped staring at the long locks of her hair coiling like seaweed in the water and resumed rowing, she prayed, the rhythm of her efforts making it easier than usual to lose herself in the prayers. 'Dear Storyteller,' she pleaded, 'please help me to set my own genre. Let this not be some pre-ordained novel of manners concerned only with the tedium of court life, and not a predictable princess-marries-prince romance...unless that be Thy will, in which case, please reconcile me to my role, but grant me the strength to shape my story. Send your Angelic messengers to protect me, and to give me hints. Bless those I love, through each and every chapter. Send them joyful plot twists, and resolve the conflicts that oppose

them, but not too easily.’ Then she lapsed into meditative silence, ignoring the dull ache that was working its way into her arms and shoulders and back.

It was dusk before she’d finally made her way far enough along the coast that nothing looked familiar, and nearly dark before she’d bypassed the first unfamiliar village and reached a small harbor, hidden from view until she was right at the mouth of it. She brought the boat into the cove cautiously, clumsily poking one oar at the rocks to keep from hitting them. She dragged the punt ashore with relief.

There was no one in sight on the tiny, rocky beach, just a narrow path heading up hill and vanishing from sight. Beta curled up in the bottom of the boat and tried to sleep, but it was colder than she’d expected, and things buzzed in her ears and tried to bite her. The best she could manage was a fretful doze with her arms wrapped over her head and her hands pulled inside the sleeves. The stars whirled overhead, and the wind in the trees made a noise like pages turning. She felt giddy and queasy with exhaustion.

‘The strangest things wash ashore here,’ said an amused voice. Beta, dreaming, heard it but didn’t answer, thinking it was part of the dream. A hand grabbed her shoulder and shook her roughly awake. She opened her eyes dazedly, and saw a pirate: the

most beautiful pirate imaginable. The woman's red hair was a wild mass of every shade from copper to blood, and she wore a gaudy but impressive imitation of gentleman's clothes, with leather boots that gleamed in the moonlight. She looked sympathetically down at the princess.

'You'd better come with me,' she said. 'You look half frozen, and there's plenty of room at the Briary for those willing to work--and to keep their mouths shut. Can you do that, boy?'

'Yes,' said Beta, still wondering if she was really awake. 'But what's the Briary?'

'A refuge for the right sort,' said the lady pirate, 'a fortress against the wrong sort, and a thorn in the side of all the others. Here, carry this.' She tossed a bulging burlap sack at Beta before lifting a second sack to her shoulders. Beta caught it obediently, but then wrinkled her nose at the smell.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Dried squid,' came the answer. 'Hurry up. If we have to wake the gatekeeper he'll be livid.'

The warmth and light of the kitchen came as a shock, but not as much a shock as the sight of cousin Pierce sitting on one of the long wooden benches sharing a plate with a rough-hewn peasant. Pierce glanced at her with mild interest and no sign of

recognition. 'A stray?' he asked.

'A guest,' Beta's rescuer said shortly.

'Care to share our room, boy?' Pierce asked, earning him a look of reproof from the other man. Beta nearly snorted with laughter.

'Don't feel obliged to enter that den of iniquity,' the woman said. 'We can find you space to bed down alone.' For one fleeting instant Beta's impish curiosity almost led her to accept Pierce's offer, but she thought better of it...for now, at least.

ⁱ A few words about the world of Sanguinity:

Canon

Non-player Characters:

Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina

Prince Pierce de St. Aubyn

Jab Ackerman

PrincessB (Princess Beta Bonafilia de St. Aubyn)

Geography:

High on a cliff overlooking an as-yet-unnamed ocean is the castle of the de Gravina vampire clan, lorded over by Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina. This was formerly (pre-game backstory, ripe for fanfiction!) the traditional seat of the human ruling family, the de St. Aubyns.

Looking east from the castle, one can view the green, lush island where the (unnamed; PrincessB's father) human king and his family inhabit a newer castle. The island is large; it supports villages and farms and whatever else I need it to, moment by moment. One of these villages, Little Edmead, is near Jab Ackerman's farm.

Below the de Gravina's stolen castle, Dread Lane meanders down the steep hill, and as it does so it crosses the misty line separating NPCs and game structure from the more malleable realm of player characters (and player-created property, for those with paid-up accounts). Thus, Mina de Malfois "owns" Malfois Manor, located somewhere on Dread Lane. Other structures may be part of the game structure--the blood taverns, for example, and the *Mint and Shift*--or they may be creations of

the players, such as the Tartan Tent and the Otakuin Awakening tent.

Dread Lane leads, eventually, all the way down the hill and gives way to the unnamed-but-inhabited (by both NPCs and players) village at its base (on the north side of the mountain). Here there are assorted taverns, a harbour, markets, etc. If you sail east from the harbour, the first island you hit is the Produce Isle. The west side has been purchased by paid-account-holders belonging to the Cult of the Gay Unicorn; the east side, which features a harbour flanked by steep grey cliffs, been purchased by paid-account-holders belonging to the Cult of the Tented Tartan.

Fanon

Player characters (that is, in-game avatars belonging to Mina and her friends; these are, in a sense, "canon" now, since they're visible to other players):

Lady Horatia Marianna Wilhelmina de Malfois (played by Mina)

Prince Choronzon Erik Vladimir de Gravina the ghost of Ciyerra (played by Ciyerra of Tyana, the former BalletChic)

Liz (played by Elizabeth11!)

Stasia Marlow (maid, played by some unfortunate soul who has a polygamist boyfriend even though she is not a polygamist)

Warr1or (played by Warr1or)

Xena (played by Xenalvr)

Arc (played by archivist12)

Assorted other Elizabeths, Tented Tartanists, and Gay Unicorn Cultists

Footnotes:

1. Note that, when Mina and PrinceC and Warr1or (and presumably anyone else) write *Sanguinity* fanfiction, they write their own "versions" of the non-player characters, so that, for instance, Mina's PrincessB barely resembles Warr1or's PrincessB.

Of course, their fanfiction also includes original characters: PrinceC uses his avatar and Mina's avatar as original characters in his fanfic, and Mina has invented and inserted "Archangela DubhGilla."

2. The *Honey'd Briar*, which is Arc's in-game property, docks at the harbour.

A religious and cultural marketplace has sprung up on the south end of the harbour; more traditional markets line the rest. Jammies (who are all player characters, of course, as it's the fen who named the ships and declared their affiliations) hang out here. Rough-trade type Jammies.)