

The Cliff Road Chronicles

Praise for Anne Fraser's *Gideon Redoak*

"...this impressive dark fantasy debut...introduces a stirring classic vampire...Fraser keeps the pages turning with brisk pacing and a thoughtful, sensitive portrayal of Gideon's struggles with Corbeau and his inner puritanical demons."

Starred Review

Publishers Weekly

"...an epic tale that few books accomplish...reminiscent of Anne Rice's vampire novels in that the story is gothic in nature and the timeline is vast. The romance in this book is very sweet and the sexual encounter described lovingly without explicit detail, which may appeal to a wide variety of readers...I recommend this book, especially for lovers of "old school" vampire novels."

Katie Seely, ParaNormalRomance.org

"*Gideon Redoak* may be the story of a vampire, but at its deepest level it is a story about the very human search for meaning and independence. Baron Gideon Redoak is a significant addition to the pantheon of literary vampires."

Elizabeth Miller, author of *Dracula: Sense and Nonsense*

The Cliff Road Chronicles

Tales of the Brotherhood
of Darkness

Anne Fraser

*Edited and with an Introduction by
Inanna Arthen*



*By Light Unseen Media
Pepperell, Massachusetts*

The Cliff Road Chronicles
Tales of the Brotherhood of Darkness

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Introduction

I first got to know Anne Fraser when I joined the Vampyres email list at the end of 1994. At that time, Vampyres List, whose original host at guvm.edu Anne immortalized in her story, “Vampire Conventions,” was populated by dozens of avid amateur writers. They wrote and posted fiction of every length, from very short stories—what are now called “flash fiction”—to entire serialized novels. None of this was fanfic. Everyone invented their own characters and fictional universes, which varied in depth, complexity and derivation, but were original to the author. The list even voted on an annual “Golden Fang Award” for the best fiction posted during the year.

Anne was the shining star of the Vampyres List writers, by far the most prolific. She had several sets of established characters, and she was constantly posting stories ranging in length from two pages to novellas. *Gideon Redoak* was her only full novel, posted to the list in so many parts that it earned the nickname, “The Endless Saga.” Anne exemplified the answer to that eternal question posed to writers: “where do you get your ideas?” Her stories often featured her characters riffing on news of the day or some discussion topic on the list. Almost anything could inspire her to dash off a piece featuring some of her “cast of dozens.” She was fond of silly humor, outrageous puns, and ridiculous situations.

But writing was not simply a solitary pursuit for Anne. It was also one of her favorite social activities, and one to which she devoted enormous energy. A great deal of the fiction posted to Vampyres List was co-written, and no one coordinated and wrote more collaborative stories than Anne. She would write intensively with one partner at a time, or plot out a multi-author story with contributions by as many writers who wanted to join in. Everyone wanted to write with Anne, and she was somewhat choosy about her writing partners. I was one of the few who never co-wrote anything with her, not even as part of a group effort, although I made several proposals. I used to tease Anne that I always knew who her current online best friend was, because it would be whoever

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she was co-writing with most actively, particularly when certain of Anne's characters were involved. For the record, I'll note that Anne always vehemently denied this allegation.

Co-writing, on Vampyres List, reached its peak in the v-party (for "virtual party"). The premise was simple. The party host—and listmembers competed to hold these parties—set up a fictional party location, and usually a set of special conditions or situations to give the party writers something to work with. Since everyone was writing supernatural characters with all kinds of magical powers, the parties almost always had various magical gimmicks and traps. For three to seven days, twenty-four hours per day, party writers wrote and posted chapters describing events at the party—and just about *anything* could happen. A big party going full blast generated hundreds of e-mail posts. To participate fully, let alone host one, you had to be reading all those posts, keep track of the wildly careening plots, invent your own twists and reactions, and be able to write and post very fast. The biggest and best parties were mind-blowing. It was pure brainstorming, at top speed, non-stop, for days on end. For anyone who was really into writing, improvisational story-telling and bouncing ideas off other people, a v-party was, as I used to say, the most fun you could possibly have with both hands on a keyboard. One of the first v-parties that I participated in was hosted by Anne.

Unfortunately, v-parties were dependent on a large quorum of people who were all good writers and played well with others, and after a few years, Vampyres List ceased to have such a quorum. I actually hosted the last of the really big v-parties, in December 1996, and after that, they were much smaller and slower and gradually faded away. Not everyone was as sorry to see them go as Anne and I were. Vampyres List members also enjoyed extensive discussions of vampire-related topics and occasional sessions of a vampire trivia round-robin called Visceral Pursuit, and the list established rules limiting the duration and frequency of v-parties. As v-parties and fiction posting in general declined on the list, Anne joined several other email lists, such as Nightstalkers, Ghostletters, and Quillings, where she and other writers continued their collaborations.

Anne's characters tended to shift and change depending on who she was co-writing with at a given time. Sometimes she had second thoughts about changes she'd started to make in a character's canon and would go back and revise previously posted stories to eliminate them. In other cases, Anne rewrote earlier

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tales to make them consistent with fresh directions she was taking with new co-writers. But continuity, especially when it came to v-party plotlines, took second priority for Anne after accommodating her fellow writers and their ideas.

Anne inspired my writing more than any other direct influence I could name. Several of the characters and plot threads now critical to my own series of novels were invented for v-parties and fiction on Vampyres List, although they've changed a great deal from their initial form. I owe a huge debt to Anne's boundless enthusiasm for the sheer joy of creating stories and characters and sharing them freely.

As I edited Anne's stories, I kept in mind what I knew—because we'd had extensive discussions as we worked together on *Gideon Redoak*—about where she intended her characters and plotlines to be going, even if she hadn't had time to make those updates herself. Ray Griffin, for instance, had been evolving in a way that Anne decided to change, and I made some alterations in his stories in accordance with this. I deeply regret that I could not use much of Anne's more recent fiction, because it was co-written so tightly with other authors. I had the same problem with some of the fiction that covered major events in Gideon and Joshua's relationship. Their engagement party, wedding and reception were all multi-author productions, as was Joshua's "buying trip" in London alluded to several times in the stories in this volume.

Had Anne not passed away in 2008, the first section of this collection would most likely have become a novel in its own right and a sequel to *Gideon Redoak*. Anne would have been able to rework storylines from co-written fiction and fill in gaps that I simply could not. With Anne's help, the second section of stories could likely have been integrated into a cohesive frame, as well. But each piece was originally written as a stand-alone tale. I hope that Anne would be pleased with the way they're presented here.

Inanna Arthen
May 9, 2011

Gideon and Joshua
A Love Story

Club Undead

(1995)

Mail call!" Mitch came breezily into Oakwoods, holding a batch of envelopes out of the reach of Pumpkin, who was leaping up trying to grab those enticing items. "Get down, dog! There's no mail for you!"

Evan emerged from the kitchen and Joshua came downstairs from his office. Both looked expectantly at Mitch.

He grinned and began sorting the mail, after dumping his winter coat and boots sloppily on the hall floor. "Let's see...bill, bill, mail for the boss, mail for the boss, mail for me! Here's one for you, Josh. Your weightlifting mag, Ev. Bill, mail for the boss, another one for Josh, one for Evan...scented!" He waved the letter under Evan's nose and then sniffed it elaborately. "Gardenias? Lilacs? Deadly nightshade?"

"Give me that!" Evan grabbed for the letter and a scuffle ensued in which the remainder of the mail fell on the floor.

Pumpkin pounced, picking up a flashy brochure which had caught her eye. Warg gave her a wolfishly disgusted look.

Joshua gave Pumpkin a light swat on the tail section and rescued the brochure. "Children, stop it." He wiped doggie drool off the shiny pages that Pumpkin had coveted and looked at them curiously. "What on earth is this?"

Evan stopped whacking Mitch with the weightlifting magazine and came over to peer at the glossy paper in Joshua's hand.

"Advertising," the protector grunted. "Some travel agency."

"But it's addressed to Gideon."

"Some travel agency that doesn't know he's a vampire. Gideon's on quite a few upscale mailing lists, you know."

"I don't know, Evan. Look—most of these photos are night

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scenes.”

Mitch joined them, wanting to have a look, too. “Get a load of this!” He pointed to the inside front cover. “Club Undead!”

“*What?*” Joshua flipped the pages back. “That’s what it says,” he affirmed incredulously. “Club Undead. A unique vacation package catering to the special needs of the supernatural client. We offer a full line of services and facilities to suit your unlife-style. Club Undead gives you the vacation you need; whether a weekend getaway for some night skiing in the mountains, or a luxurious week of being pampered on our private Caribbean island. Our trained travel agents will assist you in booking to suit your special needs, so you can relax and not worry about the full moon catching you unawares. We offer a full range of activities, archery excluded.”

Evan chuckled. “Wouldn’t want to accidentally skewer one of their clients, now, would you?”

“A travel agency for vampires.” Mitch shook his head. “And werewolves, too, I guess. That line about the full moon is aimed at us.”

“A week of being pampered on a Caribbean island sounds pretty good.” Joshua mused. “Gideon’s so tense that it frightens me. We’ve been through a lot lately. I’m going to study this brochure more closely.” He took it and his mail up to his office on the second floor.

Soon he was immersed in the section describing the Caribbean island. The services offered included massage, “special dietary needs fulfilled”—which Joshua interpreted, correctly, to mean they served blood—and complete security and privacy guaranteed. A wide range of activities was available, from a swimming pool and golf course through tennis, horseback riding, waterskiing and surfing. The brochure promised that no one would force you to participate in anything you didn’t want to do. If your aim was to lie on the beach and vegetate for the duration of your stay, that was fine. Since all persuasions of supernatural critters were catered to, there was a large restaurant as well as snack counters and bars on the island. The main dining room offered music and dancing as well as food and drink.

Joshua threw caution to the wind and dialled the toll-free number.

“Travel agency, may I help you?” A woman’s voice, with a soft Irish accent, answered.

“Ah, yes.” Joshua coughed, wondering how to proceed. “I’ve been studying your brochure, and I have a couple of questions.”

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He could almost hear the woman on the other end sit up. “Which brochure would that be, sir?”

“The one for ‘special needs’ clientele.”

“Very good, sir. Are you on a private line?”

“Yes, I am, and in an office where I can’t be overheard.”

“Excellent. Your name, sir?”

“Joshua Trevallion. The brochure was sent to my...good friend, Gideon Redoak. We...share a house.”

“And what questions do you have about Club Undead, Mr. Trevallion? You may speak freely, we guarantee discretion. My name is Reagan. And Mr. Trevallion...sexual orientation is of no consequence to the Club. When we say discretion, we mean it.”

“Thank you, that’s good to know. I’m very tempted by your island in the Caribbean. Both Gideon and I have been through a very trying time lately, and I think a week on your island sounds like what we both need.”

“The island is an excellent antidote for tension, Mr. Trevallion. Now, my file on Mr. Redoak shows that he is a vampire, which is how he got on our mailing list. No need to worry, sir, our files are absolutely confidential. But I have no information on you, Mr. Trevallion.”

“That was what I needed to ask. I’m, well, at the moment, I’m still human. A breather. Is that a problem?”

“None at all, sir,” she laughed. “Many of our clients travel with human companions. Your safety is guaranteed, your needs will be seen to by our trained staff, and there’s a restaurant on the island that serves a variety of dishes. Should you wish companionship during the daylight hours, any of our staff will be delighted to be at your command—whether for tennis, golf, chess or just talking. I’m certain there will be other diurnal guests on the island at the time of your visit as well.”

“It sounds wonderful. I’ll have to talk Gideon into it, but I don’t think that will be a problem. Thank you, Reagan. I shall definitely be calling back.”

“Thank *you*, Mr. Trevallion, and we look forward to hearing from you.”

Gideon woke up as the sun dropped slowly out of sight in the west. He sighed as he felt the tension tug on his back muscles, the ever-present headache grinding behind his eyes. The recent crises with Genevieve’s serious illness, Joshua’s grief and exhaustion after a buying trip to London with tragic consequences, the piling up of several corporate problems—all had taken their

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toll on the Baron. His temper was frayed. If he had been human, he likely would have been heading for a heart attack or a nervous breakdown. He felt like he was fairly close to the latter, anyway.

Not even his ritual evening bath had the power to relax him, nor did the cup of herbal tea Michael had recommended. Gideon knew that his friends were all concerned about him—more than one of the Brotherhood had lately dropped a hint about taking a vacation. His tension had caused problems in the bedroom, as well. Joshua had been spending a few nights on the cot in his office rather than share a bed with a bad-tempered vampire. Gideon couldn't blame him. He didn't even want to keep himself company.

He rose from the bath, towelled himself dry, and dressed slowly. A pile of work waited for him in his study. He wanted to chuck it all and go out with Joshua, try to recapture some of the charm of their early romance. Perhaps they could go back to that Italian restaurant...

The stern Puritan in Gideon (which sounded remarkably like the voice of his father) made him go into the study, pour himself a glass of his special stock, and go to work.

He was on the phone with his stockbroker when the study door opened and Joshua came in. Gideon briefly looked up, wondering what the glossy catalogue in his lover's hand was for, then went back to arguing with his broker. Joshua sat down in an empty chair, and used his feet to propel it and himself up against Gideon's desk. While Gideon was still talking about bulls and bears, Joshua slowly reached over and depressed the little button on the phone, effectively cutting off the conversation.

"I trust you have an explanation?" Gideon's eyes sparked dangerously, but Joshua didn't flinch.

Joshua leaned back in his chair. "Can this marriage be saved?" He put the Club Undead brochure on the desk in front of Gideon. "You. Me. An island. One week."

The phone rang just as Gideon reached for the brochure. Joshua managed to grab the receiver first.

"I'm sorry," Josh said sweetly to the puzzled stockbroker. "But Mr. Redoak has been called away on a household emergency. His assistant will call you back shortly."

Gideon frowned at Joshua, but opened the brochure. "Club Undead?" he said incredulously.

"Keep reading."

Pursing his lips and biting back sarcasm, Gideon read the introductory blurb. He turned to the pages describing the island.

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The telephone rang again, jarring his headache. He let Joshua answer it as he scanned the description of the island and its facilities. "Massage" caught his attention.

He looked up at Joshua, taking note of the anxiety mixed with determination in the other's demeanour. He had not been given a choice, but an ultimatum. "It sounds wonderful. But..."

"No buts," Joshua warned. "Mitch and Evan can run the business for a week. Nothing is pressing in the Brotherhood. It's another month until the wedding. I have no clients who need me immediately."

"I was only going to ask, what about you? Are they set up to accept breathers? Will you be safe there?"

"Guaranteed safe. I called the 800 number and talked to a lovely lady named Reagan, whom you are going to call right now to book reservations."

Gideon reached for the telephone. "I don't own any bathing trunks."

"We'll get you some. With polka dots."

The Club's small jet touched down on the landing strip at the private airport on the secluded island. Gideon nudged his dozing seat companion.

"We're here."

Joshua yawned and grinned. "Why do I feel like we're going to be greeted by Ricardo Montalban and a tuxedoed dwarf?" he quipped, then sighed at Gideon's blank look. "Never mind. I keep forgetting that you don't watch prime-time TV."

There were only three other passengers: a beautiful African-American vampiress in a white silk poet's shirt, purple suede pants and killer stiletto heels; a forlorn-looking stocky man with a heavy beard, dressed in a safari jacket, worn chinos and Birkenstock sandals; and a delicate-looking, greenish-tinged young woman whose lime-coloured dress only contributed to her appearance of severe motion-sickness. Joshua felt quite concerned about this girl, but perhaps she belonged to some exotic species. The fact that even her hair had an emerald cast to it bore this theory out.

The duo from Maine were casually dressed, although Gideon's idea of casual was a light grey business suit with a pale blue shirt and a striped tie. Joshua had not bothered to argue, since it was something of a miracle that Gideon was on the plane at all. His own outfit, tan Dockers and a purple short-sleeved sports shirt, was more practical for a vacation. As the blinking passengers

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emerged from the plane, they were greeted by Club Undead employees. Neither Ricardo nor a dwarf was in evidence—rather, two young men with dark complexions and very white teeth whisked them into a mini-van.

The island offered “guest cabins,” which sounded more rustic than the quite lovely little private cottages that were available. The windows were shuttered and provided with curtains that effectively blocked the sun. Excellent and subtle lighting made the interiors cheerful. The cabin reserved for Gideon and Joshua had a roomy bedroom with a large, modern bed, several chairs, a dresser, bright pictures on the walls, a striped bedspread, an en-suite bathroom nearly as large as the bedroom, and a living-sitting room with comfy chairs, a big sofa, and more colourful art pieces.

The smiling young people left them to adjust to their surroundings. Joshua slipped off his shoes and measured out his length on the bed, testing it for comfort. He picked up the booklet from the bedside table and flipped through it idly. Several of the services were offered on a “home visit” basis. He could order in dinner, drinks, a massage...

Gideon paced. Now that he was here, he wondered if it had been such a good idea. It seemed ridiculous on the face of it—a resort island catering to the supernatural? He prowled into the living room, snorting at the furniture. Where was his favourite chair, at a comfortable distance from the fireside, a glass of brandy at hand, a wolf curled up at his feet? Where were his favourite pictures, his treasured knick-knacks, all the comforts he had accumulated over the years? How on earth was he supposed to relax and enjoy himself in this strange place?

There was a soft knock on the door. Gideon turned, startled. He frowned. Had they not been promised they would not be disturbed? He moved towards the door, ready to angrily dismiss the intruder, but Joshua beat him to it. He admitted an efficient-looking, muscular young woman in white, who was carrying a bag.

“There,” Joshua said, flipping a hand at Gideon.

“Oh, yes,” the young woman nodded. “I see what you mean.” She studied Gideon closely, especially his shoulders and his eyes. “This is urgent.”

“What?” Gideon said.

“I’ll need you to take off those clothes, sir,” said the woman briskly, “and lie down, on your stomach, on the bed. We’ll get some towels down first, so no oil gets on the bed.”

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"I'll do that," Joshua volunteered, then turned to his dumbfounded lover. "You heard the lady, Gideon. Get your clothes off."

Dazed, Gideon followed Joshua into the bedroom. "I will not undress in front of some unknown female!" he protested, watching Joshua spread towels over the bed.

"For pity's sake, Gideon, she's not in here now. Get undressed and lie down, and I'll cover you with a towel. You can't expect to get a massage with your clothes on. You need one—you could slice bread with your shoulder muscles."

Gideon sighed and undressed, neatly hanging up the business suit. He left his underwear on. Glaring at Joshua, he stretched out on the towels that covered the bed. Joshua shook his head and placed a towel discreetly over the underwear.

"Okay, miss," Josh called.

She came in and ran practised hands over the Baron's back, probing the musculature. "This will take more than one session," she warned. "You've pushed yourself beyond your own healing abilities. I should have you on the table, but your friend thought you wouldn't come willingly the first time, especially if you knew my gender. Let's see if I can't loosen these muscles up, just a little."

Gideon felt warm oil being poured on his back, then her strong fingers and hands at work. It hurt as she massaged, especially his too-taut shoulders. She spent a long time on those shoulders, and the pain began to ease. She worked her way down his back, stopping just short of the towel. Despite himself, Gideon felt much more relaxed when she was through.

"The massage clinic is up in the main building," she said, drying her hands on a towel. "Come and see me tomorrow night if you can."

"Thank you, Miss...?" Gideon turned his head enquiringly.

She smiled. "Arden. Just Arden. You have very tense muscles, Mr. Redoak, you really need to relax."

"I'll try," he smiled back as she departed.

"We'd best get those towels off the bed," Joshua said. He handed Gideon his pajamas. "Here, put these on. Next time, you won't be able to leave your underwear on."

Gideon stood up and threw the bundle of rumpled, slightly oil-stained towels at him. It seemed the only viable response. Joshua laughed and disengaged himself from a tangle of terrycloth.

"You're obviously already feeling better," he said as he shed his own clothes.

As they slid under the covers together, Gideon turned to

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Joshua.

"I've been rather impossible to live with lately, haven't I?"

"You've had your reasons, though." Joshua's fingers brushed Gideon's thick, dark hair.

"Not reason enough to drive you away. Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive. Now, shush. Let's just snuggle together and listen to the night."

His muscles loosened by Arden's fingers, his eyes and temples not pounding for the first time in weeks, Gideon cuddled next to the person he loved more than anything. Eyes shut, he let the sounds of the night lull him—Joshua's steady breathing and familiar heartbeat, the soft wind that ruffled the palm trees, the ocean waves spilling onto the beach...slowly his head dropped further and further down on Joshua's shoulder and he slept. Not the death-like coma that took him in the daylight, but actual sleep.

Joshua very softly kissed the top of Gideon's forehead, breathed a soft thanks for this seeming miracle, and drifted off to sleep himself.

When Josh woke, he was temporarily disoriented, then recalled where he was. He looked at Gideon. The vampire was out for the count, so it had to be daytime. Josh turned on the bedside lamp and consulted his watch. Ten a.m. His stomach grumbled a complaint, so he rolled out of bed, tucked Gideon in, and headed for the palatial bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, spiffily attired in a blue polo shirt, gray walking shorts, and boat shoes, he made his way into the restaurant. A smiling island employee in, yes, a polo shirt and shorts, met him and showed him to a table, passing the breakfast buffet en route. Joshua's stomach growled again. He told his cholesterol count that he was on vacation, and went to the buffet for scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes and baked ham. *Salad for lunch*, he told himself sternly, or more likely no lunch at all. If he ate like this every day of his sojourn, he'd be leaving the island by air ambulance.

His smiling waitress brought him fresh-squeezed orange juice and the most excellent coffee he'd ever tasted.

"I'm moving here permanently," he told her after sipping the coffee.

"Oh, you'd get tired of it after a while."

"Doubtful," Joshua murmured, accepting a refill.

He looked around the dining room, noting that the largish,

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hairy man who'd been on the plane was steadily attacking his own breakfast. There were less than half a dozen others eating, most by themselves.

"Breakfast isn't our most popular meal," the waitress said.

"Understandable," Joshua laughed. He noted the servitor's dark complexion, and all those white teeth, and it hit him who she, and all the other staff, reminded him of—Evan. Of course. She was a Nameless One, the perfect solution to the service problems on the island. They had enough staff to solve the cycle problem, the race was used to serving vampires, and none of the guests would dare make unwelcome advances to staff who could break them into little pieces.

Finally replete, Joshua sat sipping coffee and watching the ocean for a while. Then he left the restaurant and set out to explore the island. There was just the right balance of civilization and wilderness, and the civilization had been planned with the wilderness in mind. As little damage to the island's ecosystem as possible had been rendered. Even the golf course and airstrip had been ecologically designed. The native wildlife had been left in peace.

Having walked off some of that large breakfast, Joshua went back to his shared quarters and had a nap. Then he put on his bathing suit and headed for the pool.

Gideon stirred and woke at sunset, as always. Had he actually fallen *asleep* last night? He felt refreshed and his headache was gone. A slight tension gripped his shoulders as he arose, but it was not nearly as bad as it had been. He rose, showered and dressed in the clothes Joshua had left out for him—a dark blue short-sleeved shirt and tan cotton slacks. It would take more than one night of relaxing to get Gideon into a pair of shorts.

Dressed and restless, the vampire went in search of Joshua. He found the tennis courts first, where the lovely black vampiress was playing against an Asian woman, non-vampiric, who had not been on the plane.

"Evening!" called out the ebony-skinned woman. "Do you play?"

"Gideon shook his head. "No," he admitted. "Have you seen my friend? I believe he plays tennis, perhaps he will give you a game later."

"No, hon, I haven't seen him, but like you, I just got up." Her teeth flashed in a grin. "You don't play tennis?"

The Baron raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders in

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mute apology.

“What do you play?” asked the Asian woman, coming up and leaning on the net. “Ping pong?” She looked hopeful.

Another shake of the Baronial head. “Billiards,” he offered, and both women sighed. “Chess?” Two more sighs. “My apologies, ladies.” He bowed. “Gideon Redoak, obviously not very much at your service.”

“Leanna Darwood,” said the black woman.

“Yvonne Huang,” offered the other. “Is this your first time at Club Undead?”

“Yes, it is. I have not had much of a chance to form an impression, as yet.”

“You’ll like it here,” Yvonne assured him. “Whoever bought this island and turned it into a resort for us is now very rich.”

“I’m certain of it,” Gideon smiled. “If you ladies will excuse me, I really must go find my companion.” He bowed again and departed.

When he was safely out of earshot, Leanna turned to Yvonne with a heavy sigh. “Shee-it, why *are* all the cute guys gay?”

Gideon, unaware of this remark, continued his search. He encountered the swimming pool next, with a small contingent of guests and staff. The fragile-looking girl from the plane was here, comporting in a green bathing suit and obviously in her element. Two male vampires of the European ladykiller mold were lying on beach chairs, making desultory passes at this and all other females. Three of the dark-skinned staff, whose race Gideon correctly guessed, were doing laps in the pool while another coached them from the side. A towel-wrapped couple were cozying up to each other at the poolside bar, but Gideon could not quite decipher just what type of creature they might be.

No Joshua. Gideon wondered if Josh had returned to the cabin and was wondering where *he* was. He asked the bartender for the use of the phone, and called. No answer. He frowned.

“Hey,” said the bartender, “Don’t worry. Nothing can have happened to your friend. The island is completely safe. Try the restaurant.”

“Thank you,” Gideon murmured, dialling the number.

Joshua was not there, either. In desperation, Gideon asked for the massage clinic and requested to speak to Arden.

“Yes, he’s here,” the masseuse laughed, greatly to Gideon’s relief. “We figured you would deduce it sooner or later. He’s keeping the massage table warm for you.”

“I’ll be right there,” Gideon promised. He left the bartender a

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tip for letting him use the phone, and was at the door of the massage clinic almost before she finished saying, "That's not necessary, sir."

In a few more minutes, he was on the table (and without even his underwear, as Joshua had predicted), Arden's skilled hands finding the kinks and tension spots still remaining. Joshua sat and watched, managing not to laugh when Arden whipped away the concealing towel and worked on those muscles, much to Gideon's discomfiture.

"Muscles are muscles," the massage therapist said, giving the muscles in question a friendly pat. "You've got tension lines going all the way to your toes." She worked her way down, replacing the towel so that her client wouldn't feel so embarrassed—or em-bare-assed, as the case might be. In her line of work, Arden had seen many bodies, living and undead. All had passed beneath her experienced hands, some so badly abused and scarred that they had stirred her sympathy. This current client had some very old, faint scars on his backside. She had been around long enough to know them for the legacy of a birch rod. He had been a breather in the days when they still whipped children. There was another, newer scar in the small of his back, and she recognized the puckered seam left by silver poisoning. That made her shudder. Someone had tried to give this vampire the true death.

"Done for now, Mr. Redoak," she told him cheerfully. One never, ever, mentioned the clients' scars to them.

"Thank you, Arden." He smiled at her, and she retreated so he could get dressed.

"Sorry if I frightened you," Joshua told him. "I should have left you a message, but the massage she gave you last night looked so good that I wanted one, too."

"It's all right. I was just a little concerned, not frightened. Have you had dinner?"

Joshua shook his head. "I had a huge breakfast," he grinned. "I'm just starting to get hungry now."

"Shall we, then?" Gideon offered his arm.

The dining lounge was much busier for dinner than it had been for breakfast. All three of their fellow plane passengers were there, as well as most of the others both Joshua and Gideon had met. The Baron nodded his head to Leanna and Yvonne, who were sharing a table with the two playboys who'd been at the pool.

"Found a new girlfriend already?" Josh teased.

"Well, with you neglecting me, what else was I to do?"

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“Feel like doing anything tonight?” Joshua asked him as they took their places at their table. “I know you too well to ask for a tennis match.”

“Ask my girlfriend for that,” Gideon smiled, his eyes indicating Leanna. “No, I don’t think I feel like any activities tonight. We still have plenty of time for those. I need to get a feel for relaxing, first.” He flexed his now loosened shoulders, a wondering expression on his face. “Amazing. Arden has a deft touch.”

“You look happy,” Joshua said. “I haven’t seen that for far too long.”

Gideon’s hand enclosed his. “I am happy. Thank you.”

Joshua flushed and studied his menu. “I’d better not have any more cholesterol. Steamed fish sounds about right, after that breakfast.”

“Are you feeling all right?” Gideon asked anxiously.

“I’m fine, don’t fuss.”

“What did you do all day?”

“I explored the island, went for a swim, baked in the sun, then had a massage. I’m taking it easy.”

Gideon nodded, thinking that Joshua no longer looked quite so pale and drawn. The sheer exhaustion that had flattened his lover after that buying trip had passed. Joshua seemed healthy.

The waitress came by to take their order. Joshua requested the fish and white wine. Gideon, a hint of a twinkle in his eyes, asked for a glass of the special house red. She nodded and departed. The order was filled quickly and efficiently. No fuss was made about Gideon’s order, and other vampires could be seen sampling the house red. It was served in the finest crystal, as was Joshua’s more ordinary white wine.

Josh, well-used to vampiric drinking habits by now, didn’t even make a face as he watched Gideon delicately sip the contents of his glass. He blithely attacked his own excellent, low-fat dinner as if he was not sitting across from someone drinking blood.

“Trifle high in cholesterol, perhaps.” Gideon set down his glass, a smile twitching at his lips.

“You,” Joshua waved a forkful of rice at him, “are asking for it.”

Gideon giggled. Yes, giggled.

Joshua shook his head. “We should have thought of this ages ago.”

“We didn’t know this place existed.”

“Sure, be that way. Use logic.”

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After dinner, they took a leisurely stroll down the beach, plunking themselves onto bar stools and sipping whiskey and soda while watching the more active guests play in the water. Leanna and one of the playboy vampires rode past on horseback. Joshua felt Gideon stir and watch with interest.

"I haven't been on a horse in decades," the Baron sighed. In the grip of a sad, sweet nostalgia, he watched the equestrians until they were out of sight.

"Do you want to go riding?"

Gideon relaxed and took a swallow of his drink. "Not tonight. I'm still unwinding." He reached out and touched Joshua's cheek gently. "I'm still getting reacquainted with what's really important."

As the night thickened, all but the hardiest of the water babies came ashore, got drinks, and sat watching the waves roll in. The half-moon, surrounded by a glittering court of stars, reigned loftily in the velvet sky. A few torches had been lit on the beach, and some light came spilling out of the buildings, but not enough to spoil the general effect.

Couples began drifting away from the bar, lured by the music from the main building where the dining lounge had become a dance floor, or walking entwined in each other's arms towards their cabins. Joshua tugged on Gideon's hand, meeting no resistance.

Holding their shoes in their hands, they walked along the shoreline, laughing as the waves slapped over their bare feet. The cuffs of Gideon's pants were soaked by the time they drew close to their cabin, but he barely noticed. He stopped, idly disinterring an empty shell from its sandy grave, in front of the path to their rooms.

Joshua realized he was walking alone, and turned. He saw Gideon standing in the water, a slight breeze playing in that short dark hair, moonlight reflected in those equally dark eyes.

"What?" Joshua asked.

"I love you so much," Gideon said simply.

Joshua walked back to him, leaving footprints that vanished smoothly as the next wave washed in. His arms went around Gideon and their lips met. They broke apart when a larger than normal wave swept over their knees. Gideon laughed, surveying his sopping pants.

"Perhaps there is a reason to wear shorts," he said ruefully.

"Come on," Joshua said, placing the palm of his hand in the small of Gideon's back, "We'd best get you out of those wet

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clothes.”

The idea that a vampire could catch cold—or that anyone could, given the tropical temperature—was mildly absurd, but Gideon voiced no disagreement. He and Joshua walked to their cabin arm-in-arm. A trail of wet sand and discarded clothing marked their progress through the interior. A hot shower dispersed the remainder of the sand. The normally fastidious Baron did not even “tsk” at the mess they’d left for the cleaning staff.

Lips and arms locked, the lovers fell onto the bed. They made love with an urgent abandon that had not been in their relationship for some time. When the first wave of passion had passed, they lay together, touching and kissing more gently.

Gideon kissed Joshua’s neck, his tongue tracing the pulse along the vein. The taste of sandalwood soap mixed with sweat lingered on his tongue. He could smell the hot metallic blood under Joshua’s skin, the scent mingling headily with those of the soap, the tropical flowers and plants on the island, and the salty ocean only a few yards away. Joshua moaned, his “yessss” coming between his teeth like escaping steam. Gideon’s teeth gently raked the skin, his fangs sliding out as he pierced Joshua’s neck. The act made him so attuned with Joshua’s thoughts and emotions that he felt the same thrill of pleasure and pain that his lover did at the bite. The sweet savour of his lover’s blood exploded in Gideon’s mouth, intensifying his pleasure and the intimacy of the moment. As Gideon drank, his body moved in a rhythm that matched Joshua’s heartbeat and the hypnotic sound of the waves on the nearby shore. The pace increased as Joshua’s breathing grew harsher and the sounds and scents of the island became a blur, the pleasure building until they both cried out.

Later, in a tangle of limbs and damp sheets, they listened to the island sounds. Gideon gently wiped away the last trickle of blood from the already healing wounds on Joshua’s neck.

“Don’t ever leave me,” he murmured to the half-asleep breather.

“Never,” Joshua promised drowsily.

The next day, Joshua ate a more sensible breakfast and took himself to the tennis courts in search of a partner. He found the stocky, hairy man playing against the frail, green-tinged young lady. This slip of a girl was beating the pants off of her robust opponent.

“I’ll play the loser,” Joshua offered, having observed the verdant one’s murderous backhand.

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The big man grinned and wiped sweat from his forehead. "Good call," he grunted. "She's vicious."

"I am not!" declared the victorious femme with a toss of her greenish-blond hair. "I'm Ladriel, a nixie."

"Colin," offered the hairy one. "Lycanthrope, as you can probably tell." He laughed, fingering his heavy beard. "Beaten by an elf!"

"Joshua. Human."

"Really?" Colin extended a paw—er, hand. "Not too often one of your sort turns up here."

"I'm on vacation with someone who fulfills the requirements." Joshua shook hands with Ladriel, too.

"Your friend on the plane," she nodded. "He's a vampire."

"Just let me get a drink, and I'll give you a game," Colin said, and proceeded to quaff half a gallon of Gatorade. "Vile stuff," he spat. "Okay, Joshua, you're on."

The werewolf won, 6-4, 3-6, 6-1. By this time, a few others had turned up at the courts and Joshua was asked to play a few other games, both singles and doubles. At length, weary and sweating, the players called it quits and headed for the pool.

The early twilight fell gently over the island and Joshua made his way back to the cabin to shower and change for dinner. When Gideon woke up and saw his lover peeling off a wet swim suit, they were a trifle late for dinner.

The guest on the island were beginning to loosen up and get to know each other, and there was a certain amount of table-hopping at dinner that night. Arrangements were made for a game of beach football, with even Gideon dragooned into playing. Since he had never played football in his life, and thought it meant soccer to boot, he stood blinking rather stupidly at the plastic oval in his hand that Colin had thrown to him.

"Run with it!" yelled one of the other vampires, whose name Gideon had not yet learned.

"Toss it here!" Joshua called out.

"Throw it to me!" insisted Ladriel.

Leanna took matters into her own hands, and tackled him from behind, knocking him down into the shallow surf. "Gotcha!" she laughed, pinched his butt, and stole the ball.

Much to his surprise, Gideon found himself laughing. He scrambled to his feet and set off in pursuit.

Eventually, everyone had been tackled and dunked at least once, and the football had been lost at sea. The fact that no one had immediately noticed this loss could be attributed to the

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frequent drink breaks the players had taken.

It was Joshua who needed the massage the next day, but even though stiff from slightly overdoing it, he was feeling very happy. This vacation had been what *he* had needed, too. The haunting spectres of that buying trip—the bearded mage, poor Alexandra, the blood magic—had finally been laid to rest. He felt less tired and ill. He was getting a tan, not to mention plenty of rest and exercise, and his relationship with Gideon had improved immeasurably.

His musings came to a rude halt when Arden whacked him—very, very gently—on the back of the head with the edge of a towel.

“That’s for overdoing it,” the masseuse said sternly. “You’re here to rest as much as your friend is, after all. You’d better not let me catch you waterskiing.”

“Not much chance of that,” Joshua laughed. “I’ll be careful, Arden, I promise. But I thought you weren’t supposed to boss the guests around.”

“I only do it to the ones I like. Why don’t you go have a nice game of golf?”

He made a face. “I *hate* playing golf.”

“Well, tennis, then, but not more than two games.”

He twisted around and saluted her smartly. “*Ja wohl, Fraulein Doktor!*”

She whacked him with the towel again.

Josh ended up spending most of the day lying on a raft in the pool while Ladriel described life as a water nixie to a fascinated audience of Colin, Yvonne, two anonymous guests, Joshua and the pool staff. Josh suspected that the hirsute werewolf was falling for the little faerie. Yvonne, it turned out, was a mage. A good mage, she hastened to add, seeing Joshua shudder. He explained about his recent brush with the other kind, and the Asian sorceress nodded.

“Heard of him,” she grunted. “A bad lot.” She sighed. “I’ll be sorry to leave this place tomorrow.”

“You’re not going?” Ladriel squealed in distress.

“Sorry, children, but my week is up.”

“You know,” Colin remarked, ever-so-casually draping a long, hairy arm around Ladriel’s shoulders, “that’s something weird about this place. They only allow you to stay a week.”

“Too long in Paradise and the taste sours,” said Yvonne, a bit cryptically. “Leanna won’t be happy, those two Eurotrash playboys came on the same plane as I did.”

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"I've noticed that the number of guests here at any one time is pretty low," Joshua remarked. Besides the ones who had been on the plane and those he'd met otherwise, there were perhaps a dozen guests on the island.

"They don't want to flood the island."

"Makes sense," said Colin.

"Sort of," added Ladriel, who didn't seem to be objecting to Colin's advances.

Yvonne rolled her eyes and gave Joshua a conspiratorial grin. "Now *there's* a strange pairing," she whispered. "Werewolf and nixie. Can you imagine the kids? Little green water-loving puppies."

Joshua laughed.

Since he had promised Arden he would take it easy, Joshua did not suggest either horseback riding or joining in the beach football game that night. Instead, they once more sat in companionable silence, sipping drinks and watching the water. The sounds of music and laughter spilled like audible shadows over the beach.

"Do you think our masseuse would permit us to go dancing?" Gideon enquired.

Joshua almost fell off his bar stool. "Yes, I think she might."

Gideon smiled and finished his drink. The music had been calling to him for some time. He wanted to dance with his lover, and the reactions of the others be damned.

But no one reacted, other than to smile in a friendly way, when the two men entered the dance floor. Gideon thought he'd never been happier in his life than here, with a soft sweet song playing in the background, his lover held closely in his arms, and the gentle tropical night folding open like a chrysanthemum, many-petaled and smelling vaguely like cinnamon.

Somehow, that same quiet music seemed to be playing in the privacy of their bedroom as they performed another sort of dance entirely.

Still later, Gideon found himself humming that tune as he walked in solitude down the beach, hands in his pockets. Joshua was peacefully asleep back in the cabin, and there were still hours until dawn.

"Hey!" called out a voice. "C'm 'n' join us!"

He turned to behold a rather inebriated Leanna sitting at the beach bar with the two vampire gigolos.

"Theesh two are leavin' t'morra'," Leanna hiccupped, and

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Gideon wondered what she'd been drinking. It took a *lot* to get a vampire in that state. "I'm havin' a sho-long party."

Gideon shook his head. He sought quieter company. "No, thank you. Enjoy yourselves." He walked on.

There seemed to be a dark mound in the sand, a writhing dark mound at that. As he drew closer, Gideon's vampiric night vision allowed him to make out two people who were, er, making out.

"Heh, come here, you little nixie."

"Oh, Colin!"

Suppressing a mental vision of green aquatic puppies, for Joshua had shared that joke, Gideon continued his peregrination. He came to a small cluster of guest cottages. Most of them were unoccupied, or otherwise quiet for the night. But one person was sitting on the wooden porch swing in front of her cabin, gazing up at the waning moon.

"Ah, the man who doesn't play tennis," Yvonne chuckled. "Good evening, Gideon."

"Good evening, Yvonne." He nodded to her. "I understand that you are leaving tomorrow."

"Yes, and I'll miss this place." She patted the swing. "Come and sit with me, keep an old mage company."

"You're not old!" he exclaimed, obeying her summons.

"You, of all people, should know that appearance isn't everything. What's the idea of going around looking nearly forty when you're not even twenty?"

He smiled wryly, momentarily dropping his obviously useless illusion. "And how many people take an eighteen-year-old seriously?"

"Eighteen." She shook her head. "Ancient Chinese proverb say eighteen too young to be vampire."

"Is there really an ancient Chinese proverb that says that?"

She shrugged. "Maybe it was a fortune cookie." She reached over and patted his knee. "You listen to an old lady, my boy. There is magic on this island. In it, maybe. I don't know if it's in the air, the sand, what. Healing magic, very subtle. That's why no one can stay more than a week, except the staff. That lot is immune to magic. But for everyone else, it would be too much of a good thing." She reached under the swing and produced a bottle of brandy and two snifters that hadn't been there a moment ago. She showed the bottle to Gideon. "Your brand, I think?" At his murmur, she poured them both a measure and stowed the bottle...somewhere.

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“The people who come here are the weary, the heartsick, the troubled in mind, or body, or spirit. I mean most of the people. Some are here just for vacation, but the Club has a way of finding who needs time here and sending them brochures. Don’t ask me how they know. But generally, if you come to the island you’re in need of more than a massage and beach football. By the time your week is up, you will have been restored, healed, refreshed—whatever word you like. You’ve felt it already, I think.”

Gideon nodded. “Yes. It’s quite remarkable. More than my health and temper have been restored to me.”

Yvonne’s sharp eyes flicked towards him. “You look after that breather of yours. He has a beautiful soul. And he loves you.”

“I love him,” Gideon said to his brandy.

There was a long silence as the Chinese mage examined this statement. “Yes,” she said finally. “You do.”

“And I’d best get back to him.” Gideon stood up, returning the brandy glass. “Thank you, Yvonne. Have a pleasant journey home, and I hope the healing influence of this place stays with you.” *What an odd thing for me to say*, he thought.

“Thank you, dear.” She touched his cheek. “Put your illusion back on, unless you want your boyfriend to start asking you to wear military school uniforms. I think we shall meet again someday, Baron Gideon Redoak.”

“I trust that will be so.” Something moved him to give her a full formal court bow before he departed into the night.

The remainder of the week passed too quickly. Gideon often thought of Yvonne’s words. No amount of money was too high to pay for the peace he had found here—he could never, ever, repay the Club for giving him back not only Joshua, but himself. As he thundered down the beach on horseback for the first time in decades, danced with his lover under the moonlight, dunked Ladriel in the ocean during a football skirmish, or joined with Joshua in the ancient rhythm of love, Gideon knew that he had been singularly blessed. He knew, too, that he would do everything in his power to keep the magic. Only once before had he been so wholly healed.

On their last night, Gideon and Joshua kidnapped Arden from the massage clinic and took her out for a drink to thank her for her help. After they released her, with many hugs, they went shopping. They wandered into the “trading post” to buy Mitch a souvenir, because he’d be crushed if they didn’t. They made a few purchases for other friends as well.

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Having paid for their souvenirs, the pair returned to their quarters and began the arduous task of packing. Somehow, the pajamas got packed first, so they didn't bother to dig them out again.

After one last dinner the next evening, the five guests who were leaving were taken to the airstrip and put on the plane. Somehow, leaving wasn't as difficult as they'd expected. One week on the island was exactly enough. The plane taxied and took off over the Caribbean, dipping its wings to give its passengers one last look at Paradise.

"That's the last time I throw out junk mail without reading it," Joshua murmured, resting his head on Gideon's shoulder as the island slid out of sight below them.