

# “Addicted To Love”

By Glenn James  
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*“Addicted to Love” is the second of Three Short stories featuring Glenn’s vampire character Skaler, and looking at his afterlife as a musician.*



You couldn't get tickets for love nor money. Nothing ever appeared in the music rags or papers, and despite the fact that there was nothing at all on the internet and no sign of a website, somehow word got around when there was a gig. It was like some kind of telepathy communicating through the fans, the time and place of a show spreading simply by people telling each other.

To begin with, at least, it always looked to Blik like some kind of really clever stealth publicity campaign, and he watched with cynical pleasure for the sudden big track he was certain was going to kick it all off. Oh yes, he knew the signs.

Blik cared about music more than anything else in his life, but it was a love hate affair. It ran through him like water, a ruling obsession which shoved all the little things like eating, getting enough sleep and financial security right to the back of his mind. He was a pretty mean guitarist himself, but when the long road of effort and touring opened up before him Blik let in the black dog, and lay awake at night doubting his own talent. He began cursing his skill when things inevitably took time, and the doubt began destroying confidence in his own considerable ability. He would lie awake watching the unwelcome grey light of dawn sneak into the room like a thief over the top of the curtains, uninvited, and wilfully destroying any last prayer of sleep. Night after night this happened, for years, until he stopped playing, sold his guitar, and spent his day's jealously watching the careers of others and hating himself for not being in their place.

With true care he had once applied himself to learning everything he could about the music business, learning to look for the signs of how the industry cultivated and weaned a talent. He knew just what went into an overnight sensation, the unspoken grinding years on the road, and then being suddenly thrown into the spotlight with little or no warning.

Suddenly everyone in sight was bowing and scraping, as you were treated like an earthbound god. Blik saw when the cracks set in, sometimes surprisingly early, and he saw the inevitable decline and fall; the sad demise, again and again, as group after group began to believe their own publicity, and a tight outfit welded together by music and passion died in the white hot fires of egotism, and little white heaps of powder. Time and again he watched this, until a love of the industry broke down into brittle recognition of the moneymaking machines behind it all, and youthful idealism was replaced by a thick hard shell of bitterness. He no longer wanted to be Jimi Hendrix, but oh, how he wanted a way to get his hands on some of that money.

He watched with the hunger of the truly disillusioned, half hating the obvious con tricks he knew were going one, and at the same time desperately wanting to believe them. That was the magic of the whole thing, and knowing that only made it worse.

Blik wanted to stand in the crowd and yell himself hoarse, lost in the joy of music and believing every note like an unspoken prayer, to look up and see musicians as mythical as Greek Gods and Heroes. At least, he used to. Nowadays he came and went through the musicians bars with a slight sneer in his heart, through the ripped beer mats and sticky patches on the floor, in the same way that the frustrated writers argued fiercely in their haunts across town, the Am-Dram societies poached each other's members across the pork scratchings, and the night school students plotted extra marital affairs.

The world was a grey routine of habitual rotation, punctuated by half-hearted attempts to do something constructive between signing-on dates, and nothing really catching fire. It felt like this was life, and that was that, but then, one night when Blik was half-way through a flat-pint in the Costermongers pub, an old roadie friend put a cassette down next to him on the bar. On a night unique only for his being one day closer to his eternal reward Blik wouldn't have taken a blind bit of notice, but he happened to look up.

When he did Blik caught his friend's eye, and that really made him take notice. Old Gurdy was the walking survivor of a thousand gigs, the roadies-roadie, a man without a patch of skin untouched by the tattooists needle, and now he put the palm of his hand flat across the top of Blik's pint and said quietly "Play it."

There was something in Gurdy's eyes. This big hard Brummie was known to have rammed two drunks through a fire door with an upright piano, when they refused to leave a gig; subtlety was not his strong point. This look in his eyes startled Blik, and so he picked the tape up and looked at Gurdy with raised eyebrows. The man nodded in confirmation and just went on his way.

A bit surprised and more than a bit puzzled Blik shoved the tape into his pocket and forgot all about it until he got home. Then, in the nicotine scented twilight of his flat, amber streetlight streaming in around the bath towel pegged up over the window in the pre-dawn darkness, he read the name "Chorus Angelaum" on the label, and taking a big pull from his sixth can, Donovan Blik pressed 'Play'.

It was an acoustic group, and a good quality recording, too. A guy and three girls, that was his instant thought, in an old, old habit analysing anything different; but that's as far as he got before the alcohol burned off his soul, in the wake of a sound like the sun cracking over the horizon on the greatest day of your life.

There was nothing artificial to their songs. No sudden, unexpected, misplaced Rap, no scratching or mixing, no synthesizers, hip-tricks, or novelties. In shock he sat and listened to a choral harmony of four voices, singing in a bittersweet unity about love lost centuries ago, music so sorrowful and sweet that it took hold of something in your soul, took it by the hand, and showed it the moon. It wasn't folk or rock, or anything he had ever heard in his whole life, but it was sad and wonderful, and by the end of it he was shocked to realise that he was crying.

He later found out that the man played the lute, and the girls played the steel-guitar, the violin and an old Irish drum. Their songs moved effortlessly between being achingly sad, and then more joyous than the best rock and roll. The style reminded him of the great romantic poets, and alone in his flat for 25 minutes he swung wildly between heartrending sadness, and dancing with the honest delight of a five year old.

There were five songs on one side of the tape, and to his wretched disappointment, after an hour of static, nothing on side B. Blik listened to side A five times, and then lay in the darkness for an hour before he got out of bed and went to find an old Latin dictionary which had belonged to his father. "Chorus Angelaum: Choir of Angels."

Life after that simple session listening to their music changed totally. The more he thought about it, the more Blik was certain that there was some kind of ubersubtle, meticulously thought out marketing plan at work, building interest in the group slowly, at first through other musicians. If that were true, then god knows he played his part. After that night he was like a man possessed. He couldn't stop thinking about them. Chorus Angelaum had captured everything he wanted to bring out of himself as a musician in those five short tracks, everything he ever aspired to as a student and dreamed of when he stepped out onto a stage and couldn't articulate. He was certain that this was going to be the group to end all groups, the rock and roll of the 21st Century. Here were a group of musicians who would end the charade of reality T.V talent shows, as it seemed that someone with vision was finally backing true talent. Donovan Blik, jaded musician and cynical observer, came back to life like Lazarus.

He had to find them, and he chased every lead he could think of. Here and there he came across acquaintances who had heard of them, sometimes someone who had been to a gig, but Chorus Angelaum were like smoke on the wind. There was no tour mentioned anywhere, by anyone.

No recording label had heard of them, and they didn't seem to have a manager, not even a representative or Roadie who he could track down. Blik became wildly concerned that this superb group and their incredible music were undiscovered and unrepresented, and that really made him redouble his efforts to track them down.

The guy, the lead singer, he found out was called Skaler, and he was a kind of understated New Romantic, in a long dark green velvet coat, with long black hair.

He sounded like a kind of Gothic Bard, and he had a stunning voice, but it was the girls who interested Blik. He couldn't get their voices out of his head, and a friend who was one of the chosen, someone who had actually been to a gig, almost raved about their beauty. "Imagine," he said, with a far away look in his eye, "A gothic spin on The Corrs, or those girls who used to play behind Robert Palmer. Real Goths, classy. Three really beautiful girls with long black hair and big dark eyes, in elegant black dresses and curves to die for." He paused for a minute, and seemed to collect himself, "And then there's that lead of their, Skaler, the front man... He can do things to a stringed instrument which would send Hendrix back to the Bert Weedon guitar prima, and his voice.... Let's just say if it was a narcotic, it would be at the top of the banned substance list."

Then, going through his pockets, he showed Blik a photograph. "Here, look. You won't see many of these. You can't get hold of publicity photographs, and they don't like cameras at their gigs. It took me six months to get hold of this; Brian didn't want to part with it. Cost a bomb, too, careful now...."

The owner's hand never strayed far from the picture while Blik held it. Not only did its previous owner not want to part with it, but its current one wouldn't let it out of his sight for thirty seconds. He only agreed to Blik scanning the picture on the condition that he went home with him while he did it. He was breathing down Blik's neck every second of the time that the photograph was in his hands, and Blik only got rid of him when he handed it back. But he had done it, he had at least found out what they looked like, and he was not disappointed.

Chorus Angelaum were really going in for a retro style in the myth growing up around them, he had to admit that. The photo was quite a small, a square black and white still, with a generous border, but the picture could have been taken by a 50's new-wave French photographer. He saw an elfin guy and three stunningly attractive girls standing in the doorway of a club, obviously taken unawares and photographed as they left. All wore expressions which were slightly surprised and gently amused, and it was the shot of a photographer's lifetime. Blik had never seen anything so understatedly glamorous. Skaler's long black hair was parted at the centre and pulled back in a long ponytail. He looked out at the observer with deep dark eyes, and Johnny Depp would have killed for his cheekbones. The girls were luminous, all three dark eyed with long lashes, elegantly arched eyebrows, slender necks and shoulders. Each one of them could have won a major modelling contract by gently raising an eyebrow, but there was something unworldly about them which he couldn't put his finger on. There was something haunting there, under the Celtic pallor, something old, and he stared at the faces on his computer with insatiable curiosity.

Getting hold of a picture was not a kind turn of fate for Blik. Before he had only been haunted by their voices, but now their faces flitted before his mind's eye, smiling seductively and regarding him with big bottomless dark brown eyes. Every time he turned on his PC, this new screen saver appeared to torture him, and they moved through his dreams like phantoms.

He dug and he dug, trying to find out anything new about those four mysterious people. Tiny little snippets of information came his way, and Blik could not say for certain whether it made things better or worse. Like the fact that within the group itself they all had nicknames. Skaler was called "The Heartsmith", as his voice, command of words, and what he did to those strings could melt a stone. Mabb, she of the stunning steel-blues guitar, was called "The LawMaker", for the foundation purity of her music, and the understated lead it gave the others. Cristobel was called "The Siren", for those who had heard her said the sweetness of her violin playing could call a mariner to his doom, and Jane was known as "The Captain", for the stirring marital brilliance of her drumming. Just listening to that lightning Celtic beat made you stand up taller, and the hairs on your neck bristle.

Blik was galvanised. Suddenly getting out of bed in the afternoon was a whole new adventure, and where his interest in music was concerned, everything had totally changed. All of a sudden he had a renewed purpose in life. More than anything he wanted to meet these amazing musicians, (preferably all three girls, ideally somewhere with a very large bed.) Donovan Blik, it has to be said, was a randy little sod, but aside from sheer lust and a genuine passion for their music, rather a lot of old fashioned greed had suddenly barged it's way into the centre of the tight little crowd of emotions he felt towards Chorus Angelaum. This could finally be his way out; they were unsigned and unrepresented, a potential legend in the making, and as far as he was concerned, no-one knew the music business better than Blik himself.

He would become their manager (to begin with), and handle their whole career on his own. So, with his head spinning with decadent thoughts, (not irreconcilable, either), Blik embarked on a bizarrely difficult mission; tracking the group down without mentioning what he was doing to anyone. (After all, if he had thought of it someone else might, too, and so he kept his cards close to his chest.)

They were smoke on the wind. A rumour here, a mention there, nothing ever concrete. He never saw so much as a flyer, yet people seemed to know when there was a gig. You couldn't get tickets for love nor money, and although he had now ceased to believe that someone was pushing them, he one day intended to capitalize on this handy bush telegraph as their manager.

He started going back to student bars and pubs again. If there was nothing on the internet he needed to feel the pulse of what people were doing, and so he began outrageously standing pints left and right, and as he did so he listened in on conversations.

Something which surprised him early on was the strange variation of ages amongst their fans. Most were in their late teens and early twenties, but whenever Chorus Angelaum were being talked about there always seemed to be a number of individuals around who were far, far older. Some seemed to be in their mid fifties, but they ranged up from there, he would swear up to their early seventies. Not many of them, only two or three people across an evening, but he never saw the same faces twice, and these individuals always seemed to have a burning interest in the band. Blik dismissed them as being horny old weirdoes who wanted to get them into bed (his own 29 year-old lusts were perfectly legitimate) but it always struck him as odd. Whenever one of these silver-groupies got too curious about the date and place of a gig (and they were always desperately pushy) the younger fans exchanged an amused look, and clammed up. There was then an amused silence, as if they were sharing a secret, and conversation moved on to anything and everything but Chorus Angelaum. Blik carefully kept his distance from the older fans, since he was on the dangerous side of twenty seven in most of their eyes already, and tried to cultivate the air of mystery he saw in the students. He never mentioned the group by name, and tried to keep his ears open.

It took a couple of months, and cost his overdraft dearly in lager, but his patience was rewarded. Blik got wind of a gig well in advance, and he made damn sure he didn't try to buy tickets.

Very little was said except a cryptic "They're playing this month", and to the polite enquiry of "where?" a date and place were mentioned. A shared smile and nodding of heads spread through the people around him, and Blik noticed a white haired man at the bar, with a feverish expression, dashing for the door. The best thing of all, and it took a couple of seconds for the penny to drop over what he had heard, was that it was at the Civic Hall. When it did it was all he could do to hide his excitement as he couldn't believe his luck; the Civic Hall was his own home turf. Chorus Angelaum were treading some hallowed boards, as the Civic had been a time honoured mosh-pit since Bill Hailey had first thrown a bootlace tie around his neck and everyone had played there from Roy Wood to Eminem. This was prestigious, and the new drip feed of greed into Blik's soul grew a little faster.

Now he knew the date and venue he relaxed slightly, as he knew the Civic like the back of his hand. It was a soot-blackened Georgian relic, gutted during the sixties, and lined with concrete intestines, and miles and miles of beer-stained concrete corridors wide enough and high enough for a roadie's flatbed-truck or forklift. In the main hall, servicing the stage was a sound system loud enough for Disaster Area. When he thought of the music he had heard on that C90 cassette being played in a place like that he almost cried, it would be unbelievable. Blik had to get to them backstage, and if there was one place where he knew the route it was the Civic. He could duck through those tunnels like a rat... and somehow the comparison didn't occur to him.

The night soon rolled around. All around him he was conscious of beer and sweat, and he hadn't even got in to the hall yet. Blik kept his eyes open for bouncers or barriers, for people being turned away without tickets, but it just didn't happen. The set was being held surprisingly late at night, and you couldn't move in the wide corridors for the press of bodies trying to get in. Just as well he was going the same way, as the human river on every side picked him up and swept him into the hall. Blik found himself two-thirds of the way back from the stage, and the lights were down pretty damn low. Four classic retro steel microphones stood silently on the stage, alone and unattended, and the crowd was curiously hushed, anticipation dimming even whispers to a low background hiss.

How they did it he would never know, but the four of them were suddenly there, and the hall was filled with a startled group sigh as the crowd took an involuntary sharp intake of breath from shock. Skaler stood there, his lute slung low over his shoulder like Hendrix, and one of the girls carrying her guitar in exactly the same way. Blik felt an odd shiver as the lights came up on the band, unprepared for their sheer presence on the stage. They looked fantastic, there was no other way of putting it, absolutely fantastic, and when one of the girls brushed her hair back behind her ear and grinned at someone in the crowd he nearly swallowed his tongue with desire.

"Good evening", Skaler spoke mischievously into the microphone, with the most wicked grin Blik had ever seen, "...would you like to hear some music...."

For seven minutes Blik went stone deaf. The roar of the crowd was like a force of nature, crashing down on him and smothering all other thoughts or feelings, exploding like thunder storms duelling with a blitzkrieg. He thought it would never stop, but Skaler raised a hand (along with an eyebrow) and suddenly there was a monastic silence so complete that it almost hurt. These guys really knew how to work a crowd....

"Oh, you would, would you?" The grin was back, "All right then," Skaler was raising his lute, "since we're all here..." and as the girls raised their instruments, Skaler chanted that ancient minstrels incantation which probably began the Universe, "A one, two, a one, two, three, four..."

And as they started to play, everyone in the hall around Blik forgot about where they had parked, work tomorrow, or the daily tragi-comedy of good and evil, because in one unified second they remembered absolute joy. It wasn't so much unconfined as absolutely rampant, and as the whole place went completely bananas, and there was only one man present who was uncharacteristically trying to shut out the music. To the extent of carefully screwing in a solid pair of ear-plugs.

Blik shut it out. He didn't want to be distracted. He wanted Chorus Angelaum signing a contract. When he left here tonight he would be representing them, and he would be having dinner with at least one of the girls, (ideally the guitarist, who made him almost sick with lust.) The effort was agony, as he wanted to just let himself go to the music as much as everyone else and just loose himself completely, but his focus was absolute. Blik moved through the deafening crowd towards the stage, fully intending that the group would see him. Tears rolled down his face as he ignored their music, but he shut it out.

Ironically they did see him, but more from private amusement than anything else. For two hours Blik tried to move purposely forward, and for two hours he was swept even further back, like a particularly unlucky salmon trying to get upstream. Crowds have a kind of group intelligence, and they can be very cruel. They sensed that here was someone not just there for the music in the way that they were, and so Blik was blocked by bodies whichever way he tried to go. Everyone on stage politely ignored him, as they were enjoying themselves as much as the audience and his pointless struggle went unnoticed even when they paused between songs. Suddenly, it was all over, and after the inevitable encores he found himself struggling out through the doors at an ungodly hour perilously close to dawn.

The crush in the corridor was unbelievable, and Blik struggled along against the flow, with everyone else trying to get into the bar as he tried to get backstage. The press of bodies pushed him to the side like a fast flowing river, and he struggled into a doorway, where he was half thrown, half shoved out of the exhilarated crowd. It was actually a large dark area giving access to three offices, and such was the noise and the rough treatment he had just been through that Blik was too furious to acknowledge someone watching him. There were a couple of large tears in his leather jacket, and he was absolutely livid.

He might have been ignoring the stranger, but the stranger was not ignoring him.

“Rough night?” they asked, in an amused voice.

“Sod off,” snarled Blik.

“Please yourself. Good crowd, though.”

Blik was beside himself, “Good Crowd? Good Crowd? Have you seen what some bastards done to my jacket?”

“It’s not the end of the world though, is it?”

Blik flung his coat to the floor and spun around in a vicious rage, only to stop in his tracks. Leaning against the doorframe in the darkness, with a mischievous look in his eyes, was Chorus Angelaum’s male lead, Skaler. His hands were deep in the pockets of that old velvet coat, and he didn’t look older than 19. He had his head cocked to one side like a cat, and he grinned at Blik; “You were saying...”

If it were not for several other moments through which he was destined to live, (oddly enough in the next hour and ten minutes), this could have been the worst moment of Blik’s life, and apologies came bursting out of him like a water main, but Skaler put a finger to his lips for silence and grinned again.

“You know”, he said to Blik, levering himself casually away from the wall, “I’ve got a funny idea I’m going to know the answer to this question, but would you like to meet the girls?”

“YES! I mean, yes - no - that is, well, all of you, actually....” but Blik stopped talking, in the face of an ironic look so impossibly knowing that he felt like going to confession for the first time since he was eleven. Skaler just nodded with a smile, and opened the door behind him.

Blik found himself walking through a completely strange series of dark corridors, and for someone so familiar with the building, THAT unsettled him. Skaler strode easily along and let him talk, and Blik could not understand how he could be so composed and fresh after a hectic two hour set. Blik himself, stumbling slightly in the dark, found that the more he tried to seem professional the more he found himself rambling like the worst kind of mad fan, and just as he heard himself blurt out the fact that he wanted to be their manager, he realised that he was still wearing earplugs.... Skaler stopped so suddenly that Blik almost knocked him over, and for someone so young he gave Blik that knowing, penetrating stare again, with just a hint of a smile, but all he said was “*Really?*”

Blik nodded firmly, and Skaler’s eyes narrowed slightly, but his smile widened as if this confirmed something. Then he set off again, but just as Blik drew a long shuddering breath he said over his shoulder “You’d better take those things out whilst I’m not looking, it’ll make a better impression...”

Nothing else was said until Skaler opened an unremarkable door, and the Blik was in the Holy of Holies: The Dressing Room.

The three girls looked up with interest as they walked in, and Blik’s heart nearly made a hole in his chest when the guitarist smiled at him. He knew their names better than his own, but Skaler introduced her as Mabb, and the other two as Jane and Christabel. None of them could have been older than nineteen, and Blik didn’t think he had ever seen such beautiful women in his life. He was old enough and damaged enough not to let himself be too impressed with physical beauty, but there was an incredible glamour about these girls which completely overwhelmed his common sense.

They were sitting in a coupe of old fashioned hard backed chairs, seemingly totally relaxed, exactly like Skaler. Something about this was really disturbing Blik, it just wasn’t normal. He couldn’t get his head around it, there was no adrenalin high in any of them, there were no sweaty, discarded costumes, and no histrionics. They could have been enjoying a leisurely drink in a wine bar all evening and not have moved a muscle all night.

“It’s nice of you to join us,” Mabb was Welsh, and her accent melted his soul.

“Mabb, eh?” he heard himself say, “Good name!”

She frowned, “Thanks, my parents thought so, too.”

“Strictly speaking, girls, this isn’t just a social call,” Skaler was scratching his ear in a way which made all three of them look at him thoughtfully.

“Oh?”

“No indeed,” and he patted their visitor on the shoulder, “Mr. Donovan Blik here wants to be our manager.”

“Do you indeed, Mr-Donovan-Blik?” Mabb had raised an eyebrow, and Blik’s world blurred at the edges.

“Yes, that’s right,” Blik kept his voice as steady as possible, “I can make you very, very rich.”

Mabb was smiling slightly, “Is that so?”

“Trust me; we are talking the far side of megadosh. This time next year we’ll be millionaires...”

“Megadosh?!!” Christabel tried hard not to laugh and had to look away, as Blik’s best (and perhaps most ill advised) Del Boy Trotter impression fell on stony ground. Blik knew it was pretty accurate, and it usually bought the house down, but here it didn’t do so much as vibrate through the foundations.

“He’s been telling me all about it on the way back,” Skaler was grinning broadly, “in fact, he’s been quite adamant about it.”

“Oh,” Mabb gave him a very direct look, “like that, is it?”

“Oh yes.... I’m afraid so.”

Now the four of them exchanged a look, and then with a shared irony which went about ten miles over Blik’s head, all three of them got up, came over, and gave Skaler a kiss on the cheek, almost as if saying goodbye. Then, with the kind of easy gallantry which made Blik green with envy, Skaler kissed all of them on the hand. Without another word, he left the room.

Blik stared after him for a moment, “Where’s he off to?”

Mabb dismissed all thought of his departure with an airy wave of the hand, “There are just a few things we have to take care of, you know how it is. Now look, Mr. Blik, you’re supposed to be our guest, won’t you sit down?”

Well no, as it happens, he wouldn’t; Skaler had gone, and now he had a captive audience. Blik had the floor, and he didn’t intend to leave until he had signatures.

So he went into his pitch. It took about ten minutes, but somehow the girls didn’t seem that impressed, and when it came down to it they said no.

That took him more than a little by surprise. So he tried another track, and then another. After forty-five minutes they were still obstinately refusing, and there was still no sign of Skaler. A cold wind blew in through the open windows, and a heavy rain was falling outside. Every now and then the three of them cast an odd glance at the window, and when they heard an oddly old fashioned car-horn they all grinned at each other. Blik didn’t even notice, due to the fact that he was virtually tearing his hair out.

“What’s the problem, I just don’t understand! This is a hell of a deal I’m offering you!”

Mabb shrugged, “Oh I can see that, but we just aren’t interested, you see.”

“Is it the contract, is that the problem?” he strode restlessly around, “A lot of managers would want a hell of a bigger percentage than that!”

“No, that isn’t the problem.”

“Is it the schedule, is that it? That can always be changed, you know. Are you massively booked up in advance, too many dates on the calendar?”

Mabb smiled, "No, I think you could say we are pretty flexible with time."

Sometimes, even an interview you have planned for weeks, the most meticulously thought out meeting, just goes wrong from the word go. That's just how life is, and although he felt the ship sinking under him, Blik kept trying. He was getting really agitated now, "Look, do you want to confer with Skaler, is that what's holding you up?"

Now they all actually laughed, "Oh no, Skaler would agree with us."

(Right, divide and conquer, Blik thought snakishly), "Can't you make a decision for your own band without his say-so?" he asked indignantly

Mabb stood up and smoothed down her dress, "Were a very democratic group, Mr. Blik, no-one has ultimate authority. But if you must know, we would take his feelings into account from courtesy. After all, he was one of the original members who started this band, and Skaler is the only original one remaining."

"Most of the others have been dead for centuries," said Jane, and he stared at her sharply. She blinked, "Maybe you should just forget that I said that...."

He did, and he blinked too, "Don't you understand, you have a totally fresh new sound, I could make you billionaires."

Jane shook her head, "The money doesn't interest us, it isn't important."

That was it, now he thought they were either sick in the head or under hypnosis, "Not important! How can you say that, it's tantamount to sacrilege! Don't you want offices in New York and London? Gold discs all up the stairs, and a stretch Limo?"

"Not really, no."

He sat down hard, "Then I really don't understand."

Mabb gave him a look, "No, I'm afraid you don't. Don't you see, Mr. Blik, we really aren't interested in the money, or the bling side of it. We don't even charge on the gate, we just want to play."

"Then how do you cover the venue, the hall?"

"We pay for it ourselves...."

When he heard that Blik nearly passed out, but some protective impulse in his mind told him she couldn't possibly have said it. The words were edited from his memory, and he carried on as if nothing had happened. He was on his feet again, "But the money, that new sound of yours! It's not even been named; it's completely fresh and new..."

Something changed in Mabb's face, "You really don't understand. It's not a "New-Sound" at all; it's actually very, very old. Everyone's forgotten it, that's all"

"No," he shook his head, "Sorry, but that's rubbish. It's the most exciting music I've ever heard, completely uninhibited, and it's so deep..."

She smiled, not unkindly, "Everyone says that, that's what Louis Armstrong said, and Colonel Parker. It's not new at all, you just know it because part of you remembers it, deep down through your bones. It's in your muscles and your blood, every part of you that's ever wanted to dance and love, or run and run forever. We feel it too; we just know how to let it out."

"Colonel Parker..." the three women were looking at him very oddly, and Blik began to feel rather unnerved. "This Skaler," he snapped, "Does he feel the same?"

Mabb nodded, "Oh yes, he picked up on it a long time ago. Skaler's the most natural musician I've ever met.... He can spin his feelings straight into music like silk; it just flows out of him. And he's been at it for years, decades before he met any of us."

Blik snorted, "Decades! Oh, come off it, love! Don't give me that kind of crap. It might impress the great unwashed, but you can keep the mythology to yourselves. He's no older than nineteen."

Mabb shrugged, "Only to look at, maybe. Some people can carry a century better than others."

Jane nodded, "And it's far more than a few centuries now, he started touring before anyone else, him and Chaucer."

They were all smiling now, and Blik was getting really angry, "Stop pissing me about! Are you going to sign this contract or not?"

"Not..."

"I won't take no for an answer!! I'm warning you, I'm going to make you rich!"

He only clenched his fist, but in the wink of an eye Mabb was virtually standing on his toes.

He cried out and staggered back, shocked by her sheer speed. The room was colder, darker, and her eyes flashed dangerously before him. Her skin was milk white, and her eyes a deep ruby red.

"Yes, you can put that fist away, Mr. Blik. I was wondering when it might come out. Nobody tries any of that kind of thing with us, thank you very much. Skaler taught us how to look after ourselves a long time ago," she looked at him under her eyebrows, "you have to be careful in a life on the road; you never know what you might run into. Now tell me, Mr. Blik," her voice was low and seductive, "Just how rich can you make us?" Her canine teeth shone ivory white against the moist silk of her lips when she smiled, and her raven hair fell forward over her face, "Give us the figures..."

He tried to speak, but she hushed him, and the two other women walked lazily over to stand beside her. He was backed up against the wall and they were suicidally close. Their eyes frightened him horribly with a hunger he had never seen before, and although he pushed himself desperately back from their dangerous mouths he longed to touch their cool snow white skin...

Mabb frowned mockingly, "You see, the thing is, we don't want to be rich from our music. We've already got everything we need. All we want to do, Mr. Blik, is to play our music and have fun with the crowd." He gave the three of them a frightened appraising look, and her frown became more serious, "And I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong. We don't need to pick the fans off just because we might feel hungry. We love our music, and so do they, so we entertain them. You can't live on bread alone, y'know."

"Besides, be a touch ungrateful, wouldn't it?" Jane sniffed, "Spoils a gig, if you ask me."

"And now, we find ourselves in an awkward position with a very nosy man, Mr. Blik," Mabb was staring thoughtfully at his hairline, "standing here with you."

"Me?" he was scared stiff now, "what about me?"

"Well," she looked irritated, "There's always someone like you who pops up just as we're getting into our stride, and spoils everything. Shoving an inky piece of paper under our noses, promising zillions of Dollars." Her tongue touched one of her fangs reflectively.

Christabel nodded, "It happens every time. We just start enjoying ourselves, and in come Broadway Danny Rose. It was the same in '25, and then in 1950, and I'm not even going to mention 1979..."

All three of them winced, "Oh DON'T!! What a creep he was..."

"Wandering hands..."

“Undressing you with his eyes...”

“Right little pervert...”

“And now, as I say Mr. Blik, there’s you.” Mabb cocked her head to one side, “What should we do with him, girls?”

“Well, there’s no choice now, he’s broken the Cardinal rule...” Jane glared.

“Knows all about us,” breathed Christabel, all razor sharp teeth, “He’ll have to go...”

“We’ll just have to get it over with, then,” snarled Mabb, erotically terrifying in her night beauty, as all three drew closer to him, teeth bared....

And then... Then they bit him, or nipped him, fast and quick: one each on the ears, and one on the nose, and *then* they fell about laughing.

He screamed like a banshee and fell to the floor, but they hadn’t even drawn blood. Still laughing, they headed for the open window. “We’ll have to say goodbye now, Mr. Blik,” Mabb called, “you won’t be seeing us again.”

“What do you mean!” he struggled to get up; totally single minded now, “Aren’t you going to think about my offer?”

She grinned, “Oh, we have. That’s why we’re leaving.”

“Leaving! You can’t leave now!”

“We have to. You see, we don’t need the money and we don’t need a manager, but more than anything we don’t need the publicity. Spotlights are uncomfortably like the sun if you stay in them too long.”

He was on his feet, “Well, you’re not going to get away as easily as that. I don’t care where you go, where ever you play I’m going to be waiting for you, and I won’t take no for an answer.”

She shrugged, “Suit yourself, but we might not play now for 50 years, not with a pushy little creep like you trolling around after us. Maybe you’ll get the message by the time you’re 70.”

“You wouldn’t do that!”

“Why not? We’ve done it before.”

And as he watched, and before he could lift a finger to stop them, each of them stepped up onto the dressing table with the poise of Grace Kelly boarding a yacht, and dropped out of sight below the windowsill outside in the rain. They were four floors up, and Blik ran across the room screaming.

Impossibly, down below in the street, the three women walked between the raindrops, conspicuously untouched by the moisture. They approached an antique car, a big black glossy Rolls Royce Phantom, where a tall athletic figure in an Armani suit was holding the door open. He had the kind of jaw which would make Cary Grant look like a chinless yuppie, and Jane gave him a peck on the cheek. They got in, one after the other, and only Mabb looked back, with the faintest of smiles, before the door whispered shut behind her, and the elegant old car purred away through the rain.

“I gather they said ‘No’?” Skaler was standing next to him out of thin air, and Blik nearly had a heart attack. Although Blik tried very hard to ignore it, Skaler’s pallor was very noticeable now, and he turned the same kind of deeply unsettling eye on Blik as the three women had. He was smiling faintly, “I could have told you we’d say no.”

Blik’s look could have outstripped the dawn, “Yeah? Well, that’s what you think, friend. They’ll come around.”

“They never did for Brian Epstein.”

*THAT* phased Blik for a minute, but to his credit he recovered magnificently, and shrugged, “So what? I’m not Brian Epstein.”

“No,” Skaler was trying not to smile, “No, you’re not.”

“They’re magnificent,” whispered Blik, gazing into the night. Skaler thought it sounded like he was talking about a race horse, and said nothing, but Blik turned on him with a certain kind of look.

Skaler raised an eyebrow, “Oh Please! They’re like my little sisters! And besides, I have someone.”

“Yeah?”

“YES. Well, almost...”

“Well, I hope she understands, then.”

Skaler blinked, as if the thought hadn’t even occurred to him, “What, Mariah? She’s known them for years.”

“Really?”

“Certainly, who d ‘you think taught Christabel to play the violin?”

Blik just stared at him.

“Mind you,” Skaler nudged him in the ribs, “Christabel’s playing is a little saccharine for my taste. She isn’t as accomplished as Mariah, but then, she’s only been playing since 1836....”

Blik looked rather dazed, and just nodded. Then he gave Skaler a rather scheming look, and tried to sound indifferent. “Any idea where you’ll be playing next?”

Skaler’s grin was very wicked, “Don’t you mean ‘When’?”

“All right then, “When?”

“I really couldn’t say. Do you really mean to sign us up?”

“Totally. You won’t regret it.”

Skaler smiled, “Then you’ll have to keep your ear to the ground then, won’t you?”

And with that he was gone.

Blik hardly noticed. He just sat watching the rain, and staring off into the distance after the ancient automobile. There was only one thing on his mind. “They’ll come round,” he thought, “I’ve just got to be persistent.”