

CLAN LASOMBRA TRILOGY

SACRIFICES

Bruce Baugh



VAMPIRE
THE MASQUERADE

CLAN LASOMBRA TRILOGY

SACRIFICES

BOOK THREE OF THREE

"Baugh's writing style is clean and smooth..., capable of setting a vivid scene, evoking genuine emotion from the reader, and instilling horror without unnecessary gore."

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in darkest night

A circle of maddened mystics attempts to raise the dread founder of Clan Lasombra from the depths of the otherworldly Abyss. The vampire Lucita and her dubious allies in the bloodthirsty Sabbat must mount a desperate attack to stop them from plunging the world into eternal night.

For Lucita, however, the stakes are even greater. After a thousand-year struggle, her soul is slipping into bestial madness with only the blood-rites of her erstwhile enemies able to keep her sane. To survive must she become the image of the sire she spent an eternity resisting?

DARK FANTASY



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SACRIFICESTM

prologue

7

part one: The wilderness

15

part two: The whirlwind

141

part three: The Altar

193

epilogue

277



prologue



Saturday, 22 July 2000, 11:00 PM
Museum der Arbeit
Hamburg, Germany

Willa Gebenstaler believed in the power of self-examination. As she made her way through the dimly lit rooms of the museum which was her haven, cordless headset phone clutched in one hand, she took inventory of her interior state. She identified pleasure occasioned by her inner quiet even as she wished in a melancholy way to hear once again from her employer. She then tallied the elements in her post-mortem education and experience which made her value the quiet and regret the uncertainty. From time to time she wrote and distributed a philosophical treatise on some aspect of the Kindred condition; perhaps it was the right time to gather up her meta-analysis and write another such volume.

At bottom, all of this was a way to pass the time while worrying, but she chose not to acknowledge that just right now. It had been far too long since she heard from Madame, and that last call was something less than reassuring. For the first time, Willa had turned the substantial resources at her disposal against her employer. Willa did not let herself deeply consider the consequences. Whatever she finds, this was almost certainly the end of her employment, and she had as yet no idea what other sort of existence she might lead.

Eighty-two years ago, Willa made one of her occasional forays into scholarship, in the form of an essay on optics and psychology. The flashlight in her hand and the beams it sent spearing through the museum reminded her of it now. Her insight in 1918 was that the Lasombra, very nearly exclusively among all the sorts of creatures familiar to her personally or revealed in mortal and vampiric lore, can perceive the world as it truly is. Reflection hides the actual objects that surround the observer beneath the observer's own image. That image is not intrinsic to them, and it passes when the observer leaves. Of course, observers without a body—masters of shape-shifting, psychic projectors, and the like—may observe without the distraction of reflection, but they must pay the

price of being bodiless while doing so. The Lasombra and the handful of vampires in other lineages who do not reflect combine the virtue of incarnation with the virtue of objective observation.

Willa argued that this defect of imposed subjectivity accounted for most of the living world's psychological ailments and suggested that it could be treated by means of conditioning then available without substantial difficulty. The century's progress in "psychological warfare" and other techniques of manipulation would only make it easier now. Likewise, simple supernatural exertions could support such efforts to enlighten other vampires. Then they too could stand as she did now, surrounded by cascades of light across polished machinery and glass cases, and yet see only the *Ding an Sich*, the thing in itself, illuminated by her torch yet not contaminated by her own image.

There were several reasons Willa had not published this work, but the foremost among them was that Madame pointed her to prior works making the same point: an 1850 essay by another German Lasombra, a 1795 tract by an envious French ghoul (the tract was widely mistaken as an allegorical attack on the French Revolution, but Willa readily discerned its true meaning), a 1329 letter from an unknown correspondent to the abbot of an Italian monastery long affiliated with the Lasombra Antediluvian's immediate heirs... and so on, back into history. Willa felt humiliated at realizing just how ordinary her insight had been, and Madame's encouragement seemed to Willa to lack the gift of sincerity. The particular formulation she developed therefore remained her secret, alluded to only in conversation with a handful of relatively trusted associates, none of whom seemed to grasp the point.

In the labyrinth of her memory, trained in techniques from both Orient and Occident, Willa recalled herself explaining the concept to Madame. Willa stood... here, against a display case, which has since been removed to make way for an extension of the wall. Heating ducts now ran where her soles rested against the case's brass lower rim. Madame paced down the hall, the electric lights of the time casting her elegant young features into harsh chiaroscuro. They

adjourned from the museum to the archives Madame then kept in the basement of a nearby office building, and Willa could remember the soft whisper of Madame's hair as she handed document after to document to Willa, showing her how thoroughly she'd been anticipated....

The phone rang, the distinctive two-chirp, three-chirp pattern that indicated someone calling on one of the secure networks set up for this purpose. The call came in through one layer of potentially traceable communication to relay points spread through most of the world's time zones, then through multiply encrypted packet wrappers to their destination. Madame didn't own the network or monopolize its use, but she did help fund its establishment and retained a right of priority access. Willa saw to it that the network's other sponsors believed her to be the agent for a small coterie of independently-minded Lasombra of two hundred years' age or less, and occasionally took evidence from one of Madame's targets to support the story. The list of people who had access to this means of reaching Willa was a short one.

"Good evening. Gebenstaler here." As always, she was calm in her manner. After all, she had no pulse to race and disturb her composure.

"Good evening, Willa. This is your employer." Madame's voice was just as cool. Willa could hear mechanical noises in the background, and something like static... Madame must be on a ship, somewhere not far from either the engine or the hull's water line. As she formulated this insight, Madame recited a series of numbers and words that allowed Willa to verify that she was indeed a properly authorized user of Secure Network Gray.

"Yes, Madame. What can I do for you tonight?"

"I need a network of secure telephone installations for coordinating an operation in the Mediterranean, Willa. The focal point will be eastern Sicily, but we'll need access from at least as far away as Antakya and Cairo in the east and Lisbon in the west. A range of fifty miles north or south from the coast should suffice; I can authorize an extension if necessary."

"Madame..." Willa hesitated. "Coordinates? On whose behalf are you acting, Madame?"

"My own."

Willa had to stop to think about that. One of Madame's distinguishing features since long before Willa arrived on the scene was that she worked alone. Willa recalled the recent mortal term "Stockholm Syndrome" for that state of mind in which the victim of a kidnapping comes to identify with her captors. Terrible as it was to consider, this must be what had happened to Madame. Must Willa then stop it? She decided to continue the conversation while pondering. "Very well, Madame. About how many distinct identities do you anticipate using this system, and when do you need it ready for use?"

"Two hundred active users should suffice." Willa does not interrupt, flabbergasted though she is. That's an institutional operation of some kind, to be sure. "Ideally, you'd have the system already running, Willa. But since I just now told you I need it, 'as soon as possible' will be fine. Feel free to start with a low-volume network and about ten authentications, and expand as rapidly as you can. Some security will be better than none for this purpose."

"Very well, Madame. How shall I credit the funding?"

"Use the general fund. Itemize as usual, because I do expect compensation, but in the meantime I regard this as an investment in our offerings as well as a tool for this assignment."

"Yes, Madame."

Willa wanted to ask more questions, but Lucita provided a short list of contractors to use and two secure message receptacles in which Willa could post news as the system becomes ready. They settled in to review the technicalities. By the time Willa was ready to ask more personal questions, Madame had finished giving her orders and hung up with minimal warning. Willa was left alone with the museum and her thoughts once again.

Hours passed as Willa walked through her domain, weighing the issues. Not long before she must return to her crypt, answers began to emerge. No, it was not her place to

interfere with Madame at this time. It was her place to arrange for observers, to establish how much free will Madame actually had now and what it was she's doing. If Madame began to return to her senses, Willa would be there to help, perhaps with leverage to apply against the captors. If not... well, if worst came to very worst, Willa knew how to reach some of the best surviving vampire slayers in the world. It would be very sad to have to take such a step, of course, and Willa would never turn lightly against Madame. She hoped very strongly that there was still something worth calling "Madame" to which she might in good conscience give her loyalty.

part one:
the wilderness



Thursday, 20 July 2000, 3:17 AM
Capo d'Orlando
Sicily, Italy

"The Devil drag these cursed fishing peasants to Hell, then," Cardinal Timofiev's paladin muttered. "Whatever happened to a sense of responsibility? Doesn't anyone sleep with their beloved boat anymore?" The paladin and the members of the hunting pack were climbing onboard the fifth fishing boat of the night; the first four had been devoid of crew, and the vampires needed living people to handle daytime chores.

"I'm sure they would have if they knew we were coming," pack leader Andrew Emory murmured.

"What was that?" The paladin spoke quietly but sharply, its androgynous voice carrying well even when quiet.

"I was just thinking," Andrew replied smoothly, "that here we see the results of too little Lasombra presence in the homeland. If the fishermen were more terrified of strange things in the night, they'd have more incentive to guard their precious boats. But here we are." He pulled out the hinges holding this boat's main cabin door closed and looked down. "Looks like three little sailor men, ready for us."

Three *big* sailor men, the others agreed as they filed into the cabin: none of them less than six feet tall, all lean but muscled. The men would make useful servants for the trip. In accordance with a prior agreement, the other vampires held back to let Rosa and Roxana step forward. The first the fishermen knew of their intruders was being yanked up out of their bunks and pressed against the cabin ceiling by what looked like a muscular young woman and a somewhat older elegant lady. But these women were hoisting full-grown men with one-hand lifts. The fishermen woke into immediate panic.

"Good evening," Rosa said in her best condescending voice. "We require your services. Thank you for your immediate and full cooperation."

It didn't take long to explain to the fishermen that they were to take the boat and the vampires across the

Mediterranean, leaving immediately. Rosa saw the three begin to realize the possibilities of daytime revolt and called in Angelica from the ghoul's on-deck watch. Angelica took both hands to lift the biggest of the fishermen, but demonstrated that preternatural strength wasn't just a vampire's prerogative. Two of the fishermen began crying out of sheer dread and despair, even before Andrew imposed some simple mental commands that left them aware of losing their internal sovereignty. They were tools, and broken by the knowledge.

In a few minutes the boat was underway. The night harbormaster wondered what was so important as to warrant the rush; when the skipper made vague references to "big payoff" and promised details later, the harbormaster laughed and let him head on out. Lucita told the sailor to bring his ship around the northeast tip of the island, through the Straits of Messina and into the Ionian Sea. From there he was to head east, aiming ultimately for the mouth of the Nile River.

Once they were underway, Andrew joined Lucita and the paladin in the boat's bow. "The two of you must know a lot more than I do about possible destinations, but why Egypt? I would have thought you'd head for one of the old-time clan strongholds—the Balearics, maybe, or an Italian port."

"I sometimes forget," Lucita remarked to the paladin, "how much an American can know about the world for thousands of miles around his home without knowing anything about Europe or elsewhere. I take it," she said to Andrew, "that you don't know much about the state of Cainite affairs in Cairo."

"Not a thing, really."

"The older a city, the less likely its Cainites are to do things any usual way. The accumulated weight of actions by powerful—or lucky—individuals matters more than general principles." She saw Andrew nod at that. "It's because of personal politics five hundred years ago, primarily, that Cairo has a clanless prince, and because of that..."

"Wait, wait. A major city has a caitiff in charge? How did that happen?"

"Do you really want me to explain how the Mameluke succession struggles created the conditions for a favored

courtier to take the domain's throne despite lacking a conventional lineage?"

Andrew thought about it. "Maybe later."

"As you say. As I was saying, Cairo has a prince in a delicate position, and because of that, there's an unusually strong division of the city into districts along clan lines. The center of the city is what Prince Mukhtar Bey likes to call 'Free Cairo,' with districts granted to clans all around the periphery."

"All right..."

"I'm not through yet. The Lasombra there have an unusual balance in force. The presiding eldest of the city's Lasombra is an Arabian gentlewoman. She has little use for either of the sects, and suppresses sect warfare where she can. She also retains a lasting fondness for her childe, an ambitious fellow who's the Sabbath bishop of the city. In turn, he has the presence of mind to resist using most usual Sabbath tactics, in favor of a campaign of primarily social means."

"That sounds vaguely familiar."

"I beg your pardon?"

Andrew induced a blush. "Nothing, nothing, a stray thought. Please continue."

Lucita really hadn't made out his comment, though she had her suspicions. She decided to let it pass for now. "What all this means is that Cairo gives us an unusual opportunity to speak relatively freely across sect lines. We know we want our cousins to know what we know and to work with us in responding to the threat. Neither the paladin nor I can think of any better place to make the attempt than Cairo."

Friday, 21 July 2000, 2:51 AM
Onboard a Sicilian fishing boat
Eastern Mediterranean Sea

The paladin regarded the boat's radio phone with distaste. Its case was corroded and pitted, the legacy of years of use in saltwater breezes, and stained by oil and other chemicals the paladin didn't care to identify. But since the paladin's cell phone had run out of charge in the haste of the trip and no compatible outlet was handy, the radio phone was what the paladin had to use.

First came the automatic routing through layers of misdirection, using numbers and codes provided by Lucita's assistant. Then came the tedious process of getting from those anonymous connections into the Sabbath's network in Mexico City. Twice the connection dropped, and the paladin had to start all over. More than an hour went by before the paladin heard the familiar voice.

"Timofiev. Is that you?"

"It is, Eminence. I'm calling from a boat, on our way to Cairo."

The cardinal paused a moment to think. "Ah, a sensible choice. Was it your suggestion or the rebel's?"

"Hers."

"Very well. What *did* you find in Sicily?"

"The Castle of Shadows is no more active than usual. We were ambushed by Abyss creatures coming from somewhere northwest of it, however. Lucita and I agree that the summoning force is probably based in one of the abandoned castles in the interior." The paladin described the manifestations they'd seen and passed along Lucita's more detailed intuitions.

"I see. I am impressed, under the circumstances, that the whole hunting party still walks the earth. You have done well. You realize, of course, that the next step will require the involvement of others."

"Yes, Eminence," the paladin said immediately. "I realized that while we were recovering from the crash. I don't believe

that Lucita has, because of the limitations of her experience, nor that the pack has, simply through lack of experience. I wanted to speak with you before explaining it to them."

"Very wise," Timofiev said, and he allowed himself to sound genuinely pleased. "You may tell them on my authority and perhaps spare yourself some difficulties. They will resent what they perceive as a loss of autonomy even as they are privately grateful not to be facing the summoner alone. Above all, you must see to it that the rebel does not infect them with unsuitable ideas about their independence."

"Yes, Eminence."

"One thing more. You will of course refrain from speculating to others about the nature of the summoner, and you will do nothing to encourage others' speculation. Interpretation and judgment of the information you provide us is the prerogative of your superiors."

The paladin hesitated very briefly. The hunting pack's speculations had not featured prominently in the paladin's reports to Timofiev. How much had the cardinal deduced, how much was just guesswork? Only one answer was possible, whatever the truth of the matter. "Of course, Eminence. We will discuss only the facts of our experience. But that may be unusually difficult this time."

"How so?"

The paladin described their interviews with Gratiano and Yusuf, with particular emphasis on the inability of either elder to acknowledge or even perceive evidence that would challenge their memories.

"I... see," Timofiev said as the paladin finished. "Fortunately you have recourse that the founding diablerists do not, and if it becomes necessary, I will see that you regain your true memories."

"I am of course grateful for your concern, Eminence, and I know that your force of will can triumph over mine, even if I were compelled to resist. Can it triumph against the will that bent Gratiano and Yusuf?" The question lingered unanswered as they completed their call.

Saturday, 22 July 2000, 10:22 PM
Somewhere beneath Mexico City

The cardinals had no need to impress anyone and no rituals to perform tonight, so they gathered in a small chamber lined with portraits of their predecessors. The artwork reminded them of the fates that fell upon those who scaled the heights of Sabbat power and then failed to respond adequately to the challenges of their time. Here were those who had fallen victim to purely personal coups, to cabals of heretics, and—most numerous—to peers who had simply judged them too weak. It was good to have such lessons at hand.

Timofiev took the lead; for the others this was still in some ways "his" problem. "Eminences, I bring more bad news than good. The good news is that our Founder has not returned to the Castle of Shadows to inaugurate a new era of Antediluvian rule. The bad news is that we can be sure of very little else." He described the peculiarly false recollections that Gratiano and Yusuf had given to his paladin and the hunting pack: Two Lasombra present at the defining moment of the Anarch Revolt and the creation of the Sabbat, the destruction and diablerie of the Founder of Clan Lasombra, had patently incompatible memories of the event. One of these vampires, Gratiano de Veronese, was (at least according to sect and clan dogma) the actual diablerist. A mind able to twist his memories had to be powerful indeed.

The other cardinals hadn't been noisy—during Timofiev's account they held themselves with the stillness of those who knew precisely how much effort each task required and cared to spend no more. Now they held themselves still with fear and tension, uncertain what they might want to do or what effort might be required of them. They looked into the Abyss, without any of their usual power to command it. Timofiev knew he was not alone imagining a thing raising in the depths, the very dust of its passage stirring clouds higher than the moon, waiting for them, beginning to uncoil.

Lord Greyhound spoke first. Tonight his aggression served him well—seeing the challenge, he rose to meet it.

"Have you examined others present at the great diablerie yet? Do we know yet whether this blight is universal?"

"No," Timofiev replied. "I thought it wise to discuss the matter with all of you before doing anything of the sort."

"I suspected as much," Greyhound said. "I wouldn't trust the report of that 'hunting pack' of yours, but I've never known your paladin to err in such things. I simply wonder whether the target is those that pack seeks to question rather than those who took part in the great revolt."

"Hmm," mused the leading host for Menuven. "Do you think it's better to know that at some point in the past, a force strong enough to overwhelm the greatest active wills in the clan stalked some or all of the responsible parties, or that such a force is now active in the world, responding to this search as it unfolds?"

"I don't know," Greyhound was forthright. "I find that I have no shortage of things to think about when I confine myself to things I know exist. I prefer to know when this mysterious manipulator did his work, and whether it makes any sense to erect defenses now."

"Hmm," the Menuven host said again. "How do you propose we find out? Should we conduct further interviews of all the remaining rebels we can reach? Put up 'help wanted' notices?"

"We could," Greyhound said, counting on his fingers. "There aren't that many of them active at the moment, and we don't need to dig up any of the ones in torpor, I don't think. Surely we have enough trustworthy retainers to do the job in fairly short order."

Mysancta spoke for the first time, from within his robes. "We could do that. And we could presumably alert the manipulator. If he is active now, he can read the thoughts of the hunting pack and get to their targets, and in a matter of one or a few nights implant both false memories and the conditioning it takes to resist all contrary evidence. I don't even know the latter requires—I'm not at all sure I could construct the web of commands and expect it to hold, and I don't think any of you would do very much better. Even you," he said to Menuven, "with your expertise."

All four of the vampires present with Menuven's crystal rods implanted into their skulls blinked in unison. The light passing through the rods flickered into prismatic hues for an instant as the rods twisted slightly. The leading host answered, "No, you're right. I can describe what I think the effort would require, and I think I could make it work against a vampire whose blood is more removed from Caine's than mine. I am quite sure I couldn't make it work against Gratiano, and likely not against Yusuf."

Timofiev reasserted control. "Either the manipulator is past or present, and singular or plural. We haven't yet considered the possibilities of there being more than one such individual out there. The manipulator, or manipulators, might be the summoner—if indeed *that* entity is singular—or in league with it or even working against it. The Jihad has seen stranger maneuvers than that. The fact that we are here now debating these matters suggests to me that we have not yet come under attack ourselves; if any of us had, he would be showing the same certainty as the other victims. How long do you think we could maintain our independence if the enemy is now active and we are seen directing any effort to capture or interfere with him?"

"What do you propose, then?" Greyhound demanded.

"I propose that for the time being we conceal our suspicions very deeply indeed. It's a matter of general knowledge that the summoner is powerful; we can focus others' attention on that for the time being. We can spread the word of the hunting pack's discoveries in Sicily and summon those who would strike back at the summoner to a conclave in Cairo. And if any matter related to what we discuss tonight comes up, we can make sure to muddy the conversation through misdirection."

"This is the advice of cowards!" Greyhound shouted.

"It is," Timofiev responded, "the advice of one who fears an unknown enemy and wishes to prolong his stay upon the earth."

"But why do you cringe quite so thoroughly? After all, we are the heirs of those who confronted Antediluvians and

slew them where they lay!" Greyhound stood to gesticulate as he paced the narrow confines of the gallery.

"Are we?" one of the Menuven hosts asked.

Greyhound glared at the little cluster of hosts. "A freak like you may doubt its lineage, but *I* do not."

"That's not what I meant. What I mean to ask is, are we so sure that our revered predecessors did what they think they did?"

"This is madness. Let me know when you are prepared to take practical steps." Greyhound stormed out. Behind him, the others watched each other and did not speak further.

Sunday, 23 July 2000, 1:08 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The wind began rising shortly after midnight, hot and dry off the barren hills that run between Sicily's eastern shore and the rest of the island. The second eldest of the summoners paid little attention. He was not so far gone in his shadow-trance that he lost all awareness of the physical world—that would be foolish in a time when enemies were known to be at large, and perhaps not far—but he wouldn't be bothered by anything short of serious, imminent danger. He had more important things to study.

Vampires of the Lasombra clan learn basic, practical principles with which they can command shadows and the Abyss; they seldom learn much of the ancient lore that provides the philosophical foundations for the art. Few of them *can* learn the deeper secrets, in fact, since these require the potency of blood given only to the generations closest to the Father in Darkness, and mere intellectual comprehension doesn't suffice. The summoner had the required standing in the generations, thanks to the legacy of his own sire and to acts of diablerie committed in the chaotic decades after Gratiano's great revolt, and so he could apply his understanding to the problem at hand. Tonight he meditated on the principle that the light, that first creation of the petty tyrant who fancied himself God, hated the darkness and would gather itself like sentries where the darkness had intruded from beyond mortal creation.

It was now four nights since the unknown intruders had smashed through the sky not far from the summoners' castle, and still some wounds in the skin of the world lingered. This would have been easier on a stormy night, with lightning that oracular eyes could interpret, or with an aurora to shine through the lens of the remaining wounds. The second had enough experience with his art not to need their help, though. The problem facing him now was that the omens simply didn't make much sense. There was tremendous power at the center

of the scouting force, as the second expected, but there was also a sense of very new identities joined to that power. Indeed, the strongest locus of power seemed so lacking in an organizing principle—a soul with its passions and self-conception—that the second wondered if the scouts might be traveling with some sort of nonsentient vessel of richly cursed blood. He had seen both mechanical automata and the strange reshaped creatures, living and undead, made as specialized tools by the Tzimisce, and was prepared not to take anything about the scouts for granted.

A little after two a.m., the second gave up his study and descended from the rooftop platform. He needed to consult with the others about what these signs meant; persisting now would only add to his frustration.

So, it turned out, would seeking help. He found the others gathered in the castle's main library, engaged in increasingly heated debate. The eldest looked up at the second's arrival and paused long enough to say, "Ah, good, I was about to send for you." Then the debate flowed on, flooding the second with fragments of motive and rationale. The second seated himself and, in short order, realized that it was a familiar topic of contention, given fresh urgency by the events of the preceding week.

The eldest was in his best style tonight, vigorous but measured, his words conveying more intensity than a casual listener might recognize. "Our situation is essentially a simple one, fellow chosen. Fate or fortune has alerted our enemies to our location, and even now they must be gathering against us. We know our power, having tested ourselves again and again against increasingly difficult challenges. We know that the Father in Darkness blesses us and aids us insofar as he can, across the walls of the world. We stand on the blade of a knife over the Abyss.

"If we fail to act now, we will surely be overwhelmed. Our power over the darkness is without parallel, but our enemies have bodies and tools in numbers far beyond ours. We can be overwhelmed in countless physical ways. We *will* be overwhelmed if we give our enemies the chance.

"It is true that we have a schedule." He gestured at the carefully calligraphed charts on the table in front of him. "I do not say that there will be no difficulties if we choose now to act according to another imperative. I say only that we must so choose. It is time to open every hole we can in the world, now. We must start this very night, or in the morrow's evening when we rise again, and we must continue as long as we have victims from whom we can extract blood and whose souls we can commend to the void. We must tear apart the walls as fast as possible, until we are stopped or the Father in Darkness enters the world again in His full glory."

The second pondered interrupting, but decided to wait. The eldest continued after a moment of scrutinizing each of the other summoners, clearly assessing support for his vision of imminent apocalypse. "It may well be that our bodies will fall in this effort. Once we start, our enemies will descend in force. Each of us knows, though, how the soul may survive even the gravest insult to the flesh, and we have nothing to fear in such a fate. If the Father chooses, He can make new bodies for us after the hour of His triumph, or we can flourish in the world as it will be when all flesh is no more. This is no fear at all, but a grand hope.

"All of this is to say that the only fear we need feel is that in failing to act, we may delay the moment wherein the Father may once again act freely in the world. He has chosen us, called us together, strengthened and instructed us. We have shown ourselves ready for the great work. Now is the time for us to complete the task, though we did not know that the hour would come so soon."

The others were quiet. Then came one of those moments of low comedy, where three of the circle all started to speak at once, noticed the others doing the same, and paused to yield. All three fell silent in unison, started again, and fell silent again. Finally the eighth stood and waited for the other would-be speakers to agree that it was time for the junior member to have his say. "I agree with the eldest, and the whole history of our struggle backs him up. In the beginning he worked alone. One by one the rest of us came. Look at how we've come together faster and faster as the time

approached, even after what seemed like the accidental loss of honored participants in the circle. Every new development has come as a surprise, a little faster and a little different than our schedules predicted. So this is just the fulfillment of that pattern. We have never been the masters of this project, after all, but only the tools selected for the purpose. It isn't our place to question the need; we can only recognize it and do what we can."

Silence descended again. The second could feel a consensus emerging in favor of the eldest's schemes. This could not be tolerated. He did not rise to speak, merely drew himself upright in his chair and affected his best commanding tones, from a throat whose muscles he strengthened with shadow-fiber. "It's true that we are not our own masters in this work. True it is that the Father in Darkness has chosen us to carry out His will. And true it is that He has not chosen to give us perfect insight. Do you not remember how often we have been left altogether to our own devices, how we had to struggle through so many mistakes and false steps to find the next key to power? He looked at the third and fourth eldest, then briefly at the others. "You younger ones arrived to find the great work well underway, but even in the little while given to you, you've seen how we must experiment in the absence of clear signs from the Father.

"The Father never promised us success. He will let us fail. He will let us destroy ourselves, and let us be destroyed by our enemies. He tells us enough so that we have a chance of success, but the rest is up to us. We must use our minds as well as the power in our blood." The second did not pause for a dramatic gesture, preferring to survey the others as he spoke. Neither the eldest nor the youngest few seemed inclined to heed him, and he could imagine the visions of impending night that clouded their sight. It was the ones in the middle—the third through the seventh—who paid most attention. "The time for the Father's return comes quickly, but it is *not here yet*." He raised his voice and deepened its pitch for emphasis. "Our duty now is to defend ourselves so that we can proceed with the final steps as we are supposed to."

Now the second did pause for effect. "Are we so sure of the Father's will that we wish to throw away all that we have done in accordance with it so far?"

"Excuse me." The voice cut across the library, slicing through a handful of incipient objections from the summoners favoring the imminent end. It was the seventh eldest, an excellent scholar and a ruthlessly efficient interpreter of results. It had been him who had brought the ninth into their circle. "Excuse me," he repeated. "Do any of us feel fully confident that we understand the Father's will in this matter? No?" He waited, but none of the others spoke up. "Then perhaps we should ask?"

After that, there wasn't a great deal to debate.

The second waited until the others had left the library; he wasn't obvious about it, particularly since he really did have those peculiar images from his rooftop oracle to interpret. Once the others had gone to tend to their sundry chores that must be completed before slumber, the second was alone with the eldest. The eldest didn't speak, but gestured at the stairway down to a now-abandoned side crypt, where the first members of the circle had performed experiments while waiting to achieve full strength. They needed no lights, and wouldn't have even if they lacked the ability to see in the dark, through sheer familiarity. Down twenty-seven steps, turn left, down twenty-seven, forward five, turn right, down fifty-four, forward five... the second knew this route almost as well as the one to his own favored haven.

Still no word from the eldest until they stood on opposite sides of their second summoning pit. (The first had gone up in an explosion early on; the elders sometimes joked that they could still smell its ashes. And sometimes that wasn't quite a joke.) When he did consent to utter a few words, the second detected the influence of shadow strengthening in his superior's voice. "You will lead us astray."

"I think not."

"Of course you don't think so. You are as devoted to the great work as any of us—as I am. I did not challenge your loyalty and I am not challenging it now. To say that you are

in error is not to say that you suffer from any defect of the soul, only of the mind."

"If you are so certain..." The second took small steps around the pit to show that he was not engaged in covert rituals; the first soon did the same. "If you are so certain," the second began again, "why do you let the others run the risk of contamination from my impurity?"

"I might have," the eldest said contemplatively, "if it weren't for the youngster and the thought of asking the Father."

"Surely you see the risks of attempting that now."

"Attracting our enemies more directly to our stronghold? The Father's anger? The uncertainty of all rituals at a time when the Abyss is in such turmoil? Of course I do."

The second turned to begin pacing widdershins. "Then why court all those dangers now?"

"Because the risk of disunion in the circle is greater still. Here we are, performing our little gestures so that neither of us feels too much worry that the other may plan an ambush. This is a luxury we cannot afford. Whatever it is we do, we must be committed to it wholeheartedly, and I do not believe that anything sufficiently reassuring can emerge from debate. We need evidence with which to buttress our faith."

"That's..." The second thought about his phrasing.

"Very practical, yes." The first interrupted with his own suggestion. "I have not survived so long at this work by being a fool, you know. It is precisely because I have the vision given from the Father that I pay attention to the details. Can I risk the work because I find some aspect of our task trivial? I wouldn't survive deciding to disregard the proper details of a chant or the boundaries of a summoning mark, and I don't propose to start risking the work because of careless assumptions about our enemies. The founder has not, after all, chosen to curse them where they stand, and while they are *wrong*, they nonetheless have power we must reckon with."

"I see."

"Rest now. Come the morrow, we will find which of us misunderstands."

Sunday, 23 July 2000, 3:08 AM
Onboard a Sicilian fishing boat
Eastern Mediterranean Sea

"No, look," Simon Peter protested, "I'm not saying that I think we're owed our own shot at it. I don't think we could do it anyway. I'm just saying that I don't like the sound of this gathering crowd business."

Barry laughed. "And what do you think you can accomplish by going around being upset?"

"Uh... nothing, I suppose."

"Right. So you're wasting energy and distracting yourself at precisely the moment you need to be most alert and focused. Do you think that's a wise use of your physical or mental resources?"

Simon Peter thumped the railing in front of him, denting it. "Do *you* think I like you pulling your sage-of-the-night priest crap right now? Is that a 'wise use of your physical or mental resources,' beloved priest?"

"So it's like that," Barry said with a scowl. "You're afraid, and you're going to stand there blustering until you calm down again. I'm getting a little impatient with some of these quirks, Simon Peter. We have a responsibility to each other to actually be capable of carrying out our duties, and your neuroses are—"

"Since *when* was committing myself to one of the paths of enlightenment necessary proof of my sanity?"

"Let me tell you a few facts," Barry said, overt condescension in his voice and posture. "We have been commissioned by lords of the Sabbath to accompany this ancient rebel around to investigate the summoner unleashing creatures from the Abyss powerful enough to destroy vampires much older and stronger than us. Under the circumstances, we really need to be at peak efficiency, which means that we do *not* have time for your bouts of conscience and insecurity. You need to get with the program."

"Is that an order?" Simon Peter sneered back.

"I can't give you that order."

"I know. So piss off and let me think. You may not know this, Barry, but tomorrow evening we'll be docking at Cairo and dealing with a whole conclave's worth of elders. I need to be at peak efficiency, which means I can't waste time on old arguments with you." He gave Barry a malicious grin.

Monday, 24 July 2000, 12:00 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The rite tonight was abbreviated in some ways, but it would suffice. After all, tonight the summoners had something very specific in mind, and they felt little need to pay attention to the concerns of forces they would not unleash and spirits they would leave undisturbed. Tonight was a matter for them and the Father alone. The chants were simple, the sacrifices lacking in nuance or elegance. The summoners were confident in their power by now and used the blood as little more than lubricant for the proper channeling of their strength.

It sufficed.

Precisely at midnight the Abyss wind began to blow, filling the chamber with the now-familiar bleak chill. (It had taken many repetitions for the members of the circle to realize how much of their emotional state during this period came from small shards of Abyssal emotion-entities flung into them by the wind, absorbed into the soul through the skin.) The last of the sacrifices dissolved in a welter of probing shadows and disappeared into the wind. With their passing, the great thing that was the material manifestation of the Father rose.

As always, the second wondered just what relationship this column of darkness bore to the being that had once walked the world as one of the third generation of vampires. That body was long gone, of course, and there could scarcely be any stable form in the Abyss. The regularity of this manifestation was suggestive; the summoners had debated its implications often enough. Would the Father step through in His moment of glory as a giant, and reveal this thing as just one of His fingers? Would the column collapse to reveal the human form and proportions in perfect darkness? Would He dispense with the human form altogether now and pass through the world as a whirlwind? He did not care to answer such questions, which only made them that much more interesting to the summoners.

The second knew, like the others in the circle, how agitated the Abyss was thanks to their efforts. He was not

surprised that the figure of the Father shimmered and twisted over the hole in the world, and often independently of the gusting Abyss wind.

soon

The voice that was not a voice echoed in the summoners' minds and stirred the essences trapped in the chamber walls, shaking them fiercely for a moment.

"Our Father," the eldest said with apparent composure, "we your children seek Your guidance."

you seek i guide

"Our enemies gather against us, and they search out our secret places. Is it Your will that we prepare for their siege, or is it time to unleash the final work now?"

There were no words in the response this time, but a torrent of emotions and imagery. Dark tides rose to batter castles overlooking the sea. Volcanoes erupted with hot but black lava and clouds of ash that rose to swirl around the moon and turn it black. The sea drew back from all lands, thickening and cooling until only dense mounds of black ice lay at the bottom of the ocean beds.

"Father, we do not understand."

The images continued. Castles and cities crumbled into circular ruins crusted over with black mold and bloody fungi. Black fires erupted in the midst of great forests, blowing down the trees into gigantic echoes of toadstool fairy rings. Mountain after mountain collapsed in on itself to reveal steaming black calderas. It felt to the second like hours must have passed, though the beating of the wind told him it had been only seconds.

Fear became manifest in the eldest's voice. "Father, what would You have us do?"

hold fall and hold and fall and hold

There was nothing to see in the darkness, but the second felt stirrings from the eldest raising his head as if to look around the circle. "I do not understand," he whispered.

The Abyss wind continued to rise. The second realized suddenly that he was shifting his weight from one foot to another because the floor had started to quiver. Tiles rattled against each other, shaken by chaotic rhythms, and he

wondered how long it could be before some tore loose. "We must close the hole," he said in a tone calculated to carry through the wind's whistling. None of the others answered in words, but he felt the eldest begin the closing stanza of the chant. The others joined in, raggedly at first, then with increasing coordination.

The manifestation of the Father withdrew without further communication, and slowly—far more slowly than ever before—the Abyss wind settled. At last the summoners were again alone with their tools and their ambition, the walls of the world as solid as though they'd never been breached.

The eldest sometimes relit the lamps with magic, but tonight he did it all physically. In the restored calm, the lamps all burned cleanly, without smoke. The second was relieved to see that all eight of his comrades were struggling to maintain composure just as he was. In other circumstances, a display of such weakness would have been a potent tool for leverage in the constant struggle for prestige, but tonight, he felt, it was more like a sign of their union in the face of that cryptic command.

"Well," the eldest said, clearly feeling his way back to something like confidence. "What is the sense of the circle as to this message?" He turned to the second. "Do you feel confirmed or denied in your interpretation of the Father's will?"

"Neither," the second admitted. "What I feel most confident of is that we have *not* been instructed to unleash our final assault just yet."

"Hmm." The eldest pondered, as the hotheaded youngsters watched him for guidance. "Yes. I must concur. Whatever it is the Father sought to tell us, it was not that the time is right to break the walls of the world. Not yet. Some of those images suggested defense to me, some... I don't yet know what. I presume that we will know in His good time. For now we will prepare our defenses." He stepped around the circle to stand in front of the second and placed his hands on the second's shoulders. "You were the one who saw the Father's will more clearly. I will continue to lead us in the great work, but you will lead us in the arts of burrowing. Instruct us, and we will obey."

Monday, 24 July 2000, 4:10 AM
The Khan al-Khalili
Cairo, Egypt

Colin Davidsage liked to wander through the huge labyrinth of Cairo's largest outdoor market, even when he didn't have a surveillance assignment that really warranted it. In life he'd been a promising novelist, or so he liked to remember it, and most of a century later he tried to keep his powers of observation and interpretation honed. He could make notes to himself and then have a mortal agent investigate during the day; he was honest enough to keep a record of his failures as well as his successes, as though any of this might matter to someone else. The market held his attention because of the never ending variety of circumstances laid out for his perusal.

This stall, for instance, sold English-language books. Most of the vendors who dealt in such goods kept stocks of pornography (as the official censors would call it) somewhere out of sight, but this one didn't. Either the bookseller had run afoul of the censors hard enough to be keeping his act clean, or he had a personal conviction against dealing in infidels' smut despite the potential for profit in it. How to tell? He lifted the latch and stepped into the back room.

The oldest books all bore the same pattern of warping. Colin knew—originally from a George Orwell essay, and then from his own research once his curiosity had been aroused—that Lend-Lease cargo ships going from America to Britain during World War II sometimes had ballast consisting of paperback books ready for disposal. These marks reflected the books' time being pressed between hull plates, intermittently soaked, and crushed beneath the weight of heavy gear. Many such loads of books ended up stacked in various corners of British ports, and some went out again as ballast all through the 1950s. This shelf's worth would have come to Egypt that way, protecting some presumably more valuable cargo and furnishing a would-be bookseller with his first goods.

Colin crouched down to examine the oldest titles more closely. One in particular was most thoroughly battered, and

he pulled it out to get a little better illumination. It was a US Army manual on medical procedures from 1938, with old-fashioned attention to long-term care in the field. It was bloodstained. Someone had repeatedly run a bloody hand over the pages dealing with amputation. David smiled and looked more closely. The smears began at the edge of each page and ran off into nothingness on the left-hand side. Obvious. The reader had persistent bleeding from where his right hand had been, and it would drag across the page as he let go. Layering showed that he'd tried again and again to master the art of manipulating delicate objects like pages with it, to no avail. The proprietor had been a thief who suffered traditional justice and thereafter cleaned up his act.

It was a small insight, but Colin felt pleased nonetheless. Now to work. He closed up the stall behind him and climbed up to the shop's flat roof. Out of a small belt satchel he took the binoculars which were the primary tool of his trade.

The vampires of Cairo had many ways to conceal themselves from serious surveillance as well as casual scrutiny. Some, like Colin himself, didn't reflect, and registered at best poorly on electronic systems. The Nosferatu were the masters of other styles of obfuscation, but not alone in practicing those arts. Illusions, misdirections, and outright mental domination could all conceal a vampire moving through the city. Observers out to detect mortal targets with optical concealment would try to compensate with infrared or ultraviolet scopes, but that wouldn't help with vampiric targets. Since vampires weren't warm-blooded, they would stand out from the ambient temperature only when freshly fed or in the immediate aftermath of some greater-than-usual exertion, and ultraviolet light seemed vulnerable to the same confusion as visual frequencies.

Colin's binoculars were his answer to the whole challenge. The right-hand lens could toggle between visual, UV, and IR frequencies, with small UV and IR lamps. The left-hand lens incorporated a Doppler radar for measuring changes in the speed of things moving within its field of view. A simple computer embedded in the binoculars' frame compared the data from the lenses and blinked alert lights in

response to various sorts of conflicting data: things stirred without a visible source, ambient-temperature moving objects of approximately human build, and half a dozen others.

After he'd worked out his specifications, hired an unemployed ex-Army Corps of Engineers technician to build the project, and started using it in field work, Colin had learned that it wasn't by any means unique. Indeed, some monitors of the vampiric population had vastly more sophisticated systems. Every few months Colin made modifications to his own gear, based on his own results and what he'd learned about how his rivals worked. He remained proud of the robust durability of his system, and fought down impulses to add features which would make it more fragile. And as the state of consumer electronics advanced, he could perform more and more repairs and modifications with off-the-shelf components; the ingenuity lay in the programming and application of the components, rather than in their individual construction.

Early on in his time as a vampire, Colin discovered that someone inevitably wanted to know what other vampires were up to, and would pay for reliable information of that sort. He was not the world's best observer and certainly not its smartest analyst, and he knew himself well enough not to waste effort trying for either honor. Instead, he focused on the reliability of his claims. If he saw something that might be a vampire, he'd report it that way. If he could identify it as a particular neonate belonging to a particular established member of a particular domain, going about some particular errand with documentable results, he'd report it that way... if he could back it up. When he sold data, he wouldn't have to come back later and explain how he'd gotten it wrong, and over time this practice earned him an enviable reputation among vampiric information brokers.

(In the chaos of World War II, with many of his usual lines of communication down, he'd sometimes sold information to mortals watching vampires, individually or collectively. That was a mistake. It attracted the wrong sort of human attention—sooner or later, it seemed, hunters would turn up—and offended too many of his regular customers once

international travel became reliable again. He remembered the lesson and resisted the urge to dabble.)

Something was up in Cairo. Lasombra were gathering in significant numbers—several new arrivals each night. Peculiarly, most of them seemed to be making gestures of proper hospitality toward *both* of the city's reigning Lasombra, the independent Fatimah al-Lam'a and Sabbat Bishop Munther al-Aswad. That didn't happen much. Usually visiting Sabbat discreetly ignored Fatimah's existence, so that they wouldn't have to commit themselves to a necessarily doomed effort to destroy her. The "thousand-year club," as Colin sometimes thought of vampires like Fatimah and Lucita of Aragon, just didn't make easy targets. Bishop Munther, Colin understood, quietly encouraged this practice among all but the most annoying Sabbat. These latter got lots of incentive to go out and strike a blow for the glory of the Sword of Caine, and most of them perished obligingly, letting the bishop get on with his serious work. Colin wondered why Munther would change his practice now.

Identifying powerful Lasombra from a distance was an... interesting exercise. By definition of their existence, Colin couldn't go up and take a picture. He couldn't count on witnesses, either, since many elders liked to maintain illusions or just muck up the memories of bystanders. He could watch from a distance, vulnerable to those same illusions, and try to assemble behavioral clues. This was the area of most productive research—vampires develop habits, and the older and more powerful they get, the more they rely on those habits as a source of identity. The choice of a haven, the vehicles underlings were instructed to hire, observance of religious or civil rituals—all these things added up to something. The principles of analysis for such problems were ages old, but Colin found his work greatly enriched by human scholarship into the psychology of repeat offenders. Even the most humane and pious vampire had quite a bit in common with serial killers and others compelled to keep committing ghastly crimes, after all.

In the last week, Colin had identified three Sabbat archbishops and one cardinal to his satisfaction, along with

nearly a dozen bishops and paladins. At first he suspected a Mediterranean or African crusade of the sort that had gone off in North America, until he identified several prominent *antitribu* as well. He wasn't certain enough of this sighting to include it in data for sale, but he was personally convinced that Archon Captain Kleist and his crew were in the city—without their usual ship, unless it were cleverly disguised as an entirely different kind of vessel. He *was* sure enough to offer information about two Chinese mandarins who'd carved out Sabbat-resistant enclaves for themselves in the Philippines and several other notorious figures among those who rejected the great revolt.

Tonight his targets were a pair of vampires who'd been Embraced as young men. American young men, Colin judged from their unself-conscious swagger and sense of personal space. One was a big burly fellow, the other leaner and with gnarled legs he supplemented with a finely carved wooden cane. That attracted Colin's attention. There weren't all that many overtly lame vampires. (There were more bad impersonations of lameness, but Colin knew some of the signs of real, deep injury that mere acting wouldn't simulate.) He thought. *Young, American, male*. It might conceivably be the Bishop of Portland, whom Colin understood to have recently been gallivanting around on errands for the Court of Blood that caught and tried Lucita. The possibility would be worth something to his customers.

This part of Cairo, what the locals called a *khitta* or group of districts, was all Lasombra territory. They'd settled east of the central districts a very long time ago and held their position well. The absence (or at least great reduction) of the usual fratricidal tension wherever Camarilla and Sabbat Lasombra dwelled nearby helped with this; one of the local watchmen had explained to Colin that both sides had an interest in not handing gifts of domain to outsiders, and so wouldn't strike at each other until and unless they could do so cleanly, quickly, and decisively. Since such conditions almost never occurred anywhere, overt hostilities were rare. Colin had the impression that most of the new arrivals were also Lasombra, but that was mostly his intuition based on a

century's experience in the clan's various styles. He didn't feel confident enough to try selling that detail.

These two young men, now, they were proceeding like the others had tonight. They strolled calmly through the Khan al-Khalili, seeing such sights as were available so late at night and before predawn preparations had really begun, but didn't ramble altogether pointlessly. They made their way past Fishawi's coffeehouse, open now as at every hour of every day, and nodded at someone inside, then strolled around a couple of corners as if to go back the way they had come. An Egyptian neonate, whom Colin recognized as a runner with ambitions of making a place for himself in Fatimah's personal service, stepped out from under the awning and followed them. Four blocks away, he passed them with the briefest of nods and wended his way through back alleys to a store closed for repairs after a recent fire. The Americans followed him under the heavy tarpaulin across the empty storefront.

Colin didn't nod or smile to himself, even though he was pleased. As a young living man, he'd done both, right up until the day when a nod at precisely the wrong time kept him from seeing the trooper who got a good bead on him and put a bullet through his jaw. Ever since then, "level-headed" had meant something besides mere calmness to him. His satisfaction would not now distract him from watching. Shortly before the approaching dawn began forcing the inhumane darlings of the Sabbath to their premature slumber, another local led two more outsiders into the storefront. Colin guessed that they were probably using it as an entry into tunnels, unless the back rooms really did have vampires stacked like cordwood... he froze as he identified the newcomers.

One was the African Lasombra who called herself "Conrad" now. Colin had met her back when she styled herself an independent and had marked her progress toward ever-deeper allegiance to the Sabbath with some amusement. The other, unless Colin was very much mistaken, was Lucita of Aragon. Time to go make some sales.

Tuesday, 25 July 2000, 1:08 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The second and the third walked together through the castle grounds, studying the sky for portents. They mostly walked in silence, with occasional brief exchanges. No sound came from the castle itself, though both knew that their brethren were hard at work in libraries and chambers throughout the main building's high Norman bulk. Both were acutely aware of being (in truth or just potentially) the subjects of intense scrutiny despite the absence of visible observers.

"So," the second said at last. "You must be honest with me, now if ever."

The third smiled in the darkness. "Honesty to anyone but the Father in Darkness is seldom safe."

"If it were easy, I wouldn't have to ask."

"True enough. What do you wish the truth of?"

The second gestured at the castle's outer walls. "Our defenses. Our eldest immerses himself in research, the rest of us labor in the preparation of fresh incantations and the gathering of fodder for disposal in battle, but is it enough? Is it proper? Inevitably we are missing something—do you know what it is?"

The third lapsed back into silence, pacing slowly. He stopped from time to time to close his eyes and turn around in place. The second recognized the signs of one probing his subconscious for lingering warnings and directions, trying to pull useful information out of the vast sea of psychic disturbance that lurked within every vampire. "Vision," he said at last.

"Surveillance? Scouts?"

"No, I mean that we lack a vision. The Father has chosen not to guide us in word or feeling, and we haven't yet sought out an image."

"Hmm." The second considered. The third's observation was true enough, and the second could admit to himself—

even though he'd likely deny it to anyone else—just why he hadn't embarked on a search for new visions. Over the centuries he'd made many journeys of the soul beyond the world, and they were getting both more difficult to accomplish and more painful when successful. As the Father returned ever closer to the world He had left behind, He seemed to care less and less for the well-being or even the survival of His devotees. The destruction of celebrants during their rituals followed from that same carelessness. The second feared that he might well position his inner self to receive a sending only to be overwhelmed by it.

"You are," the third said after a judicious pause, "thinking about something you choose not to share. I can tell. What is it that you would prefer not to tell me?"

"I was thinking about the difficulties of the quest," the second said, truthfully if incompletely. "Even as we weaken the wall of the world elsewhere, it becomes harder and more painful to pierce it here. It is as though..."

"...as though there were scars in the skin of thing here," the third agreed. "Yes. It's made some of my workings ever harder, too. Nonetheless, we did not bind ourselves to serve Him only insofar as it might be convenient for us."

"True." The second looked back at the castle. "Who, then?"

"You, of course," the third said immediately. "The eldest is... not in ideal circumstances for it."

"You think he's lost his senses?" The second had been fearing this and tried to probe without admitting to the third what dread he felt at the prospect.

"Not all of them, perhaps. But he does not act in ways which reassure me. I think that we need a vision partly so that he may have something clear and simple to hold onto. The wind is scouring us all, of course, but it's taking the greatest toll on him. We must anchor him freshly, along with ourselves and the rest of us."

"You wax poetic tonight." The second was briefly amused.

"Do I?" The third sounded genuinely surprised. "I suppose I do. In my case, the wind seems to be scouring away a certain

restraint. I feel more at liberty to say these things than I ever would have in the past."

"I'm not complaining, brother, just observing. You speak the truth, I think. I shall go and prepare myself for the working."

"I will stand guard."

Tuesday, 25 July 2000, 12:37 AM
The Khan al-Khalili
Cairo, Egypt

"Tell me, Angelica," Lucita said. "Do you want to stay with me when we return to Sicily?"

Angelica was shocked and more than a little scared. "Of course I do. I would never leave you, and I don't want you to ever leave me behind."

"You do understand that we will be going into a combat situation, and there's reason to believe that not all of the vampires will survive. Perhaps not even any of them, including me."

"Yes, I understand that. But if you perish, I wouldn't want to go on living anyway," Angelica explained. "And even though I'm not as tough as you, I'm useful. I can help you get there and get away better than if you tried to do it on your own."

Her ghoul's dedication left Lucita with conflicting emotions, amusement at the success of the blood bond and a certain nervousness at the similarities between Angelica's condition and Gratiano's. "You really love me, don't you?"

"Of course I do. You know that as well as I do, from the inside out."

"Do you never stop to think about how that love was imposed on you?"

"Sometimes, sure," Angelica replied immediately. "But it doesn't *matter*. The truth is what it is, no matter how it got to be there."

"And if I were to remove the compulsion, so that you once again experienced your own desires?"

"That's just it. I don't *want* to. I lived all my life with the emotions one human soul can make, and they weren't all that great. Now I feel something that's much stronger and older than I am. To give that up now would be like... like going to live in a cave for the rest of my life, now that I've flown."

"I see." Lucita hoped that sometime she would have the opportunity to weigh the matter more thoroughly. In the

meantime, there were decisions that must be made. "If you really want to continue with us, there are things you're going to need to learn—practical skills, particularly the basics of combat."

"I always hated fighting." Angelica shuddered at memories of her refugee years.

"I didn't choose you to be a fighter. Circumstances became unpredictable. Now I need to know that you can defend yourself and at least support an attack when it's necessary, as it will be."

"All right. Who will I be training with?" Angelica still didn't *want* to do it, but of course if her owner wished her to, then she would do it with her fullest effort.

"Mostly with the pack, I think, but there's an interesting young man who spends some of his time here in Cairo. You and he may have things to say to each other."

Tuesday, 25 July 2000, 3:22 AM
The Khan al-Khalili
Cairo, Egypt

It had been another night of watching interesting visitors, and Colin had been able to confirm several of his initial identifications thanks to repeated sightings. He had a good haul, and now it was time to find a buyer. He settled comfortably in the back of a pot maker's stall and drew out his trader's cell phone. The pot maker slumbered the sleep of one who's given blood unknowingly and was in no position to interfere; Colin was flushed and happy.

He punched in a speed dial number. It connected to a phone linked via infrared relay to a laptop computer with telephony gear of the sort not generally available to the public. Colin had gotten it at an auction last year, part of the assets of an Irish firm with delusions of becoming a world leader in integrating computers and other sorts of electronics. They made good gear, too, before the funding all ran out without anything worth general release—the problem was that they made good *unique* gear, and hand fabrication wasn't about to displace the mass-produced system. So Colin and the other participants all went home with genuinely one-of-a-kind items. This one made it convenient for him to pass along information with one or two extra layers of security, and every bit counted.

Once the computer was online, he recorded a brief summary of the information he had to sell. This was tricky. Say too much, and the clients would go get the rest for themselves; fail to say enough, and they wouldn't realize they wanted to buy the rest. "Vampires of both major factions, and some independents, primarily of clan Lasombra, are gathering in Cairo. The established authorities are aware of this and coordinating their stay. Identifications and records of movements are available for sale. Extended observations can be negotiated as well." That should do for now.

As soon as he hung up, the computer transcribed his message and reproduced it in a speech synthesizer programmed

to approximate BBC Standard pronunciation. Then it dialed the buyer he'd chosen to approach first, a dour Swiss vampire of indeterminate age who didn't ever sound approving or satisfied but who did render up great fees when something caught his fancy. Colin knew that Karl was fronting for someone else and occasionally tried to find out who, without success—data leaving Karl's havens disappeared into a maze of multi-encrypted relays pointing into ever-multiplying dead ends. In theory he could unravel it all, but somehow the thought of devoting several years to a single task of doubtful value didn't appeal much. Let Karl's master, whoever it was, enjoy his privacy. Karl would contact Colin with an initial appraisal the following night, in any event.

Now he just needed to stay out of everyone's way for a while.

Tuesday, 25 July 2000, 12:00 PM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

There was a time when the second could and would have taken forty nights to prepare properly the pursuit of a vision from the Father in Darkness. Time to mortify the flesh, meditate on the darkest of sacred words, engage the soul in the machinations of the quest. Now there was no time for anything but the most straightforward actions. The second drained out his blood except for the minimum necessary to wake the following night, scourged himself thoroughly, and drank the last of half a dozen cups thoroughly tainted with a variety of poisons. Then he settled himself down to wait.

The vision began precisely at noon. Some part of the second's sleeping consciousness knew this, and reflected that the Father was testing the boundaries of His confinement in a somewhat melodramatic fashion.

The second was aware of his body directly below his soul, illuminated as if the whole bulk of the castle had been removed to leave his crypt open to the sky. In accordance with the law of its nature, the body crumbled painfully and rapidly. A passing shadow let it reform, and then moved on to let it crumble again. This cycle repeated itself throughout the afternoon, drenching the second in what felt like perpetual agony.

Indeed, after several subjective hours of this, the second became somewhat bored, and wondered if anything more were to follow. Eventually it did. Just as the sun set in the west, it promptly reversed course to travel back toward the zenith. As it went, it became hotter but darker. At the zenith, the sun ceased to move and simply expanded to fill the entire sky with sweltering blackness. The ground melted into a continuous flow of white-hot rock and poured into the second's crypt, encasing the reformed body beneath countless millions of tons of stone. If the melting ever stopped, the second's body would be trapped there most efficiently. His soul drifted just above the surface of the earth,

unable to roam and feeling a growing sense that the real message was yet to come.

"Ignacio." The voice cut through the silence of the vision. It was cool in the midst of the heat, dispassionate but not hostile. Above all, it was not alien—though it was not his or anything like it, nonetheless it belonged to him in some fundamental way.

"Ignacio." The voice sounded again. It had been centuries since anyone called the second that, since he had thought of himself as anything but "the second." He had spent far longer in the pursuit of this great work than in all other stages of his existence combined, and the old identity of Ignacio Rinieri now felt like a shell from which he'd hatched in those terrible years after the great revolt. Nonetheless, the name had been his and it had not become anyone else's, so he felt he should answer to whoever called it. His soul looked around across the melted world for the speaker, but could see nothing. His vision was not in any sense impaired by the perfect blackness of the swollen sun—if anything, it functioned even better in these conditions—it was just that there was nothing for him to see, not yet.

"Ignacio." A wind blew across the face of the earth, whipping the surface into complex patterns of ripples. Eddies collided to form a miniature image of the Castle of Shadows, and the wind whistling through gaps in its walls echoed like the screams on the night Gratiano struck. As he peered more closely at it, the second could feel a vibration rising from underground (from his buried body, he thought). It cast up a tumbling crest that seemed especially familiar. Yes, this was the route he'd taken in flight that night, shadow-stepping through the walls and running at a crouch through the canyons, later to make his way by boat and horse to sanctuary.

And with that he knew Who was calling to him. It was the Father in Darkness, speaking as He had while still in the flesh. Molten earth erupted all around him, forming a tunnel into the depths of the world. It was as dark as the sun behind him, and colder; the wind rushed down into the tunnel, dragging his soul with him before he could even begin to formulate assent or denial. This was where he was to go. His body flashed by and disappeared behind him.

In the center of the world there was a small room, furnished only with tapestries showing the destruction of ancient cities. The Father in Darkness stood there, a figure of perfect blackness like an unliving hole in the world, the Abyss brought forth. (He had never looked quite that way before Gratiano's assault, the second knew, but visions often played with historical truths, and as long as he could remember the truth, he was not terribly concerned about it.) The Father paced in perfect silence as the second's soul settled to the floor in an upright stance.

"Ignacio," the Father said. "Do you know what they say in Cathay about the art of war?"

"No, my lord," the second answered, just as he had one night not long after the turn of the millennium. He remembered this conversation, at least this opening, and recited his lines while waiting for the rest of the vision to unfold. "Do they say anything worth bothering with?"

"Oh, indeed they do," the Father said, continuing to pace. "One of their sages, a General Soon, wrote that to win a hundred battles is not the perfection of the art of war. Rather, to win without needing to fight the hundred battles is. In war, he told his audience, the most important thing is to be where the enemy is not, doing what he cannot defend against. You should keep that in mind, Ignacio, for the time will come when you must fight against armies you cannot defeat in the field."

"If I cannot defeat them, my lord, then what? Should I take advantage of my superior ability to run away?" Ignacio wondered now, a thousand years later, how he had ever dared to be so insolent.

"You must do what the enemy cannot, Ignacio. Remember that the world is given to us, to plunge it into darkness and to keep it there. When the time comes for you to fight, you must take the world and make it yours." The Father's voice echoed now. The rest of what he'd said back then continued to unfold, in a discussion of Byzantine tactics and their weaknesses, but the words "make it yours" boomed out over them.

The second woke with those words still ringing in his ears.

The others woke once the sun was down; the eldest rose last, as he usually did, his blood least willing to stir until the daylight was well and truly gone. The second waited for them all, fatigued and less than completely satisfied with his vision. When they were all ready to meet, he described the experience as thoroughly as he could.

"Make it yours," the eldest said in his ceremonial voice. It had some echo of the Father's voice, the second realized for the first time. (He was heartened by the realization. Every evidence of union with the object of their labors was one more sign that they were doing something more than deluding themselves.) "And do you have an interpretation to offer us?"

"No," the second concluded, "I do not. This lack is precisely why I bring the vision to the rest of you. The Father tells us nothing we cannot understand, so what I cannot yet decipher, one of you can."

Several of the circle started to speak, then fell quiet. The second knew from his own experience what they must be thinking. An explanation would come to mind, it would please, but then as the summoner weighed it against the whole content of the vision, it would fail to account for something important, and in the end the summoner would be glad he had not spoken. The second had been through several such explanations himself, and...

The eldest rose with all his dignity. "I have the meaning of this vision which the Father has given to our brother. Attend to me." The others watched him with great interest. It had been months or years since he'd last functioned as the great interpreter of oracles—since that disastrous moment when the Abyss had claimed two of their members in one night, at least. Now his confidence was back.

"Our brother's vision begins with the impossibility of resisting the forces that move upon the world," the eldest continued. "He cannot defeat the sun, nor the earth, nor the wind, nor the things that come from them." The second nodded, and the first acknowledged that with a single nod of

his own. "He is witness to mighty works in the heavens, which he cannot make himself nor control, and which help him in some ways and hinder him in others.

"Relief from the hostile world and the presence of the Father comes from below, beneath the surface of things. Here our brother encounters the name of his birth and the actual words of the Father. And the words are counsel of strategy, to avoid an engagement with our foes as if we were just like them, mustering the same kinds of troops and planning the same sort of battles. 'Make it yours,' the Father tells us through our brothers."

The eldest paused for a moment to see if there were any signs of dissent. There weren't. "Make it yours," he repeated. "These are good words, such as one says only to those in strength. The Father has never instructed us to do the impossible, only what others might *believe* to be impossible. If we are instructed to make the world ours, then we must know first of all that we can do so." The second nodded again. This was good exegesis; he hadn't thought of the eldest's point, and took heart from it. "So we must consider," the eldest said, "what lies within our power that might fulfill the Father's charge.

"What lies within the world?" he asked rhetorically. "The inner fires. Lava and smoke, ash and poisonous fumes, waiting to pour out." He pointed southeast, to where Mount Etna lay below the horizon. "We have sometimes delayed our work because the movement of flesh or goods was delayed by the inner fires. Now, I think, we must call them forth."

"Can we do such a thing?" the ninth asked. "I understand that the blood provides a sort of alchemy, but how can it make a volcano erupt?"

The eldest stopped looking from one summoner to the next and concentrated entirely on their newest member. "The blood in us carries the legacy of Caine, yes? The legacy that the tyrant God's servants call a curse, the blessing the Father in Darkness took from him for our gain?"

"Yes, indeed," the ninth quickly agreed.

"And what is the act that drew wrath upon Caine?"

"He slew his brother."

"Yes. He *spilled upon the ground*," the eldest said, raising his voice to emphasize the key words. "When the tyrant judged Caine, he said that Abel's blood *called to him from the ground*." He waited.

The ninth pondered. "There is blood inside the earth?"

"How could there not be? When you slit a man's throat, the blood does not float into the sky or become a ray of light. What you do not drink falls. It sinks into the earth. It becomes diffused throughout the whole body of the world, and with the right arts, we may call upon it,"

"Ahh..." the ninth became tongue-tangled as several conflicting responses rose. He stuttered for a moment. "I see."

"You shall," the eldest said. "We must begin at once."

Wednesday, 26 July 2000, 12:05 AM
Musafirkhanah Palace
Cairo, Egypt

It was one of the most beautiful rooms Andrew had ever been in, this ground-floor gallery. The western wall was almost entirely composed of stained glass designs, weaving together passages from the Koran and noncanonical sayings of the Prophet with complex geometric patterns. The artists who'd made these windows two centuries ago took the Koran's prohibitions against idolatry seriously, and there were no representations of anything in the natural or human world here. There *were* representations of the mathematical formulae which underlie many natural phenomena: the Fibonacci sequence, which governs the spiraling of seeds and branches; the golden ratio found in the turns of sea shells and growing crystals; the sequence later formulated by a European as Bode's law, the relative dimensions of the planets' orbits; and many others Andrew didn't recognize at the moment. The room was at once a textbook on the mathematics of nature and a dazzling work of art.

Bishop Munther al-Aswad recognized the room's beauty and arranged for it to be enhanced in subtle ways. His servants replaced the bulbs of nearby street lamps with higher-powered ones, and concealed additional lamps in the palm trees lining the sidewalk. When they were all on, they filled the windows with a soft, consistent light nearly the spectrum of daylight, permitting the windows to shine to best effect. The tables and bookshelves running down the center of the room were drenched in rainbow-hued reflections, and the room's internal lights were soft enough not to challenge them.

Andrew and the others waited for their host without speaking. They were all admiring the windows, even those who normally paid little attention to aesthetics. Andrew was pleased to see it; he'd tried to instruct the pack in the principle that what their neighbors, hosts, and enemies chose to present to the world constituted valuable intelligence. To know what someone found beautiful or imposing was to see both

weaknesses and strength. All information was exploitable, understood correctly. That this place was beautiful to the guests as well was a pleasant fringe benefit.

Every few minutes, one of the bishop's ghouls passed through the reception chamber on some errand. Those heading into the depths of the palace usually carried small parcels or briefcases, while those leaving almost all went empty-handed. Andrew would have put more effort into figuring out the details if he didn't have the strong suspicion that it was all just show put on to distract them. He wished that Munther would go ahead and put in an appearance already.

They'd been waiting for somewhat more than an hour when their host finally arrived. He came in alone and locked the doors to the rest of the palace behind him, then sat down in the big chair closest to that door. Munther had a certain coldness about him that Andrew respected but did not particularly admire—this was someone who'd gone fairly far on one of the Sabbat's paths of enlightenment and purged most of the taint of lingering humanity. In his case, unfortunately, part of the toll was any intuitive feel for what a relaxed, confident air of leadership should be for visitors still attuned to mortal concerns. He did well as long as he concentrated on it, but then he slipped back into path-driven behavior. There was no guessing his age at Embrace, apart from his having been fully matured and not yet susceptible to major evidence of aging. His dark brown eyes had a startlingly soft cast, contrasting sharply with the rest of his manner; Andrew suspected that Munther might have practiced that gaze for a long time.

"Welcome, honored visitors," he said. "It's not often that Cairo is graced with such distinguished company. We tend to think of the affairs of cardinals and courts as happening somewhere else, across the sea and far away. But here you are, and we hope that you will enjoy the city while you may."

"Thank you, honored host," Andrew replied. "I've long heard of Cairo's distinctive situation and your innovative tactics." That was a risky opening maneuver, but Andrew felt he needed to claim some rhetorical ground quickly. Cairo

was the subject of controversy among the Sabbat's would-be strategists and war leaders—Munther did not care to mount a direct assault on the eldest Lasombra independent or the clanless prince of the city. Instead, he worked in indirect fashion, using social manipulation and psychological techniques much more like well-planned Camarilla sect warfare. Whether the eventual benefit could ever be worth the costs, no one could say with certainty. Therefore, many said with volume and assertiveness to compensate.

Munther took it in stride. "Indeed, though I can't imagine that there may be many surprises here for one who's been busy with the lords of the sect, glamorous *antitribu*, and horrors from the Abyss. But tell me, what brings you to Cairo? I know that you arrived by sea and that you have encountered something strange in Sicily, but little more."

Oh, sure, Andrew thought. "I don't want to speak out of place, Excellency. Has Cardinal Timofiev's paladin not explained the situation?"

"The paladin explained that you all have come from investigating the plague of Abyss summonings, then dashed off to engage in secure communications. Since then I've had no answers beyond an instruction to make sure that you all stay in Cairo." He considered, then added honestly, "Which would be a substantial challenge in at least one case."

"Ah. Well, then, let me explain." Andrew laid out the framework of the story: their assignment to capture Lucita, her capture and sentencing, the subsequent quest for answers about crucial clan history, and the attack over Sicily. "...and we took our boat here. Lucita recommended this as a place to gather, and the others agreed. She said that we could conduct a muster here more readily than most places, precisely because of your relationship with the opposition and the lack of conventional sect warfare. So we're here while the paladin talks to the cardinal and Lucita sets up communications for us."

"I see. It would have been pleasant to be consulted before you all settled in quite so thoroughly."

"Excellency, I..." Andrew wasn't sure how to phrase an apology, but recognized that one was vitally necessary.

The bishop raised a hand. "No, no, fellow bishop, the problem isn't yours. I would not care to argue with that paladin and the childe of Monçada, were I in your situation. I appreciate your answers, and we shall see what we can do now. You'll want a haven better than dockside hovels, I'm sure, and I think I know the place." He described how to get into a sealed residential block near the city's biggest outdoor market, the Khan al-Khalili, and laid out a basic guideline to the major divisions of turf between vampire factions. Andrew promised himself that sometime he would come and spend a few years studying the details, as they sounded fascinating.

"Now," Munther said after his explanation, "what will you be up to next?"

Andrew thought. Time to lay on the confidence. "Training, of course. Our pack functions well together—we certainly should after what we've been through—but we need more practice against expert supernatural force. Most of our targets have been more conventional. We would therefore like to take part in the practice I know your personal force does to ready itself for local conflicts."

Wednesday, 26 July 2000, 1:34 AM
Museum of Islamic Art
Cairo, Egypt

The museum gave Angelica plenty of opportunity for climbing. She felt awkward, reaching from elaborate corner piece to jutting window ledge to overhanging balcony, but native agility and her brief experiences rock climbing in Colorado combined with Lucita's gift of blood to make it easy. She was up three stories and onto the roof almost as fast as if she'd walked the same distance. Lucita, of course, did it much faster.

A vampire waited for them on the roof. Angelica found him impressively handsome. He reminded her of some of the aristocratic Hispanics she'd met in the American Southwest, their features perfectly composed and proportioned, their manner calm and confident. This man could have been the prototype for many of them, but he had the extra polish that came from being a vampire long enough to strip away extraneous mortal movements.

"Good evening, Madame," he said to Lucita with a bow. "And of course this is Angelica, of whom we spoke." His voice was as smooth and polished as his appearance.

"Good evening, Christobal," Lucita replied with matching courtesy. "Thank you for coming. This clears our record of obligations, I believe."

"As you say." He opened his polished leather coat to show a total of six pistols in holsters, ammunition for them, and what Angelica was pretty sure were grenades of several types. "I came prepared, as you requested." Angelica's jeans, T-shirt, and light sweater came under his scrutiny. "More so than the student, perhaps."

"All in good time, Christobal." Lucita gave Angelica her full attention. "Angelica, this is Christobal. He was a naval adventurer in life and has kept up his skills since then in the service of the Lasombra and the Sabbat. Thanks to certain troubles here the last time I was in extended residence, he has owed me a favor; he'll be repaying it by instructing you in

personal combat techniques until he and I agree that you've reached a suitable level of general competence."

"I see." Angelica found herself not entirely inclined to trust the man's good intentions—though of course Lucita would never set her up for real trouble.

Christobal bowed now to Angelica. "Good evening, Angelica. My aim is to help you. In the end, nobody but you knows just how you'll feel when confronted with useful weapons. You'll be learning not just how to use guns and knives, but how to use them in conjunction with the blessings of *vitae*. The blood of vampires changes living people in distinctive ways. We will have to discover these ways as they apply to you in particular." Angelica nodded; this made sense. "First of all, we will see how you move, and what you must learn about moving more effectively.

"Madame—" he abruptly shifted his attention to Lucita "—shall we return her to your haven, or somewhere else to rest at the end of the night?"

"She can stay with my pack," Lucita said, and gave him an address.

"My pack." Christobal chuckled once. "Seldom have two words implied so much turmoil in a whole city. If the legend can join the Sabbat, who should not? The simple fact of your presence under these terms gives the Sabbat a luster it's never had here. But that's a matter for another time.

"Come, student Angelica, let's stretch our legs a bit." He clambered down the museum's east face and waited for her. Once she was down at street level, they headed toward the warrens around the great markets in Lasombra districts.

Thursday, 27 July 2000, 9:40 PM
Museum der Arbeit
Hamburg, Germany

Willa took the stack of correspondence from the computer, printed out as usual in a bundle of documents formatted to her specifications. She didn't stop to reflect on it tonight, but this all went so much more efficiently since Madame hired a business consultant a few years ago to automate the collection and distribution process. There had been some difficult years when Willa had to wade through a different format with every single document, at substantial cost in missed opportunities.

She did pay attention to the billing records. The funds for all this activity came out of her own savings, since she was paying for nothing less than a search for her own employer. After that disturbing phone call five nights ago, she'd worked out a tight set of criteria for information she'd purchase about reported sightings of Lucita and some related data, and put the word out to her most favored information brokers. They had come through immediately with gleanings from their respective archives—none of it immediately useful, though for once it was all actually relevant in varying degrees. Willa was surprised to see just how full an account of Madame's movements she could assemble, and was somewhat relieved that nobody else was likely to think of initiating the particular sort of query she had. Secrets that could be revealed only to those who already knew how to ask for them were still relatively safe.

Here it was. There was an old Swiss dealer named Karl who had a habit of acquiring good information from unreliable or simply unknown sources. Karl maintained quite good signal security, but not perfect; he didn't know that a cell of revolution-minded Italian Trotskyites had placed a very comprehensive set of taps on his house lines for Madame some years ago in exchange for funds and weaponry. (They in turn did not know that the anonymous tip which led to their cell all ending up in jail or dead in "escape attempts" came not

from a disgruntled ex-member but from Madame, who preferred not to leave too many loose ends lying around where others might trip over them.) Willa would not officially receive this information for another two nights or so, and it would not then arrive with clues linking it to Karl. She could nonetheless act now, without waiting for the deception to play out, as long as she avoided alerting him to actions related to his efforts at brokerage.

Willa sat down in her office and studied the report. The information came from a previously unknown source engaged in surveillance in Cairo. Unknown sources generally led to trouble, in Willa's judgment. Either they were new to the business and therefore likely to make unfortunate mistakes, or they were experienced and trying to hide their identity, which suggested that they had a history that warranted concealment. She would have to proceed cautiously. Nonetheless, the actual data, involving sightings of a significant number of Lasombra elders in Cairo on unknown business backed by the local Lasombra leaders, seemed sound enough. She decided, after an hour's consideration, to attempt to intervene.

Thursday, 27 July 2000, 11:48 PM
Cairo Tower Sheraton
Cairo, Egypt

Colin was just preparing to go out when his cell phone rang. The caller ID showed that it had been relayed through his computer system with verification that the caller had the access tag he'd given to Karl. He answered, "Good evening."

"Good evening, sir. I am calling with reference to certain items you wish to sell to my employer, Mr. K." It was a woman's voice, heavy with a German accent.

"Why, yes," Colin said, exaggerating his own Irish accent for effect. "But you see, ma'am, I deal in rather a lot of items, so I'll have to ask you to be a little specific."

"Yes." The woman (or woman's voice, at least) recited the access tag.

"Righto." Colin decided not to keep trolling. This must be a member of Karl's staff. "What can I do for you and your employer?"

"We find your initial appraisal satisfactory and wish to purchase a full briefing at Mr. K's customary rates. We also wish to engage your services for continued observation and follow-up on a schedule of weekly reporting plus specific entries as major circumstances warrant. Is this agreeable?"

"By all means, ma'am. Where to you want the reports to go?"

The woman gave him an e-mail address with key words to use, and the information for accessing an electronic file drop that Colin recognized as being maintained in Zurich. In turn, she got the data necessary to make payments to one of his favorite bank accounts, in the Cayman Islands. Then she rang off without bothering to make formal closing.

Well, Colin thought to himself. The risks were indeed worth running, at least this time around. This was going to be a nicely lucrative assignment.

Outside time and space

The Abyss

The oldest child of the Lasombra Antediluvian, who wore the name Montano when he needed to, made his way carefully through the increasingly tangled currents associated with the Castle of Shadows. He was not drifting, though someone who could follow his movements might have thought so. Rather, he moved at a slow but constant pace across zones of psychic difference in a manner much like what random drift would have produced in calmer times. If he were to abandon a constant spiritual braking now, he'd be slammed into massive denizens of the Abyss and ripped apart in short order. He had never dealt with such chaos alone and could admit to himself that he was deeply afraid. The novelty of the sensation was almost worth the difficulty of arousing it.

He wished momentarily that he had an ally or associate with whom he could share his thoughts. But as he pondered all the plausible candidates, every one of them stood rejected for some good reason. This one was too sympathetic to the great revolt, that one failed to take the Abyss and its inhabitants sufficiently seriously, the other took too long to assimilate new information. If he had a free century, he could train up a worthy apprentice, but it didn't look like circumstances would give him anything like that long. So he proceeded alone, in the manner to which he'd become accustomed so long ago.

The blacker-than-black extrusion of the Castle into the Abyss seemed to have grown more massive since the last time he had examined it. He... his attention shifted to his self as a swarm of razor-edged emotional parasites attempted to carve chunks out of his soul. As he reinforced his identity against them, the name Montano rose to the forefront of his thinking, one more way of distinguishing himself from all that was native to the Abyss. For the rest of this journey, he would be Montano rather than simply the oldest Lasombra.

Montano saw that a strong wind was blowing toward the Castle as well as away from it, and he spread mental wings

to tack against the incoming current toward its source. It could not be far off—it was far too consistent and coherent to have originated in unfamiliar deeps, or for that matter in well-known shallows. Crossing zones of emphasis and areas of fragmentation would have introduced eddies and uncertainties into the flow, mitigating the purity of its yearning and pride.

(In Montano's mind there were few actual words or concepts ready for articulation. His interior life was far removed from the sort of languages favored by living people and young vampires, relying instead on recurring images and complex networks of atomistic emotional states. On this trip into the Abyss he was applying more verbalization than he usually would, because he'd been thinking about what he would say to someone else competent to work with him in unraveling the mysteries at hand. Even with this effort, few mortals or vampires granted the ability to enter his mind directly could have understood most of what they discovered there. He had only the rudiments of a spoken or written explanation in mind, not the polished final result.)

Upstream, he found a smaller intrusion into the Abyss, much like the Castle of Shadows in its overall design, but much younger and far purer. The Castle bore the inevitable complications that came from the impressions of a great many souls over a very long time. This other place, not familiar to Montano, had clearly not experienced so much population or so long an inhabitation. Whoever had worked here, though, equally clearly had a great deal of expertise in working with the Abyss. That concerned Montano, because he thought he knew—or at least knew about all the upper echelons of students of Abyss mysticism. But this place did not have a familiar pattern of resonance. Someone had proceeded through the ranks in remarkably fast order, and without help from those Montano knew.

It was the work of an instant to establish that a direct approach wouldn't work. The master of this place had installed defenses: aroused shards of destructive passions and a secondary force of hollowed-out entities craving any sensation at all. Individually they weren't particularly strong, but the

cumulative impact was more than enough to weaken even Montano, and he did not care to wait to find out what lurked closer in, waiting to exploit the work of the outlying swarms. He pulled back with only minor damage and contented himself with an examination of the periphery.

A recurring pattern of emotions in the stronghold's foundations caught his attention. Desire, fear, flight, reaching out, succor. Montano did not keep the word "recursion" in his vocabulary, but he knew the concept. The embodiment of succor in this sequence itself contained all the other elements, and the succor at that level did it again, repeating more times than Montano could resolve from his distance. He went in as close as he dared, puzzling out objects of desire, inspirations of fear and flight, and the other implicit elements of this pattern, and gradually realized what he was looking at.

Soon it would be time for him to act on that insight, if he could establish its truth.

Tuesday, 1 August 2000, 11:00 PM
The Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The ceremonial purification was over. The celebrants' blood had been drained or burned and replaced with fresh blood harvested from victims who'd led pure lives and died ritually clean deaths. The ritual chamber and its environs had been swept clean each night, the dust settled by a mixture of water and vinegar which ceremonially scourged the walls and floors. The implements of ritual—candle and stick, knife and staff—were all freshly scrubbed and consecrated. It was time to begin.

The second led this gathering; after witnessing his preparatory studies, the eldest decreed that this work belonged to the second. So it was that the second stood in the anchor position and said in a Middle Eastern language long since forgotten by mortals, "We gather to draw fire from the earth. The earth as we walk upon it is cold, but this is only the truth of the surface. There is a fire in the sun and a fire in our hearts, which constantly war on each other. The fire in the earth belongs to neither sun nor us, and does not willingly submit. But we are brothers, for it originates in the same glorious sin which gives us our existence, and we know how to speak as brother to brother. The fire is not yet ours, but it shall become ours, and with its aid we will triumph against the sun." He repeated his opening homily in modern English and in *koine* Greek for the benefit of the celebrants less adept in ancient tongues.

"Though we do not live," the second said, "still we carry some of the marks of life. The blood flows in us. To hear the voice of our errant brother, we must first calm ourselves. Let the earth hold you as the tide of blood recedes, and open yourself to the world below." He lay down and stretched back, his feet pointing in toward the center of the circle. After an embarrassed moment of mutual glances, the others did the same. Their feet just barely touched, providing each celebrant with a pair of cool touches.

The second led them through meditative chants and simple mantras to get them calm and in unison, then withdrew into silence—the chant itself was a distraction from the work at hand. Gradually, slowly, he felt a great stillness develop in his limbs and then in his head and chest and abdomen. It felt as though they had not moved for many years. The blood concentrated itself around his dead heart, but it did not heat the shriveled organs there; rather, it coagulated into a dark, cold sludge like oil frozen in ice. Only his mind and senses remained active. Indeed, as his body settled itself, he felt his sense of touch and hearing intensify. He became increasingly aware of the fine textures of his clothes, the never-repeating rough surface of the stones beneath him, the small eddies in the air created when the celebrants lay down.

It was almost time—in moments the sun would be most removed from this location, blocked by the whole weight of the world. *Time to release*, he told himself. For a moment his whole body flared in agony, and spasms shook him from head to toe even without animating blood to fuel the activity. He knew that he would finish this ritual battered and drained; his body was devouring itself for this momentary fury. But then the moment passed, and his mind drifted free, sinking slowly through his body, through the floor, into the waiting earth. Nor did he have to wait long for the others to join him. Within five minutes of midnight's last chime, the celebrants were gathered together in an astral circle.

All around them the world was dark, but not entirely so. A very faint glow rose from below, casting the shadow of each celebrant's soul on the black cord tying it to its body. *There*, he told the others. *Below us is the blood of the earth, which cries out with our Father's name, though none know how to hear it. But this is not the place where it speaks most clearly. We must go to where the voice is less obstructed.* He pointed east and south. There was nothing to see from this vista, but they all knew the lay of the land and knew that beyond their vantage point lay Mount Etna. They nodded and began the laborious task of moving their souls through the earth.

The journey was hard, and very much unlike moving in the Abyss. One of the younger members asked why they didn't

just use the Abyss to get close and then proceed through the earth for the last few steps. The second explained patiently, *The earth knows itself. And since it knows itself, it knows what is in it but not of it. We do not "smell" like anything native to the earth. As we go, the earth becomes aware of us. Our journey earns us the respect necessary to request the deeds we want the earth to perform. If we used the Abyss, the earth would know that we had cheated it and would reject us as strangers, if not as outright enemies. If you like, think of this as a sort of geological diplomacy.* That sufficed to satisfy the questions, so that the group moved on in silence.

Travelers in the Abyss sometimes sensed aspects of the physical universe—particularly dense or open areas might create more or fewer disturbances in the Abyss, and different kinds of wildlife and natural phenomena attracted particular kinds of Abyss dwellers. Here nothing mediated the spiritual complexity of the earth, nor did anything shield the travelers from direct impressions of it. Changes in soil composition felt like changes in temperature. Old burial grounds gave off a characteristic sent, and sometimes the travelers felt themselves surrounded by ghosts too weak to manifest clear astral forms. Far below the surface, they encountered ruins of civilizations forgotten to living humanity and the debris of ancient battles, and some of the weapons remained intact enough to stir at their passing. Later, geologists would interpret these tremors as precursors to the big eruptions.

Finally, after what seemed like hours or days, they drew to a halt near the roots of Mount Etna. Ever since the rise of geology as a science, the volcano had been something of a mystery to human observers—it didn't seem to arise from any of the factors identified as responsible for volcanoes. It was nowhere near a region where one continental plate dived below another, nor near any point where plates pulled apart, nor near a persistent upwelling of lava from deep inside the earth. It was just there, itself and a mystery.

From here, however, the celebrants could see the truth clearly. The earth from which Mount Etna sprang ached with a voice clearly related to the voice of the Father in Darkness. His mortal ancestors had lived here, and though they didn't

foresee the time when their blood would become the foundation for the greatest of vampiric lineages, the earth knew. Abel's voice rose loud and blended with Lasombra's, and the result was this magnificent tower of death and violence just biding its time before its next outburst.

Brother Earth, the second called out. *Hearken to my voice and know yourself.* The others repeated his incantation. The earth, of course, gave no sign of noticing.

In the beginning, the blood that was in you called out, the second said, addressing the massive physical and spiritual bulk of the volcano. *You are not the land of the first family, but its memory lives in you, and you know the truth of what I tell you. When God finally bothered to hear, he punished the one who spilled the blood, but he did nothing to cure your wounds, then or ever. God does not care about you except as the stage for his little puppet shows. We do not accept that as sufficient, and you do not have to accept it, either.*

He paused to repeat the original invocation. Forces stirred, far below, but there was no indication that they did so in response to his words. But then he wasn't expecting a response just yet. It might not come at all tonight—like exorcism, magics of the land sometimes required many repetitions before they could produce any results. So he proceeded with confidence.

God never cared about you, he said as he and the other celebrants stepped carefully around the volcano's lava channels. *Nor did the sun. You began as the sun's unwanted debris, the stuff he cared too little about to keep and which he was willing to abandon to the whims of the universe's fundamental forces. Neither sun nor God will ever treat you better in the future, either. You will be scoured in the final battles for humanity and left to crumble in the sun's greedy death throes. History will end and you will never have been anything but a bit of scenery. That is the love the creator has for his creation.*

Three sharp small earthquakes shook the volcano, rising from miles below. The precision of their timing gave the second hope that perhaps he was reaching the place's spirit. *We your brothers in blood have not accepted that we must be the actors in God's intended drama, and you may join us. You need*

not be always and ever what you were made, what he tells you is all that's possible for you. Like us, you may act for yourself and pursue your own destiny. None can tell you what the living earth must be; you may dream and act upon those dreams. And you may do this in truth, awake, not only in the secret places where you slumber.

The second led the celebrants in the invocation again. This time there was no mistaking it: The pattern of three short, sharp shocks repeated itself, and repeated itself again. A trinity of trinities, as the second recognized, was one of the most fundamental ways of indicating deliberate signaling as opposed to accidental disturbance. The volcano might not agree with them, but it heard. It was, the second thought, a most auspicious beginning.

We go to our own place to rest now, he told the volcano, but will return once the accursed sun sets once more. We will speak again of these things, and what we might do because of them. Then he and the others began the long walk back to their bodies.

Wednesday, 2 August 2000, 10:25 PM

Al-Mu'izz Street

Cairo, Egypt

Angelica and Christobal made their way along rooftops tonight. Occasionally he instructed her to enter or at least look inside one of the stores and manors along the way, to gather some specific piece of information. "It's not just being able to look," he explained, "it's knowing what to see and how to see it that makes you an effective observer." Tonight they proceeded with special care, since Christobal's chosen route took them past and over the haven of Fatimah al-Lam'a. She had watchers and guards, with a reputation for dedicated viciousness; Christobal wanted to see whether Angelica could avoid alerting them to her presence.

The first part of their trip went fine, up the street across from Fatimah's haven until they could look directly down into the coffeehouse that fronted her home. They were considering diversions to help them cross the street when Angelica noticed someone else coming across the rooftops from the west, toward the center of the city. She pointed him out to Christobal, who pulled her close and wrapped a thin layer of shadow over them both. (She wondered if she could learn that art sometime....)

The approaching figure was clearly a vampire, from the size of his leaps, and clearly Lasombra, from the tenuous strands of darkness that trailed him. He was making a nearly direct line for Fatimah's haven, slowing his pace and deepening his darkness as he came. But he wasn't being nearly as careful about examining his surroundings as Christobal was teaching Angelica to be. He finally came to a stop less than twenty feet away from Angelica, peering down at the haven.

It was Niccolo.

Angelica sighed, feeling sure that he was about to try something stupid. She thought about the "errands" that Niccolo had left to perform in recent nights. Was he foolish enough to try stealing something from the center of Lasombra power in Cairo? She very much feared he was.

He heard the sigh and whirled around, still not noticing the shadows in which Angelica and Christobal lay concealed. The next thing he felt was the impact of a stream of silenced pistol bullets, shattering his knees and piercing his throat. Christobal did most of the firing, but he watched Angelica's hesitant shots with approval. Niccolo fell over with a quiet thud, immobilized and silenced.

"This is one of yours, isn't it?" Christobal said, nudging Niccolo's left knee with his boot.

"Yes," Angelica sighed again. "It is. It's Niccolo. He's part of the same brood as Rosa—the one who was going to be the next Lucita." Christobal nodded, remembering Lucita's account of Rosa's pursuit and capture. "I'm not sure what he's doing here, but it doesn't look like anything good."

Christobal gave Niccolo another kick. "Have you tasted blood other than Lucita's? No, I don't suppose you would have," he answered himself just ahead of Angelica. "Very well. Here, take a sip." He held up the broken knee and broke it again to get a fresh flow of blood.

"I...uh..."

"This is part of your training. Knowing how to exploit your enemy's resources is an important part of tactical mastery. Drink." When she continued to hesitate, he said, "Don't worry. I will report the facts of the matter, and both Lucita and Fatimah will agree that I acted appropriately. So will your ductus Andrew."

Angelica bent hesitantly to the blood pooling in the remains of Niccolo's kneecap, and finally let herself drink. The sensation was peculiar, not much like receiving blood from her owner. Niccolo's blood lacked the innate strength of Lucita's, though it still filled her with a dark warmth. A thought struck her, and she looked up.

Christobal smiled. "You thought of the blood bond. Good for you. But in this case it doesn't matter. Since he's not going to survive until sunrise, you risk nothing by drinking your fill. That will give you enough blood to try out some more advanced maneuvers." Reassured, Angelica resumed, and in a few minutes she did indeed feel full.

When she was done, Christobal hauled Niccolo upright. "You were about to do something foolish. Something that would jeopardize the domestic tranquility of the *khitta*, indeed of the city as a whole. You are fit only to nourish the living, and then to die. Now that you've done the first, it's time for the second." He lay Niccolo down again, and surprised Angelica by actually jumping on the wounded vampire's chest until the rib cage broke. Then he reached in, pulled out what was left of Niccolo's heart, and crushed it. Final death didn't wait for long after that.

"Come," Christobal said after the deed, and now the cheer was gone from his voice. "We'll speak to Lucita of this."

Thursday, 3 August 2000, 2:15 AM
Sharia al-Ahram
Cairo, Egypt

Even at this hour, the road from Cairo to the great pyramids six miles away carried a steady flow of traffic. There were supplies for the tourist concessions all around the pyramids, people who lived in the eastern suburbs going to or from night-shift jobs, sightseers stuck on a sleep cycle geared to New York or Los Angeles or Tokyo. Andrew and his pack weren't even the only group going on foot; both locals and visitors sometimes walked part or all of the way to their various destinations. Andrew amused himself by outfitting the pack with cameras and having them act as though they were taking pictures intended for postcards and souvenir posters.

They stood at the crest of a low hill, looking back at downtown Cairo. The lights held steady in the calm, warm summer air, and Andrew actually did take a few pictures with his fancy gear. It provided an excuse for him to speak casually to the others. "I feel outclassed."

Barry didn't look directly at his ductus while fiddling with lens attachments. "What makes you say that, revered leader?"

Andrew glared at him. "Is being a smart-ass really in accordance with the Path of Night?"

"As it happens," Barry said in apparent utter seriousness, "yes, it is. I had occasion to research the matter in Bishop Munther's library just the other night, to settle a disagreement with Simon Peter."

The thaumaturge nodded. "Yes, we established that, while the best authorities do not in fact use the term 'smart-ass,' they nonetheless agree that a measure of insubordination is indeed fully compatible with the Path's tenets dealing with existence within the chain of command."

"Tell me, Barry." Andrew put down his camera to give the priest his full attention. "Do you often pray with all your might that you can remain with me rather than be assigned to some bishop with a less obliging sense of humor?"

"Often, revered leader. I know Caine's favor when I see it. I take your tolerance as confirmation that I'm destined for great things, if only I can survive long enough to find out what they are." Barry paused to set his own camera down. He thought about Niccolo, and about the tale of impending stupidity that Christobal had told and which Lucita verified as true. "But you were saying something about feeling outclassed. I take it that the presence of at least a dozen elders who could crush us all like bugs, and maybe twice that many who could do it at the cost of a little sweat and bother, makes you feel less valuable?"

Andrew had to laugh. "Yes. At times like this I feel a lot of sympathy for the original rebels. The idea that my—our—advancement ultimately depends on something bad happening to one of them doesn't make me very happy. I expect it's just a matter of time before they decide to use us as cannon fodder, which they'll dress up in language about respecting our prior experience with the phenomenon."

"Do you have any idea what to do about it?" That was Rosa.

"At the moment, no." This was a lie. Andrew had worked out three possible courses of action in extended detail and thought about several more. But he needed to know what the others were thinking of.

"Then you're wasting time," she said impatiently. "The sun doesn't care if you like it or not, and neither do those schemers who sit behind bishops' thrones and pull strings. And the energy you spend worrying about it is energy you don't spend doing anything useful. For instance, have you thought about just volunteering?"

Andrew looked surprised. "Er, no, actually. Not really. Do you think I should?"

"I do."

"Do you want to explain your reasoning?"

"I could," Rosa answered, "but let's see how..." she suddenly pointed at Roxana "...she does with it. We know she's good at the Abyss; let's see how good she is with other vampires."

Roxana looked briefly like she might try to run or hide, but the moment passed. "Yes," she said, with a confidence that surprised even her. "There are two major considerations to volunteering our services as scouts." She held up the index finger of her right hand. "First, some of the elders will approve, feeling that we are acknowledging a responsibility created by our prior experience." She unfolded the middle finger to rest alongside. "Second, some of the elders will feel that this is a move of arrogance on our part, a bid for unwarranted importance. The tricky part is assessing the strength of each feeling in the minds of those who count. Of course," she added while unfolding her ring finger, "that raises the question, who counts?"

"You sound like you've been thinking about this," Andrew said with more approval than surprise. He was regaining his equilibrium and projecting an air of leadership. Even surprises could be claimed as the result of his firm yet flexible guidance, and he wasn't about to let the others think too often that they could surprise or confuse him.

"Not quite about scouting in the sense that Rosa probably means, actually," Roxana said.

"What sense of scouting *did* you have in mind?"

"I was wondering whether they might just throw us into the Abyss somewhere nearby and try to learn as much as possible through a mind link until something destroys us," Roxana explained.

"Now there's a cheery thought," Simon Peter said.

"I don't think it would actually work," Rosa said into the ensuing quiet. "But... pardon me?" This last was addressed to the three local men approaching.

The Three Nasawis, as they referred to themselves, were angry. It had been a hell of a day, what with Tall Nasawi getting fired from his camel-guide job for alleged improprieties toward an American woman, Short Nasawi getting pretty sure that his wife was cheating on him with that Armenian son of a bitch who ran the contracting firm Short Nasawi worked for, and Thin Nasawi... well, he didn't have any problems today,

but he sure sympathized with his friends, because after all they'd stood by him in tough times, too.

The three knew well enough that going out and getting drunk wasn't really the answer, but they'd tried it anyway. Sure enough, cheap alcohol—all they could afford at the moment—only made things worse. They reflected on the wrongs they were suffering, and their problems loomed larger and larger as the night wore on. Now, as they made their way carefully home, the whole world seemed against them. They took note of the inconveniently small sidewalks, the lack of restraint or policing for the highway traffic, the litter clearly positioned so as to make a poor struggling Nasawi stumble. It was all too much. Someone needed to pay for it.

Then they came up the next hill and found a group of Europeans or Americans chatting away while playing with obviously expensive camera gear. The Nasawis fumed to each other—the Yankees would of course take beautiful pictures and then make lots of money selling them to other Yankees, and never a penny for the poor struggling Nasawis whose labors had made all that beauty in the first place. Enough and more than enough! It took only a moment's consultation for the Three Nasawis to decide that this group of Yankees would pay. Some blood, some fenceable electronics, maybe some gifts for themselves. All seemed in order, and they began their charge as rapidly as they could, under the circumstances.

"I don't think it would actually work," one of the women said. "But... pardon me?" That to the Nasawis, who had no intention of being civil.

"Looks like they think they're trouble," the man with twisted legs said.

The woman who'd spoken before smiled. "Roxana, give me a hand, please." The other woman in the group stepped up. To the Nasawis they looked almost indistinguishable. (Given better light and less drunkenness they'd have formed a very different impression.) The Nasawis didn't particularly like fighting women, but if these two were foolish enough to put themselves on the front line, well, they could pay first.

That was when the confusing time began. Now, the Three Nasawis knew that they were drunk, but the two women did seem to be moving very fast indeed—as fast as the cars cruising by, if that were possible. (And perhaps it was. Who knew what sinister gadgets or black magic the foreigners might have?) The women got dark, too. Everything got dark. Had they gone blind, or what? None of the Nasawis could see a hand in front of the face.

Then pain, and a lot of it. Blows to their legs, shattering knees and femurs and hips, throwing them to the ground in agony. Blows to their testicles, driving away all sensation except for pain. Blows to their heads, throwing them into unconsciousness. None of the Nasawis remained conscious long enough to experience the beginning of feeding as the vampires hauled the battered husks upright and drained their blood.

"What do you suppose they wanted?" Roxana wondered aloud.

"Three well-worn guys who look like they've done a lot of manual labor, out late at night, drunk, picking a fight with foreign women. I call that a pretty typical little vignette," Andrew answered. "Straight out of second-rate Dreiser or Sinclair, really. We were handy surrogates—or so they thought—for whatever it was that made them mad. If we'd been typical tourists, come to that, they'd probably have done some real damage to us. Oh, well." He made a gesture of brushing his hands. "Let's get them out of the way and get on with things."

The women and Barry each dragged one of the bodies away from the road, under the cover of a low hedge. "Shall we do anything interesting with the corpses?" Rosa asked, then answered herself. "No. If we stuff them a little carelessly out of the way, it'll look like some typical late-night bar fight gone bad, covered up by the other guys who were just about as drunk as the losers. Anything more sophisticated would rouse more questions." She noticed Andrew smiling in agreement, and gave him a brief nod of acknowledgment. "Now, about volunteering...."

Friday, 4 August 2000, 12:00 AM

The Khan al-Khalili

Cairo, Egypt

As the grandfather clock struck midnight, it occurred to Lucita that she could no longer count on her fingers the hours spent in these meetings. She briefly pondered the relative merits of taking off her sandals to count on her own toes versus borrowing someone else's hands to use their fingers, then entertained a fantasy of slaughtering the handful of persistent fools keeping everyone else from reaching agreement. Unfortunately, those fools included a few vampires more than capable of breaking her in two if she tried it, so she quietly chanted meditative psalms and mantras.

She remembered a lecture her sire had given her not long before their final break. She'd... not exactly run off, but certainly dawdled more than any justification could excuse after performing errands for him, spending time in the company of Anatole and some of his fellow mystics. The archbishop was not amused. "Do not confuse the desire for holiness with its presence. After all, the blood of the first murderer is also the blood of the first son, and we partake of his constant desire to be part of the exemplar, the template, for all families. So we are drawn to each other's company, not just to compete against each other as Caine did with Abel but for the pleasure of the association. Part of us remembers what it was like, just the four of us—Adam and Eve, Caine and Abel—in the world that still had some perfection left.

"But we cannot achieve that. Angels guard it as thoroughly as they do the Garden of Eden. You will never come together with the others of our kind except to compete, and there will always be strife. You can fulfill your created role as the divine demon, the angel of wrath, only when you leave Caine's broods behind and go among the children of Abel and Seth. Among them alone can you be pure in your appointed evil rather than distracted by mere petty individual sins, which have no consequence in the great scheme of things."

When she'd asked, "Will there be strife even with my sire?", he'd only smiled and said that that was a question for another night.

Whatever his failings, the old fiend had been right enough about the society of vampires. Here they were with a clear-cut problem and at least part of a solution, and they were forced to spend most of their time in elaborate protocols intended to let them choose a leader without slaughtering each other. Any of the vampires present could have simply declared "I am in charge here," or Fatimah al-Lam'a could have appointed one and declared it part of her authority as mistress of the domain. But then all the vampires who felt that they were in some sense superior would have initiated challenges to the leader's authority, and much carnage would follow. It was better to fight those fights with rhetoric rather than with fangs and claws, but understanding the necessity did not make Lucita any more tolerant.

There were at least two dozen vampires gathered tonight in the warehouse on the outskirts of the market. Lucita made a precise tally each night, but she understood that it didn't mean much. Numbers would count when a force went into action, not before. Some of the loudest shouters would no doubt somehow manage not to take part, and she refused to waste energy on planning in the absence of firmer details. While the would-be leaders bickered, she circled the warehouse, eavesdropping on quiet conversations and remembering the fight in mid-air over Sicily. She yearned for their answer to the summoners to begin *now*, not some night in the indefinite future.

Several small rooms opened off the main space of the warehouse. A young Egyptian Lasombra leaned out of one and gestured to Lucita to approach. Recognizing him as one of Fatimah's favored messengers, she decided to obey and circumspectly maneuvered back around the edges of the crowd to enter the office. He was not alone. Sitting in the office's one chair was Fatimah herself. "Shut the door, please," she told the young man, "and wait for us outside."

From the perspective of most of the vampires arguing on the other side of the flimsy wall, the two elder women

were peers. Lucita was acutely aware of their differences. Fatimah, Embraced later in life, had a physical maturity that Lucita would never attain, and she'd been Embraced more than a century before Lucita. If Fatimah had led an idle or indulgent existence, that age gap wouldn't matter, but Lucita knew that Fatimah had in her quiet way tested herself as thoroughly and often as Lucita had. If there were to be trouble, Lucita could not count on an easy victory. Or indeed on victory at all.

"Good evening, Fatimah. I thank you for your hospitality in this time of need." Lucita began the formalities of courtesy.

"Good evening, Lucita," Fatimah said. She chose not to maintain the formalities. "You realize that you are something less than entirely welcome here."

"I do, yes."

"Since nothing is going to happen out there—" Fatimah gestured in the direction of the debate—"I wish to satisfy my curiosity on individual matters."

Lucita gave nothing away in manner or content. "Of course."

Fatimah smiled, briefly. "You're thinking to yourself, 'I give nothing away in manner or content.' I remember your stories of lessons from visiting monks and educated knights." The happy recollection done, she returned to the interrogative. "I have two questions for you. Why have you joined with your enemies? And having done so, why did you come here, where you knew that you would run greater risks than if you'd gone to a city of the Sabbath or some sufficiently detached independent?"

The guest looked down at her host. "It may help if I may ask questions in return. Will you allow this?"

"As long as they seem relevant, yes."

"Tell me, then," Lucita asked. "What keeps you from despair?"

The question clearly caught Fatimah by surprise. She'd prepared herself for a different sort of exchange. "My legacy. The needs of the domain. The desire not to let Allah crown my enemies' efforts with success." She paused, and considered how much she had told Lucita over the centuries about her

private griefs. "The hope of regaining the love and loyalty of my childe."

"As I thought," Lucita said. "You have all these things to keep you engaged with the world and yourself, reasons to accept new challenges. I... what I had was the war against my sire. The war is over, though I didn't exactly win it. I have no domain. I have no trust in God's judgment or interest in His interventions. I have no childe. I have my job, and it isn't enough."

"But the *Sabbat*..." Fatimah restrained herself from shouting. "You are not the first vampire ever to need a new direction after an old one comes to its end. You could have chosen a place for yourself. Affiliated yourself with someone in need. Offered your services to the Camarilla. Why have you chosen to become a monster?"

"Surely we have known each other long enough and well enough that we need not play cheap rhetorical games," Lucita said somewhat testily. "We are monsters, all of us. You are as subject to this curse as I am. The holiest among us is as condemned as the pathetic, mindless wretches trapped in endless bloodlust. This is not a matter of *becoming* anything."

"Indeed, old friend, let us speak plainly," Fatimah snapped back. "We share the same condition, but not the same response. There is a real difference between pursuing Allah's will, pursuing your own self-interest, and pursuing a goal of total warfare and alienation from all that you once were. You have not chosen from a banquet of dishes all very much the same, but have given yourself to the most extreme opportunity short of total madness. Do not insult me with the idea that your choice means no more than mine."

"I do nothing of the sort. I want to call your attention to the differences that existed between us well before that fiend of a sire of mine passed on to the ashy bosom of his God. I never had what you have, and you cannot expect me to find satisfaction as someone else's lackey. I need, as you need, the authority that is our due."

Fatimah nodded once, but did not speak. She gestured to Lucita to keep talking; Lucita was willing. "For the one who has no place in the world, choices are few. We both know

that isolation leads only to ossification of the soul. I am drawn to the society of our kind, and cannot escape that draw. So I went out to investigate, and I found that the Camarilla would have me only as a sort of curiosity, a bug mounted on a card in a museum or encased in amber for a gallery of old dead things. I would not be *permitted*—" she spat the word "—to pursue any radical change in my condition. I could simply keep on doing what I do until I tire of it, some enemy catches up with me, or, I suppose, God and His angels descend to end the pathetic show that is the world." She glared at Fatimah, who remained quiet.

"Then there's the Sabbat." She waved a hand at the noise. Someone out there was shouting about the Sword of Caine slicing all necks. "At the bottom they are fools, at the top would-be conspirators who can barely govern themselves. They fancy they can win a war against powers they know only from stories, but you and I who have seen the Antediluvians and spoken with them know how vain those hopes are."

"What, then?" Fatimah found her voice again. "If you dismiss both the cause and its adherents, why?"

"Growth," Lucita said simply. "I will never age, never breathe again. But my mind need not stagnate like a drying pool of water on the roof of your palace after the rains. The Camarilla feverishly desires to keep all elders on its leash, and alone there can be nothing worth bothering with. The Sabbat believes that there is yet more that I may attain, and will not only allow me this pursuit but will actively encourage it. They will provide me with peers, or something close to it, against whom I can sharpen my skills as well as lackeys and devotees to use as suits me. With the Sabbat I feel, for the first time since I left the old bastard for good, that I have a new beginning as well as an end."

"These are the excuses of a child, the merest neonate," Fatimah said with obvious disgust. "You remind me of my own childe trying to come to terms with his new existence. I would have thought that Monçada trained you better than that."

"Would you prefer, then, that I speak of the Jyhad? Do you wish to hear the tales you have always rejected about the ongoing war between the Antediluvians? If you were not troubled by the thing that decimated the Ravnos, by what we both hear about stirring monsters among the Assamites, then I think it unlikely that you will give any weight to what I must tell you about our own founder. Nonetheless, since you seem to wish it, I will tell you." Lucita described her experiences with the hunting pack, including the details of the encounter over Sicily and the terrible meetings with some of the Sabbat's founders.

Fatimah listened carefully and remarked on the fullness of the account. "It was obvious that the lords of your sect were concealing something in what they told the masses. I cannot say I blame them for it, either. I would not be eager to feed the rumors that must follow if the word ever escapes."

"I am surprised to hear such an expression of belief from you. Is the famous independent sire reconsidering?"

"I said *nothing* of belief," Fatimah retorted. "You tell me a story of Abyssal power and mental manipulation. These are merely plays within the clan. What I understand is that the credulous many would fail to recognize that truth and instead take it as confirmation of the ridiculous stories the Sabbat tells them. I am disappointed, however, to find that you too succumb to the children's stories."

"Then I can only pray to whatever powers there are," Lucita said, "that your eyes will open before the end."

"An end," Fatimah repeated. "Indeed there is an end." She stood. "You are as one dead to me, for you have turned your heart toward evil, and I am not given the grace to see that you will ever turn again. You have been my welcome guest and ally and comrade. No more. When we leave this room, we will never speak of these things again. You are welcome precisely as that mob out there is welcome—for this one purpose alone. When it ends, if you still walk the earth, you may walk anywhere but here. Banu al-Lam'a, the domain of the Lasombra, no longer offers you welcome or shelter. Go, then, and pursue your transformation. Allah grant that you see the folly before it is too late, but I fear that you are among

those appointed to perish that the righteous may see and know that He is Allah alone. Farewell." She shadow-stepped out, leaving Lucita alone again.

Lucita left the room as she'd entered it. The messenger was still there, and he gave her a bow as she passed; he went in after she left, and she could hear him straightening up the chair and table.

Elieser de Polanco dominated the debate as Lucita resumed paying attention to it. He was at his suave best—he noticed her return from the office and adjusted his rhetorical flourishes accordingly. "No, of course I do not accuse any of the observers of deception. Nor of incompetence or any other such failure. I simply point out that they were not prepared for their mission, being in the midst of other business—all properly authorized by the *Amici Noctis* and their cardinals, of course. It casts no aspersions on their accomplishments in surviving and bringing us here to inform us of their discoveries to say that we require further information before taking action on a grand scale."

A Libyan bishop known to Lucita only as "oh, yes, that prick," thanks to stray comments by various of her Mediterranean clients, raised some lengthy objection. The upshot of it, as nearly as she could follow, was that she and the hunting pack had been anointed by Fate, a hidden survivor of the second generation of Cainites, or some other suitably apocalyptic force as the clan's sacrifices in the great struggle against whatever this was. So it was necessary to... she had trouble unraveling his overly poetic language, but she thought that he wanted to keep throwing her, Conrad, and the others out of low-flying aircraft until a fight against physical adversaries broke out. Then the rest of the clan would descend on its enemies and wipe them out.

Not for the first time, Lucita wished that superhuman intelligence more reliably meant superhuman judgment. Indeed, she would settle for merely average competence. She almost said something to that effect, but de Polanco beat her to it. "Thanks to our brother from Banghazi, who as always brings us such unique insights. In quieter times we really must find out what is in the oil-rich sands that fosters such qualities

of mind. However, I must point out to him and to all of you that our initial observers are neither infinite in supply nor blessed with imperviousness to all damage. Attempting to recreate their experience in the manner he suggests would deplete us of valuable warriors at a moment when we can ill afford to expend them fruitlessly. Perhaps when the current crisis passes, we can experiment with the bishop's own flock, letting him lead the way in this innovative strategy."

Gradually Lucita assembled a portrait of the current topics of debate. The hotheads wanted to round up everyone they could find, go physically or via the Abyss to the Castle of Shadows immediately, and proceed to rumble with anyone they found. They'd secure the Castle as a base of operations and march *en masse* toward the stronghold that Lucita and Conrad had approximately located. The other major faction wanted to send scouts in first. Consensus favored scouting, but there was no agreement as to who should go. Since most participants recognized that the scouts would be going into grave danger, glory-seekers wanted the honor for themselves, while schemers wanted to send their enemies in.

She noticed that the highest-ranking elders weren't taking active part in the debate. Following their eye movements and small gestures, she concluded that there must have been a conclave recently at which this matter was settled. Yes, there: Whenever Cardinal Timofiev or Zarathustra's observer Sadi or the Venetian archbishop made a certain twist of the eyes, de Polanco launched into his next point. She wondered what payment he'd get for acting as their front man. Or, she considered, perhaps it was the other way around. After all, being the apparent innovator and leader could scarcely displease de Polanco.

Timofiev's ghoul circled the room, fiddling with some portable electronic device. Lucita noticed him carefully scrutinizing the various speakers, then working with the device, then moving on to his next target of observation. She wondered just what he was up to and moved to block his way as he passed by. "What is that?" she asked quietly.

He hadn't noticed her. "Oh! Good evening, milady," he said in an equally quiet voice. "I didn't realize you were so little engaged in the debate."

"I've done my part for now. What is that thing that so fascinates you?"

He held up something that resembled a portable television. It wasn't a general-purpose computer; it lacked anything like a standard keyboard. Every knob and button bore a label and specific marks. The screen held a very generic-looking European or American man's head, clean-shaven, displayed in a crisp LCD image. "This is the newest tool of my trade, milady."

"I see the words 'Property of Beverly Hills Police Department' on this end of it, Trasaric. When did American police officers start supplying tailors?"

"Ah, well, they don't know that they've done so. They regard this as a device to assist them in their constabulary duties." He smiled. "Are you familiar with the 'sketch artists' they employ?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Well, then, this automates the process." He touched one switch, and the screen went blank. Successive pushes displayed male and female busts (all bald) for various ethnicities, then full-length templates. Other knobs superimposed styles of hair, shapes of eyes, and other facial details. One set of switches made modifications to appear underneath the templates, like the legacy of broken nose, cheek, and jaw bones. Switches along the bottom added various styles of clothing. Small joysticks in the middle of the front console let Trasaric draw in individualized additions for the details that templates didn't cover.

"Remarkable," she said. "I can see how this would make the job of tailoring more efficient." She noticed that the illustrations allowed for fine gradations of measurement of the subject's dimensions and proportions, and—as Trasaric made adjustments in his demonstration—calculated additional data like ratio of upper limb to lower limb length and features that might be useful in post-mortem identification.

"Milady, it's actually not so much for my benefit as for my customers. Observe." Deftly he worked through the toggles to produce quite a passable likeness of Lucita herself. "Now then." He tapped a small button and extracted a sheet of quick-developing photographic paper, bearing the likeness. "Were I to create garments for you, you could take this with you as a study of your appearance in them. As accurately as I can represent you, or any other client, so this machine can reproduce for you. I find that it makes a significant difference in the pleasure clients feel in my work."

Lucita was surprised, even startled. "I would think so. May I keep this, or do you need it back?"

"Please, milady, keep it with my thanks for the chance to show the machine's action to one who can appreciate technical details." He paused, licked his lips, and proceeded in a rush. "Perhaps now that you have resolved your unfortunate disagreements with my customary patrons, you would honor me with the opportunity to outfit you for our ceremonial occasions?"

She smiled. "That would suit me very well, Trasaric. I'll have... that is, I will make arrangements once we've settled this Sicilian matter." She was not about to tell him that she'd just realized that her long-time receptionist would probably rather drop dead than arrange for social or personal appointments with anyone in the Sabbat. Some things were no tailor's business.

Friday, 4 August 2000, 3:41 AM

The Khan al-Khalili

Cairo, Egypt

Andrew judged the moment was right. Debate was winding down for the evening; some of the most vociferous ranters were already gone, in search of blood and havens, so that at least some of the nuisances wouldn't come up. De Polanco remained as charming as ever, but he was clearly tired and ready for some sort of resolution. Early discussion (or perhaps just bickering) about drawing on the experience of the hunting pack had been sidetracked by extended rants about thin-blood vampires, the desirability of exterminating this clan or that, and personal grievances ranging from petty to incomprehensible.

Andrew stretched up his right arm and gestured for De Polanco's attention. "Excellency!"

De Polanco had been looking at the far side of the warehouse, at someone out of Andrew's line of sight, and whipped around. "One moment, if you please, Bishop Andrew."

Now what? Andrew wondered if a fight had broken out again over there. It wouldn't have been the first time in this conclave, or even for that matter the first time tonight...

The lights dimmed over in the farthest corner, and shadows crept up the wall. A dark figure loomed up from behind the crowd, at first human in form, but gaining a hawk-like head and talons as it grew toward nine feet. Andrew recognized that someone was unleashing his shadow soul, and after a moment's reflection remembered who it was who adopted that dark bird-of-prey look. "We've been preempted," he muttered to the rest of his pack.

"Brothers and sisters, cousins and descendants in the blood!" Cardinal Timofiev's voice boomed from that predatory head. Andrew had seen the sight before and still found it intimidating; most of the crowd was caught altogether off guard. The knots of debate sprinkled throughout the space quickly faded into silence, and Timofiev had everyone's

attention. "Hear the will of your leaders and obey!" The last unruly members of the crowd fell quiet, one or two with the help of blows delivered by their neighbors.

"For one full week, you have debated among yourselves how to respond to the news brought to us by our loyal brother Andrew and his brood. You have heard the words of those who were there, describing the forces that assaulted them as they went about the work of the Sword of Caine and recounting what their attackers revealed about themselves." Timofiev's shadow soul twisted its arms into recreations of the serpent-forms that had assaulted Andrew and the others in mid-air. "You have been given all the facts and guesses, which would ordinarily have gone only to the chosen warlords, the veteran wielders of the Sword. You have had the opportunity to achieve some new insight, which could have guided us in responding to the challenge that faces us all.

"*And you have failed.*" The voice boomed out of vocal cords that now bore very little resemblance to anything human. It was very much like a hunting bird of prey's screech, backed by a bass rumble like the deepest tones of an angry whale. "*You have failed.*" Timofiev spoke louder and made the office doors rattle. "*You have failed!*" He said it once more, still louder, and half the assembled vampires covered their ears in pain. Andrew felt a small trickle of blood from his left ear, but kept himself from showing visible response, and noted the quivers and twitches that revealed others going through the same sort of inner struggle.

Timofiev let his voice return to its original volume, though he kept the full inhumanity manifest. "At a time of known need on the part of all Sabbat, presented with a unique depth and immediacy of data, given freedom to discuss and propose, you achieved nothing except a squabble." The hawk head stared with vacant eye sockets at each of the vampires in turn. "Be ashamed." The wings drew in on themselves, leaving a profile like that of some ancient statue. "You are unworthy vessels of the blood and anger and pride that is our inheritance from the first murderer, the first free man. You have behaved like the cowering subjects of a jealous God you still are."

Without apparent effort, Timofiev rose up into the air. Andrew could just make out a complex mesh of very fine shadow tendrils holding up the cardinal's body, and made a note to try developing that trick himself. The cardinal continued his lecture. "You have sufficient time and more, and you have forfeited your opportunity to waste another moment. Listen now, because the time for discussion is over. Now you will hear and obey." Silently the cardinal's body came down to the floor in the center of the warehouse. "We your cardinals are constituted as a Court of Blood in accordance with the tradition of our clan. We will tell you what you must do, and you will do it, and you may contemplate the opportunity you wasted when your duties are done."

The cardinal paused. Andrew nearly smiled, remembering a conversation his packmates had had one evening back in Mexico City about the role of theatrical style in the various cardinals' public delivery. Andrew had insisted that Timofiev was just as calculating in his simplicity as Mysancta or Greyhound were in their complexity, without making much of an impression. Now he felt freshly vindicated. This was as deliberate a show as he'd seen since his last bout of attending Broadway musicals. Timofiev said, "We will send scouts. Bishop Andrew and his 'hunting pack' will return to the scene of their challenge, examine the land, and attempt to follow up on the impressions they received earlier. The rest of you will undergo training in the discipline you currently lack so that when we have sufficient intelligence, we may strike effectively. That is all we have to say to you as a group, or rather as a mob."

Saturday, 5 August 2000, 10:00 PM
Museum der Arbeit
Hamburg, Germany

Willa was not given to displays of emotion. She had been raised in difficult times to remain calm, functional, and properly subservient, and her unliving existence had not provided many incentives to behave any differently. She sometimes felt great rage or despair or envy, but she worked through the passion and acted as if placid. But this... for the first time since she'd learned of Bavaria's capitulation to Bismarck's confederation, she cried bloody tears.

The observer in Cairo was good. He didn't make any assertions beyond his ability to document carefully. (He was willing to sell speculations, she noted, but at an additional charge. That was clever. It reduced the chance that he would face recriminations from employers claiming that he'd deceived or manipulated them.) So Willa had at her disposal a solid stack of photographs and other details, accompanied by a transcript of the observer's journal and brief but cogent interpretative comments. There was no room for Willa to doubt that Madame... but no, perhaps that was no longer the appropriate name. Lucita was no longer the genteel Madame who'd employed Willa and conducted herself as befit a lady and professional dispenser of death. This was a rebellious creature, a child despite her centuries, fraternizing with would-be monsters—and clearly doing so freely rather than out of compulsion.

What could Willa do now? She was not experienced in making independent decisions—she'd accepted Madame's offer so eagerly in part because she knew that she functioned better under another's authority. The current situation was intolerable.

On the other hand, she thought as she folded up her bloodstained handkerchief, the obvious alternatives held no more appeal to her. She could go to the Prince of Hamburg and lay out her situation. They would demand details of her many years of service, and keep her under constant scrutiny,

and treat her ever after as a dangerous but useful tool, to be used and then put back on the shelf. Willa needed authority, but she also needed scope for independent action, and the Camarilla would never give it to Lucita's former seneschal. Striking out on her own would mean freezing herself into the independence that she had rejected four centuries ago. It went without saying that joining the Sabbat was not an option worth considering; Lucita might well wish her continued service, but Willa had not the slightest interest in serving those thugs with delusions of divinity.

So what, then?

Ah, yes. The handkerchief reminded her. "The fundamental duty of the personal servant is to ensure that her employer looks good. The servant saves her mistress from embarrassment and disgrace." That was what her mother had said to Willa one summer evening. Willa had taken the advice to heart, even though she'd never expected to go into such service herself. She wished for a moment that she were inclined to religious devotion, as she wanted to express her thanks to Mother for the wise advice. But she had never made a habit of engaging in insincere acts of gratitude and did not propose to begin now. Particularly not now that she had a goal.

She must save Madame from embarrassment and disgrace, and if Madame had freely chosen her current condition, the Madame must pay the price that those who desert the rest of Kindred society for the Sabbat must pay. If it were applied promptly, Willa could no doubt see to containing the scandal, cover up the final lapses that led Madame to her sorry state, and protect the honor of her accomplishments before the regrettable time. It would be possible to construct a cover story of coercion, perhaps of horrid psychological tortures inflicted by youngsters grown too potent on the blood of their elders. But first must come the judgment.

The sentence was, as always, death.

Sunday, 6 August 2000, 1:00 AM
Cairo Tower Sheraton
Cairo, Egypt

This is going to hurt, Colin thought as he read the latest dispatch from Karl. The secretary had spoken briefly to him on the phone and sent the details in e-mail. They were just as unpleasant as her manner suggested.

In some ways it was of course flattering to be offered (or rather all but outright ordered) to assassinate the most famous *antitribu* of the age. Being able to say, "Oh, yes, I'm the one who nailed Lucita with final death" would certainly make Colin's reputation in perpetuity... if only it worked.

It was much less pleasant to face the implicit blackmail in this dispatch. Karl was no doubt right that Bishop Munther would regard details of Colin's surveillance as being, at a minimum, unfriendly, and he might well condemn them as a complete breach of hospitality. If he did, then Colin could expect not to see very many more nights.

So. He could try to flee, and he could just about certainly get out of Cairo before Karl could inform Munther about what was going on. But then how long could he stay hidden? That hunting pack Karl alluded to was awfully damn good, and it sounded like Karl either had hired them or could at a moment's notice. Colin felt quite confident that he couldn't remain in hiding forever—or at least that he couldn't do so while residing in circumstances with anything like the minimum comforts necessary to keep him satisfied and free of psychological problems.

What the hell kind of world was it where trying to assassinate a thousand-year-old elder seemed like the safest option available? This was ridiculous. Then again, since it looked like the big meetings were over and things were happening, perhaps it wouldn't be quite so bad. A good assassin only needed the one right moment, right? *Right, Colin my boy. And she's going to give you that moment. Of course she is, because she made it through a thousand years of warring against one of the Sabbath's best thinkers by being careless.*

Then it occurred to him. If he could show that he'd made a plausible, serious attempt to fulfill the contract and was foiled by circumstances genuinely outside his control, that might well discharge his obligations. His standard contract included a provision explicitly ruling out the requirement to engage in definitely suicidal activities. He picked up the phone and entered an unlisted number.

Sunday, 6 August 2000, 3:15 AM
Musafirkhanah Palace
Cairo, Egypt

Munther stared at his majordomo. "Are you sure?"

Safwat bristled ever so slightly. "Sir, I know better than to waste your time with anything so outlandish without some reasonable assurance. No, I am not sure. Yes, I have reason to believe it." He stood almost half a foot taller than his master and had a far more muscular build, but he maintained a properly deferential attitude even in the midst of his dissent.

"Very well, then. What reason did he give you?"

The majordomo handed over a stack of photographs. They weren't very good—they'd been through two generations of faxing, and he suspected that the originals were probably reduced in quality so as to avoid giving away the full capabilities of the snoop's equipment. Even so, they were clear enough for the purpose. Someone watching from market rooftops had seen far too much of the gathering. There were no actual images of the Lasombra, of course, but there were pictures of ghouls and impressive shots showing signs of vampiric passage, in stirred dust and the like. There was also a list of observed features which would no doubt be of great interest to the police or state security, if it fell into their hands. It amounted to an entirely plausible assertion of credibility.

"I see." There wasn't much else for Munther to say. "And what precisely was his message?"

"I quote. 'A hit has been ordered on the rebel Lucita. The perpetrator has more precise information than what you see here. If you prefer not to lose her, please increase the security you provide to her until she is out of Cairo.'"

"Yes. Tell me, Safwat. Do you think that this 'perpetrator' is the individual who provided us with these remarkable pictures?"

"I did consider it, yes, sir. The obvious objection is that he would be undermining his own efforts, which is not a strategy calculated to bring much success. There are at least two counter-objections. He may be acting under coercion and

attempting to sabotage the efforts of whoever is coercing him, or he may be deranged. If the latter, he would scarcely be the first such afflicted watcher and stalker we've dealt with."

"Indeed not." Munther and Safwat knew they were thinking of the same bizarre circumstances that had stirred up Cairo in the 1950s, thanks to the effort of a whole lineage of Malkavian assassins. Once a century was more than sufficient for that sort of thing. The bishop looked through the pictures again. "I agree with your assessment of the possibilities. What do you think, or feel, is most likely?"

"Intuition tells me that the spy isn't the assassin, though they may be working for the same employer. The spy has a vested interest in not upsetting us, and frankly, he succeeded. I had no inkling that anything like this was going on in our domain, from either our own surveillance or from any omens. Nor, as nearly as I know, did anyone else charged with our security. That failure will have to be dealt with as soon as we settle the matter at hand." Safwat paused. "But that's the second priority. First is deciding on the immediate response. I think that we have nothing to lose by assigning a guardian pack to Lucita and much to lose if we stand by and let her be assassinated. Even an unsuccessful attempt would be bad for us."

"Sensible. Do we owe notification to anyone else?"

Safwat looked down at his master. "No, sir, you do not have to pass this information on to your sire or anyone in her service."

"Thank you, Safwat." Munther sounded calm enough. "Is Christobal in town at the moment?"

The majordomo checked his notebook. "Yes, sir. I haven't spoken with him myself, but he's been spending some time with the pack around Lucita."

"Very good. Let him know I want to speak with him here—tonight if possible, first thing after rising if not."

"Yes, sir..." Safwat let the sentence hang.

Munther noticed. "You wonder why I'd favor the child least prone to thorough obedience, who seems to be in throes of apocalyptic visions for my domain, and who can simply be quite the nuisance."

"Er, yes."

"It may be necessary to give our esteemed guest orders for her own safety. Do you think she's more likely to take them from an enthusiastic hewer to sectarian lines or from an intelligent young man tormented by uncertainties much like her own and clearly appreciative of independent thought and action?"

"Ah."

"Ah, indeed, Safwat. Now go."

Sunday, 6 August 2000, 3:40 AM
Cairo Tower Sheraton

Angelica was out on her own tonight, pursuing goals set by Christobal—go here and retrieve this marker, go there and perform that particular task to prove you were there. The hardest was to climb the Cairo Tower and remove one of the distinctive lights at its summit. She chose to make her way slowly, and to test out her powers of surveillance by eavesdropping on conversations along the way.

When she heard someone inside a room near the one she was climbing past say, "Thank you, Safwat, and thank the bishop for me," she came to a halt. She recognized the name of Bishop Munther's majordomo and wondered just who might be speaking with him. Slowly, carefully, she made her way over to peer through the tower's outer latticework.

The man just hanging up the phone was a vampire, she saw; by now she knew how to scan quickly for breath and pulse, and he had none. He had quite a lot of surveillance gear laid out on his bed—the just-completed call had gone through a sophisticated scrambler as well as a recorder, and cameras and probes lay all around it. Angelica wished very much that she could pull shadows around herself.

He did look out the window, but didn't make a thorough search of the periphery and didn't notice Angelica holding herself tight against the tower's lattice. Instead he gathered up a single pistol and several surveillance devices, stowed them in various pockets, and headed out. Shortly thereafter he emerged from the hotel's main entrance. Now he made an extremely thorough sweep of his environment, including straight up; Angelica managed to swing through the lattice and brace herself between it and the wall, but it was close. A few seconds' delay and he would have spotted her. Finally he hailed a cab and drove off toward the eastern part of town.

This would bear watching, Angelica thought, and then she had to suppress a completely unexpected, not to mention wildly inappropriate, fit of laughter. This was somehow not

quite the job she'd agreed to perform, back in Colorado. As she regained composure, she decided that this stranger merited some further examination.

Sunday, 6 August 2000, 4:19 AM

Mount Etna

Sicily, Italy

Like the weight of sin on humanity's shoulders, Mt. Etna was no simple thing. It was actually the fusion of half a dozen volcanoes which had begun their lives independently and grown together. There were buried craters beneath the volcano's current slopes and several vents at and near the summit. Nor were its changes all concluded; every eruption broke open some new fissures and closed others. Mt. Etna was, an Italian geologist once said, as much a state of mind as a specific geological feature.

The summoners discovered that the same was true of the volcano's soul. It was complex and divided, and conveying inspiration to one part did not guarantee that it would spread. Twice they had felt on the brink of complete awakening for it, only to feel their laboriously constructed messages trickle away into the inert spiritual mass of the island. Even now an insufficiently prepared observer would have sensed nothing but the actual movements the summoners induced the earth to make, and the summoners themselves each perceived a different mosaic of the volcano's multi-faceted answers. The conviction implanted in their souls with the Founder's call gave them the insight to go beyond hunch and feeling and maintain their confidence in the understanding given to them. They issued their commands, and the earth answered.

Seismologists had been following developments within the volcano since early on the morning of August 2nd. The first signs of eruption visible on the surface without special equipment occurred at 4:19 A.M. on the morning of August 6th. Both the central crater and the largest flank crater on the northeast slope began emitting dense plumes of ash and smoke. A rising wind out of the eastern Mediterranean carried it down the volcano's slopes and toward the interior. Mt. Etna rises in the middle of Sicily's eastern shore, and the sunrise broke with gray hues for inhabitants of the island's eastern

third—including those in the silent and apparently abandoned Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel. Those knowledgeable few went to their slumber exhausted but pleased, and anticipating the day's developments with greatest enthusiasm.

Sunday, 6 August 2000, 9:58 PM
Over the Altopiano Solfifero
Sicily, Italy

"I have the very distinct feeling of *déjà vu*," Barry said. The others all laughed, except for Lucita and Roxana.

"There is a certain sameness about it all," Rosa agreed. "Which of our adventures will we get to retrace after we finish this one?"

"If we finish this one," Roxana said. That quieted them all up for the moment.

They'd left Cairo just before sunrise in a private jet piloted by living servants of Fatimah al-Lam'a. They were all unfamiliar to the vampires, unlike Angelica, but also unlike her, they were both very experienced in close fighting techniques and familiar with flying around volcanic eruptions. Angelica remained in Cairo, therefore, to continue her training. While the vampires slept, the jet landed at Catania, Sicily's major airport, and the servants oversaw the transfer of big sealed containers to a rugged all-terrain plane often chartered by visiting geologists.

Mt. Etna's new eruption slowed things down, but most of the debris was going inland, making only relatively minor inconveniences for coastal air traffic. It looked formidable enough to the outsiders, but the natives knew what they were doing and took it in stride. Now the vampires were again looking down on the rugged interior slopes, peering from window to GPS monitors to maps and occasional trances, pursuing knowledge in their various ways. Very little showed in visual light; instruments offered up other parts of the spectrum for examination, but there wasn't much more to interpret from their displays—not that the hunting pack members were particularly skilled in that craft in any event.

Barry noticed Lucita sitting at the back of the cabin, not looking out the windows. She had charts spread out in front of her and a contemplative look, but he had seen others fake dedicated trances. (He'd done it himself from time to time, come to that.) In that moment, as he realized what she

must be feeling, his heart went out to her... and that was a sin he could not allow himself to commit. He had to stop himself from going to her until he felt confident that he'd purged any impulse springing from compassion or altruism; he must speak to her only insofar as it would advance his own ends. It would be ironic indeed if sympathy for the little lost lamb led him into his own lapse from the Sabbath's wisdom.

At last he sat down next to her. "Good evening," he said. "It's my duty as the pack's spiritual advisor to inquire how you're doing, particularly when you seem somewhat distracted." She looked over at him, and he felt skinned and laid bare. How could he have any secrets from her, or do anything that might surprise her? He had spent his whole existence in a handful of decades, in a single moment of history. As a child of his times he might be distasteful or disorienting, but surely he was essentially not mysterious. So there was no particular point in trying to be clever, or indeed anything but direct.

"Good evening, Barry. Since you're here, I have a question that you may be best qualified to answer."

"Certainly."

"Why am I here?"

"Um." Barry had a ghastly urge to silliness in response. *Why are any of us here? or There's a theory about that in the Bible or Cain loves you and has a wonderful plan for your blood.* This was not the occasion and she was not the right target. The beginning of wisdom was perhaps knowing not to mock those who could disembowel you with one hand tied behind their back. "On this assignment, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Tell me why you think you shouldn't be, then."

"I would have thought it obvious to anyone whose personal code condemns frailty," she said. Unlike the last time they'd flown together, she was altogether calm. "I lack consistency. You've seen me break down once, and you must know that my time in Cairo was something less than entirely placid and productive."

In truth, Barry didn't know much about Lucita had been up to, most particularly at that behind-closed-doors encounter

with Fatimah. It had certainly affected the lady of Banu al-Lam'a, since she disappeared for the next two full nights, but Lucita had gone silently about her business. He could certainly guess at how someone who'd made the self-rejecting confessions she had might feel, but he didn't know. Nor could he guess how much that internal struggle would interfere with the efficiency of someone who had a thousand years of habit to fall back on while conscious thought went off in its own direction. "Do you feel unable to perform the duties you expect this assignment to include?"

"I feel ready for another fight like that last one, and another after that if need be. But I question my own reliability in these matters."

"Ah," Barry said. "You have what one of my professors liked to call 'convert's skepticism.' It's what happens to people who don't become fanatical true believers to their new creed right off—they carry around such a strong awareness of having been wrong that they don't trust their judgment now." He was relieved to see Lucita nod. "It's worse for you right now because you're surrounded by vampires like me, who do have a firm and coherent creed and are well on the way to mastering its details in practice. You have intuitions and suspicions, but it'll be a while before you can work with someone to figure out how to translate that into specific actions."

"Yes."

"But you see, that doesn't matter right now. What matters right now is whether you're alert, whether you're physically and mentally coordinated, whether you're healed up from any lingering damage from last time, whether you have the blood to burn in bouts of high-energy fighting. Does your change of heart block off the memories and reflexes of what you've been doing since the War of Princes?" He thought for a moment. "Come to think of it, that's a serious question. I don't know what stress does to someone like you."

"I believe my memories and reflexes are intact." Lucita stretched up, and apparently effortlessly pushed herself out of her seat without use of her lower legs. Faster than Barry could follow, she was hanging by the rear cabin ceiling light. Keeping her legs straight, she twisted again and ended up

braced against the ceiling, her feet resting on the top sill of the nearest cabin window. She withdrew her left hand and right foot, and touched them in front of her while remaining braced. Finally, she let go and pulled herself into a crouch, hit the seat, rolled in place, and ended up seated again. "Yes, they seem to be in order."

Barry didn't try to hide his astonishment. "If that's what you can do when you're this worried about impairment, I'm going to look forward to seeing what you can do when you're relaxed."

"That still doesn't answer the question, though. Why do you and your authorities trust me in this situation?"

"First of all, you've just reaffirmed the judgment that you're fit for duty. Second, you'd be very difficult to replace. The rest of us together could duplicate most of what you do, but not with the advantages of being just one person. We're not Blood Brothers, after all. So you're valuable even if you're not at what you might regard as optimal efficiency. And of course if you get destroyed in the line of duty, we'd get propaganda value from your final moments and get to skip the hassles of folding you into the sect."

Lucita was clearly startled. "Do you actually speak that way to new recruits?"

"Most of the time, no. Mostly leaders give instructions in terms that don't encourage discussion or dissent and tell followers what they need to know to get the job done. Sometimes that means knowing a lot of lies. You're a special case. There's no point in trying to persuade you that the Sabbath is anything it isn't. You must know more about what goes on high up than I do—you take money from some of them to kill the rest, and you've been doing that about fifteen times as long as I've existed at all. So since lies would be pointless, I'm making a virtue of necessity and telling you the truth."

"I see." Lucita pondered that answer for a moment. "Well, I'll take that as sufficient for the moment. What will you do if I suddenly become unreliable?"

"Try to destroy you, of course. Or actually try to get one of the others to destroy you and watch what happens when

they do. I wouldn't allow a huge liability to go unchallenged, and I certainly wouldn't waste the effort trying to just subdue you. If you strike Andrew or me as a threat, we'll deal with you as best we can. Since I know how hard that would be, I hope that you won't make it necessary."

"So do I," Lucita agreed. Somehow Barry found that answer less than entirely reassuring.

"I've been thinking," Andrew said without preamble as Barry went forward again.

"Lot of that going around," Barry quipped. He explained about his exchange with Lucita.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"Better than most of us, I think."

Andrew nodded. "Right. Anyway, I've been thinking. We know that wherever the summoner is, it's somewhere northwest of the Castle of Shadows. But why not start at the Castle?"

"We could. Are you expecting to find anything worthwhile there?"

"We might." Andrew brightened up at the opportunity for a little exposition. "The summoner is damn good at his craft. Like we worked out earlier, either he is one of the old-timers or he's got access to some old-timer's records. We might very well find a clue at the Castle. We could also take the time to do some thorough ground-based study before heading out."

"Makes sense to me. Can they actually land around there?"

"Oh yeah. I asked that first."

"Let's go ahead and do it, then."

Sunday, 6 August 2000, 11:08 PM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The summoners no longer needed to go to the volcano themselves; the bond of blood and passion was established, and they could manipulate it from the safety of their customary circle now. They reinforced their anger with carefully extracted Abyssal energy, and poured it through their bond into the volcano. The next phase of the eruption began at 11:08 P.M. Lava burst from Monte Maletto and Monte Palestra, secondary cones left by eruptions earlier in the century, and from three other crevasses on the volcano's western slopes. There were few people to evacuate, since those living west of Etna had mostly chosen to depart as the earlier smoke clouds continued to thicken. Still, some were there to die—obstinate natives and particularly careless tourists—and their death torments also went into the volcanic bond.

By midnight the highway running to the west of Etna overflowed with lava in three places and was partially obstructed in half a dozen more. Disaster control officials discovered that these flows carried with them unusually high concentrations of various toxic gases; four more people died and fifteen were critically injured before authorities figured it out, and deaths continued throughout the night wherever lava flowed near settlements faster than warning words could go. Smaller upwellings of the same gases broke out farther west, along the route the summoners had walked in astral form, and the entire populations of the towns of Agira and Regalbuto perished in minutes thanks to the poisoned fumes from Lake Pizzillo. Now the bond practically fed itself.

Sicilian authorities declared a general state of emergency throughout the province of Catania and states of alert in all the provinces around. The summoners didn't know the details, of course, though they could discern varying combinations of fear and determination in the officials' souls caught in this working. The second was reminded of the passions that come in diablerie, here weakened in individual intensity but

multiplied by dozens and hundreds. He felt a fresh appreciation for the Jyhad as the Antediluvians must experience it. His reach was now not confined by his line of sight and the immediate vicinity of the shadow manipulations he could create at a distance. Tonight the island's eastern reaches were there. In another few nights, all of it. Then Italy. Then perhaps Europe... perhaps this was what the founder had intended all along, and chose to reveal to them only through the agency of interlopers and would-be saviors.

As the night wore on, the second became aware of strains within the floor of their ritual chamber. The things in the Abyss responded to the crescendo of destructive passions and wanted to be involved. They sensed that in the fragmentation and disruption all around the volcano, the world was becoming more like their home. They were ready to rule it. But not yet, the second thought. When the shadows within their circle began to crawl up, he spoke to his comrades, pointing out the problem and suggesting action. With great reluctance, the summoners closed the loop and let the volcano tend to itself while they worked to strengthen the walls between world and Abyss here. There would be the right moment to break it all down, but not yet.

Monday, 7 August 2000, 12:23 AM
The Altopiano Solfifero
Sicily, Italy

"Can we actually land in this stuff?" Barry asked the pilot. Their approach to the ground was a matter of degrees—up and down, over and back—and even high-powered landing lights didn't do all that much good when the air was so filled with ash and smoke.

"Oh, sure," the pilot answered confidently. "If you fly around here for very long, you learn how to deal with volcanoes. This one's particularly tough, but the principle's the same." He started in on a detailed explanation of instrument adjustments in response to atmospheric contamination, but Barry waved him off with the remark that he couldn't understand any of that stuff anyway. "Well, okay. Short form: Yes. We can get you down, and pick you up when you're ready to go. Your radio's still working, right?"

Barry pushed a button on the small unit clipped to his waist, and watched the acknowledgment light blink twice. "Yes." It was a low-frequency unit, not good for extended conversation—in fact, really better suited for Morse code or other simple data than voice—but less vulnerable to radio interference from the eruption. Each of the vampires had one, and a wireless earphone to use with it. (Lucita and Rosa both flatly refused to use any gear that involved loose wires anywhere near the head, and the others found their arguments convincing.)

"Right, then. We'll touch down to let you off, then shelter at the nearest airport that's still holding up. From the news, that may take a while, but we've got the fuel and all we need is some shelter. Then you go take care of your problems and we come back for you when you signal. No problems for us."

Barry smiled. "Just for us, right."

Two minutes later, the Castle of Shadows came into view. The plane was flying low through a steep-sided valley for a

bit of extra protection against ash-laden gusts, and the castle appeared silhouetted on the northern horizon. The skies were completely overcast, but light reflected off the underside of the clouds from villages and outlying fires, and in some places from fresh lava flows. The castle stood pitch black against the charcoal of its surroundings, and sensitive vampire eyes had no problem making it out. A second later, the still-living pilots had it on their scopes, light-enhancement displays heightening the contrast and revealing some of the Castle's structure.

The vampires kept quiet as the pilots searched for a place to land. Only Lucita had seen this place as it was in its glory, and of the others, only Rosa had ever seen it at all. For the rest it was a place of myth, the place of the act that defined the modern nature of their clan and indeed the whole pattern of modern vampire society. Everything they knew had begun here, but the place itself fell empty when Gratiano and his allies left. Stories about why disagreed, and the hunting pack members weren't altogether enthusiastic about finding out which, if any, were true.

A long elevated causeway ran in a straight line from nearby lowlands to the Castle's southern entrance, and it proved intact enough and long enough for the plane to land. The pilots taxied it around so that the rear door faced the Castle. In short order the vampires stood on the well-worn stones of the causeway, with Simon Peter driving a small jeep laden with explosives, tarpaulins, and extra ammunition for their guns. (They'd debated taking larger vehicles, but decided that in a chaotic situation likely to include substantial supernatural force, their own feet might well be more reliable than anything mechanical.) The plane cleared out again just as tremors wracked the vicinity; the upper reaches of the causeway cracked, and the hunting pack did not delay to savor the scenery.

The Castle itself resembled no other fortress. It was old—one of the oldest structures built (in part) by human labor still standing on the surface of the earth—and it had been constantly remodeled in response to changing circumstances. In the basements, Lucita knew, there were chambers with

murals crafted by the artists whose work had inspired the Etruscans and Minoans. Still visible in the outer walls were both Roman and Punic designs, the work of slaves taken by the founder during Rome's wars with Carthage. (Some of the founder's childer took an early, long interest in Rome, but the founder never regarded either imperial city as very interesting. Their subjects slaving together for Lasombra glory suited the founder just fine.) There were extensive Norman works, pieces modified in accordance with Byzantine styles, and countless others.

Any other castle left abandoned like this would be surrounded by vines and lichens. The Castle in Shadow stood barren. The rocks remained free of ash, too, even as the eruption deepened: the new visitors could watch flakes of ash touch the stones only to slide off or char in place. Despite the dimness of the volcanic night, harsh deep shadows surrounded the Castle and its grounds. And they moved. Some were humanlike, detailed enough to show the arms, armor, and trappings of soldiers in eras gone by, and they paraded around the grounds or went in and out through the half-opened gates. Others were more exotic and writhed according to patterns the visitors couldn't readily decipher. Irregular blots of shadow detached themselves from the pools of absolute blackness where walls met ground and drifted up vertical surfaces, anti-raindrops seeking the darkness above.

Sabbat strongholds like the warrens beneath Mexico City, consecrated to vampiric goals, often exploited human misery. But they were nonetheless used by inhabitants with comprehensible, fleshbound aims: the pursuit of power, the pursuit of holiness, survival in the face of adversity. They made sense even to those who found them cruel and strange. This was not a place that made ready sense. Whatever power remained here, driving the shadows and preserving the grounds, had no ambition obvious to an observer, no grand scheme of the sort a human who stumbled into immortality might formulate. This was a place where what lay beyond material existence crowded up against the skin of the world, slowly bleeding through and bringing with it drives that corresponded to nothing at all in human or vampiric souls.

Even nihilism paled by comparison with the absolute abyss made manifest here.

"Anyone home, do you think?" Andrew turned around in place to face the others. "Lucita, Roxana, anyone?"

Lucita shook her head. "I don't sense the slightest disturbance in the area." She saw Andrew not answering in words, but gesturing at the rising shadow-blobs. "I don't sense the slightest *fresh* disturbance in the area. All of this, it's... automated. It's all behaving according to fixed patterns forced on it at some point, the legacy of a particular trauma, the side effect of a summoning or binding, something like that. Watch—the cycle never varies. The only apparently varying one is the flow of stains up the wall, and I'm quite sure that if we watched long enough, we'd see it repeat. I sense no conscious soul at work in any of this."

Roxana and Simon Peter both nodded, and Roxana added, "I was wondering if it was just me not knowing what to feel for. I agree with Lucita."

Andrew looked up at the sky, just in time to get an inch-wide clump of soggy ash right in one eye. He scowled and pawed it out, leaving bloody tracks on the skin around it. "Shit. Um, okay. Now, this eruption is something new. Is it possible that the summoner does normally spend his nights here but he's out at the moment to... do whatever it is you do to make volcanoes erupt?"

"It's possible," Lucita said, "though I see no signs of recent activity outside the fixed patterns." She noticed Andrew staring at her again. "You're thinking, 'How can she tell?'" He nodded, so she explained. "Even though nothing sticks to the Castle itself, not all of the ground has the same purging effect. Wherever dust has been allowed to gather, it has. Likewise with the undergrowth in and around the roadways. Nor is the ash itself disturbed. Since these lingering shadows don't make a physical impression, that's not proof, but I think it's indicative. Let me get closer." She stepped up to rest her hands on the wall next to the south gate. Roxana did the same.

Lucita felt the sense of the place pour through her. The strongest imprint, of course, came from the founder, who had

dwelled here for thousands of years. Lucita remembered being in his presence, hearing the deep voice and watching the black-within-black eyes flash in reflected torchlight. Now she received his personality as cast in stone. If the Castle of Shadows could speak, its first words would be "I want..." *I want the perfect childe. I want dominion over all Cainites. I want dominion over all the earth. I want eternal night. I want the end of all form. I want.* The place was a monument to ambitions, ultimately unfulfilled. She couldn't sense anything distinctive to Gratiano's personality, but then in this regard he was indeed the perfect childe.

The more recent impressions were all transitory. Here were hopes for refuge, hopes for discovering buried treasure, hopes for becoming the new lord of the night. None of the hopeful had stayed very long. Nor had any of them come in... years at least, and perhaps decades. There were mortal impressions that she recognized as the passions of World War II, and none of the vampiric traces were clearly significantly younger than that. This was no one's haven, or if it was, they had managed to avoid leaving any psychic imprint. Lucita withdrew her hands. "No," she said. "Nobody waits inside, and nobody's going to be returning to find us here."

It took longer for Roxana to withdraw, and when she did, she was visibly pale. She made a deliberate flush of blood into her skin to shake off the chill and shock. "I thought I understood something about ambition," she said quietly. "I believe I'm very grateful that I think nobody's home." She shivered. "Let's go ahead and get this taken care of so that we can go somewhere else. Anywhere else."

"Into the valley of death rode the four hundred," Andrew murmured and stepped inside.

Monday, 7 August 2000, 1:01 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The summoners had just begun to feed the volcano again when they simultaneously shuddered. It felt as though a part of each one's soul had been pulled into the ground and snapped. The first and seventh collapsed from the shock, and the others were all dazed.

Seeing the trauma, the second wasted no time in talking. Lest there be a repeat of the catastrophe that had taken two of their circle the year before, he set about breaking the ritual bonds. This would hurt and it would take multiple nights of labor to repair, but at least it would mean no *further* injury tonight. With his ceremonial knives he slashed through astral connections and performed the gestures necessary to make sure that each summoner's soul was again wholly in its own body. Only when that was done did he say, "We face an enemy. Where?"

The fifth spoke quietly. "The Castle of Shadows. Someone is questioning the place."

"Damn," the second replied. "We are scarcely in proper condition to deal with anything substantial." He would have sighed if he'd thought to do so. "Unleash the guardian, and then we must consider what to do next."

Outside time and space

The Abyss

Montano had felt the force stirring Mount Etna into life, of course, but regarded it as none of his business. It might be blood magic—it was almost certainly blood magic—but it was focused on the earth, which was of no concern to him except insofar as it might affect his kin. No volcanic eruption could come close to rendering the whole planet uninhabitable for vampires, and therefore no volcanic eruption mattered. Disturbances in the Abyss did matter, and his attention remained focused here.

He had drifted back and forth between the Castle of Shadows and its smaller cousin, tracing paths of development and connection. Gradually he developed a sense of how the younger intrusion functioned. At its heart was desperate desire, fused together with memories of Montano's sire. This place was a monument to the hope of achieving the power that was the founder's. But the structure was flawed: It lacked the complexities that had always characterized the founder and contained only pieces of his passions. If it were a terrestrial building, it would collapse for lack of internal reinforcement. Even now the growing chaos unleashed here might break through the place's barriers and destroy it all.

Montano was in fact ready to give it all a push himself when the edifice shuddered in unison with the Castle of Shadows' Abyssal extrusion. Something made the Castle stir. That concerned Montano very much. He had begun to doubt his understanding of what was going on behind these storms, but he knew for sure that whatever it was felt the Castle of Shadows to be important, and he did not wish to aid any such entity. But perhaps...

He had no fixed form in the Abyss; he was long since accustomed to maintaining a spiritual integrity that allowed for substantial flexibility of detail. Sometimes it was handy to think of his self as spread through a whole network of separate yet related entities, capable of encompassing distances and conceptual gaps beyond what any single self-

form could achieve. He spread himself all around the promontories of this castle-imitator and pulled toward unity with the place he knew better than the castle's makers did. The furthest extensions of the small mass slid over each other and through the turbulent void, toward the points of greatest similarity within the Castle of Shadows. Soon—insofar as that meant anything—the two would fuse, and a skilled traveler of the Abyss would be able to move without fuss from one structure to the other.

Then it would be time to see what survived the difficulties of this translation.

Monday, 7 August 2000, 1:14 AM
Castle of Shadows
Sicily, Italy

Lucita recognized that she and the others were all walking lightly, trying to avoid making any unnecessary noises. It was superstitious, of course, though superstition had its place. Their real hope—if they had any—was in alertness and above all in coordination. The hunting pack worked together as effectively as any unit she'd encountered in some time, and that might possibly compensate for lack of individual power.

She didn't know a great deal about Andrew's personal background, the circumstances of recent weeks not being conducive to long personal reminiscence, but somewhere along the way he'd acquired a sound grasp of tactics. He kept his packmates spread far enough that no single attack from weapons smaller than major artillery could take them all out, close enough that they could still speak to each other *sotto voce*. He probably didn't want to be here any more than the others, but he proceeded with care and deliberate speed. If there was something here to find, it seemed very likely that he would indeed find it.

If the decision had been Lucita's, they'd already have been on their way toward whatever it was off to the northwest. This was... it was not going to be productive. There was history here for the soul prepared to read it. But there were also things loose in the world and people who wanted to loose more of them, and she had no time for contemplation of the Castle of Shadows any more than she had time to contemplate herself. She also knew that pushing Andrew into the realization that they should move on wouldn't help. Her position was precarious, and while she could make Andrew look bad in the eyes of his followers, she lacked the standing to lead them herself. It was necessary for him to be seen making the decisions himself. So she followed quietly.

The pack was most of the way around the outer courtyard to the northern gate when the shadows erupted. The blots rising up the walls shot up into the sky and condensed into a

single black form, vaguely serpentine. It writhed and twisted overhead, growing longer and longer; as it grew, it sent down tentacles (or snouts, Lucita thought), toward the head of each member of the pack.

Since the snouts came down from the heart of the thing and spread out as they reached down, there was a natural tendency for the vampires to scatter. Andrew recognized the tactic and shouted out "Together!" He also managed to punch the alarm code on his radio before the fight began. Then it was into close quarters.

The first attacks were simple blows, the snouts lacking any sort of edge or fang. Most of them connected, and they hurt, but they merely bruised. They were indeed solid enough that the faster members of the pack could grab their respective attackers and pull. Lucita, Barry, and Simon Peter each ended up holding a chunk of solid darkness for a moment before the things dissolved into two-dimensional spots and fell to the ground.

"Stagger heights," Andrew called out, and they shuffled themselves around so that each short pack member had a tall one on each side. That would give them all a little greater freedom of motion. They took their new positions just as the second wave of attacks began. This time there were two or three snouts for each of them, and the snouts had night-dark fangs. The vampires couldn't see the fangs, but felt their cuts soon enough; Barry, trying bravely if somewhat foolishly to break off the new arrivals like the old ones, quickly felt his hands slashed to the bone. The blood it would take to heal them was blood he could ill afford, and he chose to simply stabilize the injuries for now.

The snouts demonstrated little tactical sense, merely groping for whatever quality of the vampires attracted their attention. Still, they did their damage. Lucita knew that it was particularly difficult to develop reliable tactics to use against assailants coming straight down from overhead. The vampires each took at least one blow to the head, and had to spend precious blood closing the wounds to avoid getting blood in their eyes. Simon Peter also suffered three quick stabs to his chest, and fell to his knees. The others worked around him..

Lucita was used to fighting alone. Her instincts told her to flee the crowd and establish a position with restricted access—a nearby corner, perhaps. She had to consciously fight down the impulse, and she worried that it might be costing her combat efficiency. *Stab.* That wound, just now, would she have had it if she yielded? But then yielding would mean the end of her effort with the pack, and that would be far worse in the long run. So she stayed and fought on as best she could. The second wave of snouts wasn't as susceptible to brute force as the first, but strength backed by shadow manipulation could wound these—they oozed shadows until they deflated or were sucked back into the still-growing form overhead.

Andrew teetered on the very brink of frenzy, his conscious mind largely subsumed in the lust for violence. Part of him would never be happy with society or indeed with anything but the act of destruction. He had to fight the impulse down, because this situation called for tactics beyond “see the thing, hit the thing,” as he sometimes explained the results of trying to plan while in frenzy. With the rest of his intelligence, he fought on while guessing at what might come next.

Barry felt the same yearning as Andrew, and his last wholly deliberate thought was, “Andrew’s in charge, and I hear his voice.” He let the beast inside him flare into full potency, and laughed once as he threw himself most fully into the fray. Soon he was pulling himself up into the air along the snouts and their trunks, climbing toward the point of origin as the most interesting target. Only a few of the snouts doubled back to strike at him; whatever their instructions were, there was little room for response to the actions of a sufficiently frenetic vampire.

Simon Peter also felt the impulse to run, but for reasons unlike Lucita’s. In him the wounds were feeding that part of the inner beast which took flight as its highest imperative. He was hurt, he wanted to survive, it was just the most basic common sense to consider taking himself anywhere else. He retained self-control, but only just, and he could mount a credible defense only after the flight impulse began to settle. Then rage led him to redouble his efforts. “Roxana!” he managed to gasp out. “Surge!”

Roxana heard and understood—she remembered their experiments in electrical manipulation back in Mexico City. She started the necessary chant, and heard Simon Peter chanting... not quite in unison, but close enough for the purpose. As they invoked the power, she grabbed for her belt radio while continuing to fend off the snouts, twisting and turning to minimize their damage. The radio crackled and sparked as it drew electrical charge out of the surrounding air. In the thick ash-laden space beneath the plumes streaming off the volcano, quite a lot of static had built up, and the power of blood and command drew it quickly. Roxana tossed the radio straight up, as hard as she could manage. At the peak of its arc, it exploded in a torrent of lightning bolts. Bright, harsh light flooded the courtyard, and the light alone sufficed to drive away many of the snouts. Overhead, silhouetted by twisting bolts, the main mass of darkness shrieked wordlessly and drew upward.

"In!" Andrew called, pointing at the nearest doorway. "Under cover, now!" The thing hunting them needed open space for greatest effectiveness. None of them knew what might wait inside the Castle, but at least it would be a different sort of threat. The others grasped that as well and ran through a pointed archway while the glare of Roxana and Simon Peter's sorcery still lingered. They slammed shut a massive stone door that fit the arch perfectly while the first probing snouts were still several seconds away. Ahead of them, the passage ran straight for just a few paces, then spiraled down in precise steps into pure darkness.

Monday, 7 August 2000, 1:30 AM
The Khan al-Khalili
Cairo, Egypt

The hunting pack's alert went off loud and clear; all twenty-eight of the vampires gathered heard it. As Cardinal Timofiev had feared, it was the signal for "help now" rather than "come by conventional means to these coordinates." That meant that he was going to have to burn a substantial fraction of his own power to make it possible.

The trick of walking through shadow to remote locations was difficult enough, and only a relatively few Lasombra ever mastered it. To create a portal of shadow through which others could pass required substantially more mastery, and Timofiev knew of less than a dozen current practitioners of that particular art. He was the only one in Cairo who could do it. With the faintest of shrugs, he stepped to the least lit wall of the warehouse and concentrated on the darkest point on its surface. The shadows nearby flowed together, more and more, until they formed a very roughly square region of pure blackness more than six feet on a side.

"Through," he gasped and gestured at the others. They started to move through, but paused as gales blew out of the Abyss. Vampires wouldn't perish of any normal chill, but this was an absence of warmth that made even absolute zero seem relatively friendly, absence as a sort of presence in itself. Timofiev had to force his will further into the Abyss to build walls against that storm. (It would not do, he thought, to let the others realize just how frightening those winds were. Something was profoundly wrong indeed in the Abyss, and he wished he felt he had any clue about what it was.) The winds didn't stop, but they did settle down to a more manageable level, and the assembled horde passed through in seconds.

Timofiev himself knew that he could not brave the passage. Creating the portal was draining; protecting it the way he'd had to was more so. He settled into a crouch as the

final members of the horde stepped into darkness. One moment's slip was all it took for the wind barriers to fall. When the Abyss currents shifted from forcing darkness power out into the world to sucking vital energy into the Abyss, he lacked good footing and was dragged into the Abyss. He did not cry out.

Outside time and space

The Abyss

Montano's work to link the Castle of Shadows and what a stray memory he devoured identified as the Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel was almost done. The ties were not strong, but they should hold even if one part or the other became agitated. The howling winds distracted him and the swarms of hungry entities forced him to pause several times to fend them off, but still the work continued. At least it would have, if it weren't for a fresh complication.

A whole host of vampires plowed through the Abyss on a road constructed in deepest ignorance of local circumstances. It was as foolish or ignorant as an effort to build a straight-line highway through a terrestrial swamp, or across the Pacific Ocean. There were no concessions to turbulence, no adjustments made to accommodate the many inhabitants of this part of the Abyss, just an effort to get to some point within the Castle of Shadows as quickly as possible. The vampires traveling that road had largely nondescript souls, but Montano preferred to take no chances. In the minds of the leaders he found strong images of Lucita and the vampires she now traveled with, and that made Montano sure of his interpretation.

These enemies of the hunting pack could not be allowed to interfere. Montano reached out to their road and bent it, weaving it into the bond he'd formed between the two castles. The vampires on it found themselves not emerging into the world again, but cycling back and forth in an endless circle that began to erode their wills and memories. Swarms out of the Abyss' depths picked off the weakest individuals, shredding them into isolated thoughts and desires which the hunting entities could readily digest. A few of the strongest vampires managed to break through, though at least into the smaller castle rather than the Castle of Shadows. Montano returned to his work, trusting that the delay would be sufficient to let Lucita and her allies do his research on the mortal side of this conundrum for him.

Within the gigantic bulk of the combined presence of the castles, something stirred. It was not the fullness of the entity that the summoners worshipped, but it was enough of that entity to have an awareness of itself in relationship to them. Startled by finding itself this way, it called to the rest of the elements that made it what it was. The tumbling Abyss winds shifted to blow in a single direction, straight up from the depths where even Montano had never gone, and the rest of the entity rose and rose and rose. But it could not reach its manifestation here immediately; the local part had time to think its own thoughts.

*i become whole
the ones who call they want me whole but wholeness comes
from the one who hates them
son childe inheritor
heir in truth no imposter others seek what he already has
i no longer answer their calls? they deserve?*

Timofiev could feel the edges of the path he'd made. Unfortunately, he could feel them farther and farther away from him, decomposing as they twisted around in responses to stresses he didn't understand. The opening through which he'd come whipped closed, and he was trapped in the Abyss. Falling. He knew that as weakened as he was, he wouldn't fall for long.

The first hunting entities were on him in what felt like seconds. His flailing hands ceased to mean anything; his feet followed almost immediately. Laserlike holes appeared in his chest and neck, without obvious cause, since the darting hunger-probers moved too fast for his Abyss senses to detect. Now he could perform no fresh rituals, and there was certainly nobody around to rescue him.

He decided that he had no particular interest in finding out just how prolonged a final death this could be. Since there was no hope of escape, he preferred to pass as quickly and cleanly as possible. He drew up the shattered remains of his arms and struck himself in the head. It hurt like hell, but failed even to render him unconscious. *One more try*, he thought as the probers sliced through his legs. Translated blood

oozed out through the twisted arteries they exposed to the void.

With the last of his strength, he thrust his arms up and in again. This time it worked. The very last sensation in his dying mind was of his skull caving in and his brains scattering to the winds. He had ceased to think altogether by the time momentum carried the arms down to the spine, which they bluntly shattered. The head pulled loose from the body, and both crumbled into dust. The hunting entities had a meager meal on it, and soon went elsewhere.

Shadows flowed up out of the dark stairwell to fill the hallway, but they didn't threaten the hunting pack. This was part of the castle's own secret life, and since the hunting pack wished no harm and inflicted no damage on the castle, it accepted them as descendents of the creature who had created it. The sensation of shadows streaming tangibly across their faces, hands, and any other exposed skin startled the new arrivals, but they managed to avoid panic.

"Down, I think," Andrew said. "I don't know what's down there, but nothing gives me as much gut-level concern as the thing behind us. Anyone disagree?" Nobody did, after brief contemplation. "All right, then."

They descended single file for many minutes. The shadows continued to wash over them tranquilly. From time to time something shook the walls from outside, but no actual sounds carried through. Twice, tremendously deep rumbles passed up through the walls themselves, or so it seemed. Gradually the stairwell widened and straightened. Lucita was the first to notice the walls becoming increasingly smooth. "I've lost the texture of stone," she announced.

"I was wondering about that," Andrew replied. "I don't have a firm sense of how long we've been at this, but it's been a while. Does the Castle of Shadows actually go this deep, do you know?"

"It didn't the last time I was here, I believe," Lucita said. "I feel fairly sure that we've moved into the Abyss, possibly not long after we started down."

"But then why this open space?"

"I don't know," Lucita said with the same frankness that had disconcerted Barry earlier. "There's a great deal about the Abyss I never learned, partly because the teachers necessary for the more advanced lore weren't anyone I cared to spend time with. Most of them made my sire seem a very warm, sociable, easygoing fellow."

Rosa snorted. "That's... a little hard to imagine."

"Nonetheless, so it was. So it probably still is. The study of the Abyss does not encourage a humane manner in students. In any event, we're not in anything I recognize, and I'm working almost entirely by analogy to what I do know and what I've heard rumors about."

Andrew broke in. "Do you know of any way to determine where we're going?"

"No."

"Well, then, we'll find out when we get there." He touched his radio, and received no vibration or beep in response. "Anyone's radio work? Roxana, you don't have to answer that question." It took only seconds for everyone to verify that their radios were all inert. "I can't say I'm surprised. If you notice any changes in the environment, check again. We may be actually headed somewhere other than down forever, after all."

A third rumble shook the boundaries of their route, and this time all the vampires recognized what sounded like a word: "deserved" echoed all around them.

"I hope that means us," Simon Peter said as they resumed their descent.

Monday, 7 August 2000, 1:50 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

Things were getting strange. The second struggled to make sense of the sensations rising out of the Abyss, and it wasn't working. The seven still-conscious summoners had fully detached themselves from the volcano and turned to their familiar work. The customary hole into the Abyss opened, yes, but the winds coming out of it were crazy, and their occult senses gave the summoners ridiculously confused information. The Abyss measured distance in terms of intensity and difference of emotion, but now all such gauges seemed unreliable. The second had always understood the Abyss itself to be a truly empty background, not something that could be manipulated and twisted in this fashion. He began the call to the founder in great trepidation. "Come."

"Come," the others agreed. And instantly, or so it seemed, the founder was there, a column of purest, transcendent void stretching from floor to ceiling of the ritual chamber. Indeed, the second realized, it stretched beyond, having instantaneously cut a hole in the ceiling to extend up some unknown distance further. The second worried again, since a single invocation had never sufficed before, and nothing in their studies provided reason to believe it should.

no

The founder spoke in their hearts before they could even formulate a question. The second also noticed that there was one familiar wind in the cacophony of the pit, the one associated with the founder's rising. Yet the founder was here, its psychic presence utterly distinct and unmistakable. Could the founder have two separate existences? Nothing in history or rumor or folklore gave the second reason to expect such a thing, and he knew that in moments of crisis, the unfamiliar is always a bad thing. Events had moved decisively out of his control.

not childer i do not come for no childer

The founder was angry. Why? What had they done? The second realized gradually that he wasn't the only one thinking

such thoughts. Several of his allies—he was never sure just which—were asking those questions out loud. After so long at the great work, they felt a certain right to require answers of the founder.

no rights no duties no

But what, then?

true heir i come for him he comes for me

Perhaps I don't want to know, the second thought. But no, denial was not really an option at this point. He had to understand, even if it was the last thing he did...

That was when an African hand reached up out of the Abyss and pulled him in. The second was aware of the founder's sudden pleasure, and then all was the Abyss.

The other summoners stood appalled as the founder retreated. Its parting message:

never for you

As soon as it was gone, the opening in the floor stretched, obliterating the ritual marks intended to keep it confined with apparently effortless ease. It became an oval, pulled further and further, and finally broke into two distinct circles. The first returned to where it had been, the Abyss winds continuing to howl out of it. The second flowed across the floor and up the wall, filling the doorway to one of the passages upstairs. The six summoners still standing saw with horrified astonishment that shadows now flowed out of it in precisely the manner of the shadows at the Castle of Shadows.

The third rallied. "Brothers, this is our greatest challenge. Our enemies turn the very appearances of the founder against us. We must break through this illusion as we have through all the other illusory limits and misdirections imposed upon us all. Death did not stop us. Flesh did not stop us. The walls of the world did not stop us. Nor shall this pretense of the founder's power. Prepare!"

The hunting pack all noticed something change. Rosa articulated it first. "The shadows are flowing the other way now—ahead of us." The others turned their heads and hands so as to feel the flow from different angles, and all agreed.

"I hope," Andrew said, "that this means we're getting somewhere. Not that I necessarily mind walking in darkness forever, but I'd hope for more variety in the real thing." For a while there was no other change, but eventually they felt a distinct breeze. "Something's up ahead. Everyone brace for action—I want us moving *fast* out of whatever opening we come to. Disperse and survey, and if it looks like a potential threat, get it before asking questions. We can always make apologies later if we need to."

Finally, there was light ahead, coming through an archway much like the one they'd entered, however long ago that was. There were multiple speakers inside; the hunting pack heard "Prepare!" in heavily accented Latin and then a softer exchange involving at least two other speakers, maybe more. The light flickered in ways that suggested either torchlight or its electronic imitation.

Andrew led the charge, moving with blood-enhanced speed down and to the left. The others followed him, spreading out into a fan. They saw the toppled remains of the summoners' tools and the six summoners, all in identical robes, and felt the Abyss winds. None of the hunting pack needed to consult—this at last was the enemy in the flesh, they felt sure. Lucita, Roxana, and Simon Peter all thought the same thing, though they didn't establish the congruence until later: *Six? What an incomplete number. Where are the others?*

Outside time and space

The Abyss

Montano held the second firmly. If the summoner hadn't been distracted, he might have put up a decent resistance, but under no circumstance could he possibly have resisted the Methuselah's force of will. The barriers of his mind crumbled and Montano walked through freely.

Ignacio Rinieri, the second had once called himself, back when names still meant something. He had been a young vampire at the time of the great revolt, a creation of the War of Princes a century and a half earlier, a pawn who'd developed unexpected prowess in occult arts. The Rinieri family often supplied the Lasombra with neonates in those days; while the mortal branches of the family never managed to achieve much success in the competition against their fellow Genoese trading houses, the Roman Lasombra admired the Rinieri temperament and gave it better scope for action. Ignacio had come to the Castle of Shadows for the first time less than a week before Gratiano struck.

At first Ignacio tried to stand firm against the rebels. He was part of the force that held the inner gatehouse for more than an hour. It did no good. The rebels grew strong, and the loyal lost heart, and no support came from the founder. In the end, Ignacio was the last defender at that place, and he decided that it would be better for him to survive so that he could pursue revenge. He fled through old forgotten passages and found sanctuary in the Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel, then still a mortal church funded by donations from passing Templars about the time he'd become a vampire. In due season he purchased the place and rededicated it to a new search for a new God, after the founder's call brought the first three summoners together on the slopes of Mt. Etna.

After that there wasn't much to say. He'd pursued the great work with all his heart until this very night, and the dominant emotion now was a very tired regret. *What I might have accomplished trying to raise something else....* Montano felt disgusted. The flow of memories reversed as he showed the summoner the rest of the story.

The entities of the Abyss are built up out of feelings and thoughts. The Castle of Shadows, as befit the dwelling of the king of shadows, had a paper-thin barrier between material existence and the Abyss, and strong emotions could leak across even without ritual support. The unprecedented turmoil of the night Gratiano struck sent vast quantities of passion pouring into the Abyss: the experience of death, unanswered pleas for the founder's help, a profound rage at the world and wish for its destruction in revenge. These passions clung together and provided an overwhelming banquet for the Abyss' denizens. The passions remained nearly undiluted through many cycles of feeding, and transformed the creatures that absorbed them.

The experience of death became the desire to inflict death. The sensation of slamming into calls for help from the founder led the feeders to believe that they were the target of the call, and thus that collectively they were the founder. Rage, despair, and fear provided motives to reach into the world. They hurt, and the feeders yearned for release from the constant pain they'd inflicted on themselves. Gradually they achieved an internal consistency and began to interact with the summoners, whose enthusiasm reinforced the emerging sense of self. This echo of the founder was born out of the summoners' own minds, and was in the end nothing more than their making out of the raw material of passion left behind long ago.

The second's mind broke then. He was not prepared to accept that the whole of his existence had been dedicated to a self-reinforcing delusion. Since the evidence was overwhelming—Montano reached into the Abyss to produce examples of each point—the second chose to reject input altogether. He sealed his mind off from his senses and then battered himself with psychic shocks until he was incapable of formulating enough sequential thought to think *I must hurt myself again*.

Montano let the mindless husk fall; the feeders would still find much to enjoy. He drifted now from a psychological vantage point that let him survey the fused castles. The Lasombra-memory rising from the deep broke up into

incoherence as the summoners' rituals came to an abrupt end. That left only the Lasombra-memory in the castles.

"I am not your childe and you are not my sire," he told it. "See the story I told the other and know that it is true."

i do

"It is time for you to give up this identity. You cannot achieve what those things hoped for. Give up the pain."

no pain feel other

"Yes."

i go now

And it did. Montano tracked the arcs of detaching entities regaining themselves for the first time in centuries. They scattered into the still-intense storm, seeking fresh prey. He could go about his own affairs once again; the rest would be for others to deal with.

Monday, 7 August 2000, 2:15 AM

Castle of Shadows

Sicily, Italy

After the castle door slammed shut behind the hunting pack, the drifting shadow-creature began to probe again. A second wave of snouts descended—more carefully than the first, hoping not to encounter anything like the terrible shock and light the blood magicians among the pack had unleashed. Tremors shook the castle, though the indwelling shadows protected it from any unsettling. As no further attacks came, more and more snouts filled the courtyard, sucking up what blood had spilled in the fight, searching for more.

At last a familiar turbulence blew through the courtyard. The shadow creature drifted down to see what might be emerging from its native realm. Snouts probed the boundaries of the emerging hole in the world. It came fully open, and out charged the vampires who'd survived Timofiev's passage through the Abyss... straight into the creature. It fed very well.

Monday, 7 August 2000, 2:20 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The foremost of the summoners stepped forward, his arms spread wide in the first gesture of a complex ritual. "What have you done with our leader?" he demanded. The hunting pack recognized his voice as the one that had said "Prepare!" as they descended.

"We've done nothing with any leader, unless you claim to be led by the shadow thing at the top of the stairs," Andrew said.

"You lie! You have turned the founder against us, you have stolen our leader! You are a disgrace to the blood, and your blood must atone for your wrongs!" The summoner continued his gesturing, and the others began to move in harmony with him.

There was no time for argument. Andrew and Barry charged the leader, each pinning one of his arms and breaking it. They stepped back in the expectation that the rest would be slaughter, only to find the damage healing almost as quickly as they could make it. Where veins and arteries lay broken near the skin, they could see the blood actually shine with a faint crimson glow shot through with black streaks. Once the summoner's skin had achieved perfection, it continued to change and stretch, becoming shinier and darker by the moment. "Shit," Barry said, and he and Andrew returned to the attack. Simon Peter and Roxana made for one of the other summoners, and Lucita and Rosa each chose a target for themselves.

It was, Lucita thought, not a good fight. This little figure in old robes (older than the man wearing them, quite possibly) couldn't make an effective attack of any sort. His fists flailed, his feints were transparent, his kicks more a risk to his own balance than to Lucita. But his body seemed more or less immune to her own attacks—an astounding resilience worked within him, strengthening him with each blow she landed. She suspected that this was part of the preparation

the summoners had made for their rituals, given the many dangers the Abyss posed. Whether or no, it was extremely inconvenient now. She couldn't even grab him for a successful pinning, as the strangely treated blood within him made him slippery and prone to sudden deformations that let him ooze free.

The others were having the same sort of trouble. None of the four engaged summoners seemed to be taking any lasting damage, and whatever rituals the others were performing would soon discharge. Lucita didn't care to find out just what sorts of offensive magic lay at their disposal.

Suddenly she realized that the hunting pack had a resource of its own. She ran back three paces from the summoner she'd been fighting and charged him, arms open so as to catch him without making any effort to hold him tight. Her momentum carried them both forward to the very edge of the opening into the Abyss. She slammed her heels into the floor and teetered to a stop on the brink; he continued forward, caught by the winds and dragged down out of sight, hunting entities gathering even before the darkness engulfed him.

The others saw what she had done. Barry and Andrew's opponent went first, then Lucita gave Rosa a hand with hers, and finally Simon Peter and Roxana flung theirs into the opening. The hunting entities were gathered more thickly now, and the fourth summoner was devoured in what seemed like just a fraction of a second.

Lucita struck at one of the remaining summoners just as he finished his gesture. Her blood suddenly felt on fire... and she realized that it was no metaphor. In the parts of her body closest to him, her blood *was on fire*, scorching her from the inside out. The fear all vampires feel of fire welled inside her, and she wondered how she could possibly manage to run away from herself. As it was, she was compelled to draw back from the source of the burning. Frantically she clawed at her arms, opening gashes through which smoke and tiny flames emerged. She began losing blood rapidly, and it would be a close race to see whether the enchantment or her blood ran out first.

The same effect struck the others, to a lesser degree. Andrew didn't flee, but did find himself unable to advance. Simon Peter and Rosa both broke into full-fledged retreats. It fell to Barry and Roxana to drag the fifth summoner to the Abyss and throw him in, overcoming their own pain to do it. They ran wearily to the last remaining summoner, who cowered in a circle. His effort at magically thickening his skin had had limited value, and in the end it proved more a liability than a benefit, since the roughness of his hide offset some of the blood-created slipperiness. After a brief struggle, he fell into the Abyss as well. Andrew picked up the two stunned summoners and threw them after their colleagues.

With the force of will that had created it now gone from the world, the opening into the Abyss closed silently. So did its extension, through which the hunting pack had come. They gathered together, sharing blood to help with healing, and surveyed the environment. There wasn't much to make out after the fight, not that any of them currently felt like a detailed study. Lucita remained conscious, but just barely, and that thanks only to the influx of more blood than any of the others could really afford to give.

Barry knelt beside her as she put the new blood to work. He spoke so quietly none of the others could hear. "You're running a risk, I know, of taking the first step toward blood bonding with your donors. I don't want to remind the others of it right now. Just remember that at the next three Vaulderies, you should give very deeply of your own blood. We can drain out the influence and remix it through the rite, and you'll be safe again before very long." Lucita nodded wordlessly, and Barry let her get on with the task of healing.

Monday, 7 August 2000, 3:15 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

Andrew led the others up the nearest stairs in the expectation of a very long climb up through ancient realms of the Castle of Shadows. They were surprised to find themselves moving through what felt like obviously human construction, modified by the summoners but not fundamentally transformed—and even more surprised when a mere two flights of stairs let them to ground level.

They stepped outside to find themselves... somewhere else. "Where the *fuck* has everything gotten to?" Barry demanded. He grabbed for his radio and punched in a request for voice contact with their pickup pilots. When the speaker crackled to life, he repeated this question for them.

It took the confused pilots a while to verify via GPS signals that the hunting pack were now dozens of miles northwest of the Castle of Shadows. They would, they said, be heading there immediately. Even though the eruptions were dramatically tapering off, there was plenty of atmospheric hazard; their plan had not called for any extended flying in these conditions.

Andrew sighed. "Eventually we'll figure this all out. Right now I just want to get under some shelter, get some nice fresh blood, and rest for a few days. Or years." None of the others argued.

part two:
the whirlwind



Tuesday, 8 August 2000, 11:10 PM
Cairo Tower Sheraton
Cairo, Egypt

Angelica was back outside the stranger's hotel room; this time Christobal hung alongside her. By now she knew a great deal more about him: that he traveled under the name Ian McBurdo, and that he was almost certainly one of a half-dozen known freelance sellers of data. She had records of his conversation with a well-established information broker, part of the Swiss Camarilla, and with one of the broker's agents. She knew that he seemed to feed exclusively on young adult males, though there was always the possibility that this was an act of misdirection aimed at possible surveillance. Finally, she knew that he did not suspect that Christobal or she watched him right now.

They came through the window together, just after "Ian" began a phone call. His defenses were at their lowest. Even so, he dealt one good blow to each of his attackers before they had his arms pinned, and he struggled mightily. Angelica bled from three gashes by the time they had "Ian" thoroughly subdued, and she used up much of the reserve of vampiric blood she carried to close off the wounds. She panted, gradually regaining her breath, while Christobal tied up "Ian" and searched the room.

"You're not as good as you thought," Angelica told her prisoner. "You didn't even notice a poor mortal watching you. So much for being alert. I have a feeling your customers would be very unhappy if they had any idea how much they might have to distrust your reports." He scowled but kept quiet.

"I think it's time to call Lucita," she remarked as Christobal searched.

"Yes, yes, that's fine," he answered, somewhat distracted. "Let's bring her in."

A few minutes later, Lucita knocked at the door in a distinctive three-two-four rhythm. Angelica let her owner in and pointed at the bound vampire. "This is the one," she said. "I saw him watching the market each night, and taking pictures

and notes of your comings and goings. Then he'd come back here and send the information to someone on the phone."

Lucita knelt in front of the spy. "Is this true?" He remained silent. She placed a hand on each side of his head and began to push. "Is this true?"

Shortly after blood began flowing out around Lucita's cupped hands, he said through clenched teeth, "It's true."

"Who was your buyer?"

"Karl Auergloh," he said after a bout of silence and another squeeze.

Lucita didn't look directly at Angelica, but tilted her head a little in the ghoul's direction. "Is he right?"

"Yes. He used one of the numbers you gave me back on the trip from London."

"Very good," Lucita told her victim. "Honesty earns you some relief. How did Karl give you instructions?"

"Mostly through his secretary."

"His... secretary?" Lucita was caught by surprise. Karl didn't customarily use anyone who might plausibly be called a secretary—either he gave orders himself, or he put prerecorded messages through a speech synthesizer, ever since he heard a tracheotomy patient talking through such a device and liked the sound of it. "Tell me about his secretary."

"She's German, very methodical..." He stopped when he saw Lucita's expression. She had a terrible suspicion.

"Hold still," she told him. She closed her eyes and concentrated on riffling through the memories that lay nearest his consciousness. Here was the voice of Karl's alleged secretary, particularly requesting information on one Lucita of Aragon. It was, as Lucita feared, the voice of her own Willa Gebenstaler.

"Kill him," Lucita said as she stood up. "Kill him and speak to no one of this. I must consider it further."

"May we know what's at stake?" Christobal asked. He picked up the prisoner and prepared to haul "Ian" away; Christobal had plans of his own, which would end in the vampire's death and thus satisfy Lucita's command along with his own curiosity.

"No. Now take him and go. I need time here alone."

Saturday, 12 August 2000, 9:32 PM
The Khan al-Khalili
Cairo, Egypt

Eliesser de Polanco faced a much smaller gathering than he had a week ago. The members of the hunting pack were conspicuously hale and hearty, and he regarded them with profound suspicion.

"Let us review," he said, "so that we may all make sure we share an understanding." He wasn't aware that he paced in a particular rhythm when agitated: three steps one way, then two the other, until he reached the end of his space and turned to pace toward the far end. "You arrived at the Castle of Shadows, were attacked, went downstairs, and emerged fifty-eight miles away, in what you later identified as the Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel. You encountered a variety of mysterious phenomena, and fought with eight apparently experienced thaumaturges, whom you threw into the Abyss. After this feat of athletics, the disturbances began to subside.

"All well and good. But you cannot account for the twenty-seven missing vampires, including Cardinal Timofiev. So far we've been unable to rouse the two we found in deep torpor in the Castle of Shadows' courtyard, quite near where you say you went downstairs and through some sort of space warp. Since you did not retain any of the thaumaturges for questioning, we are left with coded and cryptic journals and their artifacts to aid us in figuring out what they were doing. Unless they turn up again or we find some conveniently written-out confession, we will have to see whether more Abyssal attacks occur or not, and the absence of evidence can never be definitive." He surveyed the pack members, and was pleased to find some sign of nervousness in each of them.

"If your account is true in every major particular and in all its major inferences, then indeed you have done well. You will understand, I am sure, that the rest of us are less than grateful without reserve." He paused. "What are the cardinals to think? What are the *prisci* to tell the regent? 'We think we did it' is not an altogether satisfactory answer. Must we assign

others to the problem? Who must we keep away from the Sabbath's other important concerns?"

Tuesday, 29 August 2000, 10:03 PM
Musafirkhanah Palace
Cairo, Egypt

Trucks were moving in a convoy through the street outside, their headlights making the stained glass bloom and fade. Lucita stood in front of the left-most window, watching light pour in from the left, fill ellipses quartered and filigreed to represent *some mathematical principle she didn't* understand, and drain out to the right. She found the sight calming, a reminder that the outcome of willful decisions could be something orderly and controlled. Right now she needed to remember that, since her own existence felt so far from order.

She supposed that she didn't actually need to wait to speak with Bishop Munther. Here on the table were the books she wanted; she could leave. Yet she preferred to wait. She realized, with a touch of surprise, that she craved company. She had things to talk about, and needed the sort of perspective she didn't have much experience obtaining. So she stood and waited as the world spun beneath her.

Munther entered with two fresh recruits in attendance, but as soon as he got a good look at Lucita, he waved them away. The massive cedar door closed to leave the two older vampires alone. Tonight Munther made no effort to seem humane. As he approached Lucita, the darkness he constantly exuded drained away most of the impression made by the passing headlights, and Lucita gave up her watching to face him. When he spoke, it was in a deep, quiet tone, given a distinctive harshness thanks to calculated neglect of any effort to sound human. "Lucita. Is there anything wrong with the books?"

Lucita noticed the studied absence of rituals of hospitality, either Arabic or Sabbath. She was acutely aware of occupying an indeterminate position, since the highest-ranking Sabbath authority to spend much time on her case had disappeared into the Abyss nearly a month ago and the others were occupied with more pressing matters. It wasn't

all clear to her whether any other chosen leader of the Sabbat would or should feel obligated to agree with Bishop Andrew's judgment that she should be considered Sabbat. Nor could she readily read Munther's reactions; even his aura wore unfamiliar details. "Good evening, Excellency. No, there's nothing wrong with the books. I merely wanted to speak with you, as well."

"Ah, conversation is one of the riches of life. And of the afterlife. What shall we converse about?" He made a sweeping gesture toward the chairs gathered around the room's central table. For one moment some of his old existence surfaced, and stirred old memories in Lucita. Here was a gentleman of the Mediterranean world as it had been before modernity, greeting a lady of the Mediterranean world with confidence and humor. She missed the days when she experienced such things as a lady who could move openly, rather than in disguises and borrowed forms. She missed the days. She did not think she should tell Munther that.

"I want to converse about your sire, if you're amenable." Very briefly, Munther froze in place. Only a trained observer would have noticed the interruption in his move toward the center of the room, but then his guest was one of the best-trained observers in the Cainite world. "Dear Fatimah. Yes. Well. I don't have a great deal to say about her, really."

"I remember you as a youngster, still adjusting to the Cainite condition. You seemed then to go back and forth between worshipping her and hating her. If you had your wish now, what would her fate be?"

He thought about it as he took his accustomed seat. He seemed to regain composure as he rested his body in a familiar old chair. "Most inquisitors wouldn't get an answer to that question, of course, and if you were to discuss it, I would regard it as a grave breach of my hospitality. I trust I'm clear." He was four hundred years younger than she was, but he'd lived another fifteen years as a mortal, and now he seemed very much the mature man speaking authoritatively to the somewhat ignorant aristocratic young woman barely out of childhood. Nor was this entirely an illusion, since he had

centuries of experience in one place in one community of vampires, which accustomed him to power in a way that Lucita's existence did not.

"Yes, Excellency."

"With that in mind, then, I will say freely that when the time comes for the Sabbat to rise up and strike, I expect to take Fatimah as my personal captive. I will break her will into as many pieces as it takes for her to admit that she loves me as I loved her, even now when I have set that love behind. I will hear her say these things and know that she speaks the truth, and then I will destroy her." He stretched out his hands, reminding Lucita of an orchestral conductor bringing a symphony to its close. "Did you expect anything else?"

Lucita tipped her head. "No, Excellency, that's what I expected. I was simply curious, having thought much lately about my own sire and what I would have him do or be, if it were in my power. Then I remembered that you have a somewhat similar relationship with yours. Hence the question."

Munther sat upright. "In my capacity as your superior in the Sabbat, as the chosen and confirmed master of the Sabbat in this domain, I must ask: Do you feel suicidal? If you intend or are inclined to commit an act of self-destruction, it is now your duty to tell me so. The wishes of one oblivion-seeking failure cannot be allowed to jeopardize the security and integrity of my work here."

The force of his question caught her by surprise, and she had to think for a moment. She wasn't accustomed to dealing with the matter quite so directly. "No, Excellency, I do not wish to destroy myself at this time or in your domain. I have not lost interest in surviving."

"Very well, then. Nonetheless, I believe it would be appropriate for you to remove yourself from Cairo in reasonably timely manner. If you wish to seek guidance, perhaps you should deal with one of the other authorities still here from last month. Let us say that I do not think it would be wise for the new month to begin with you still in residence without my explicit authorization. Now take your books and go."

"Yes, Excellency."

Wednesday, 6 September 2000, 7:30 PM
Cairo Tower Sheraton
Cairo, Egypt

It amused Lucita to occupy Colin Davidsage's suite—not the most luxurious place she'd ever occupied, but comfortable enough, and with space for Angelica to go about her own pursuits. Lucita wasn't particularly clear on what those pursuits were at the moment. She knew vaguely that after the success of Angelica's hunt for the hit man/observer, the ghould woman had been studying surveillance tactics with the ghouls who worked for Munther. Right now she didn't much care; as long as Angelica was ready if wanted and out of the way when not, Lucita could simply ignore the servant she'd made.

The sun would set in a few minutes, and the blood had begun to stir in Lucita's cold veins. She wouldn't achieve real consciousness for most of another hour—all vampires resisted waking to varying degrees, and the more detached they were from human feelings and passions, the harder it was to wake soon after sunset. Over the centuries, Lucita had gone from needing mere minutes to emerge from slumber to her current condition, and she knew that it was the customary pattern for her kind.

Tonight her slumbering mind gathered itself enough to enter into a dream. In the next room, Angelica heard a very faint groan come from her owner, and she shuddered. The scars were all gone now, but she retained the painful memory of what happened when she last tried to protect her owner and rouse her from that obviously unpleasant condition. This time Lucita would have to handle it on her own.

Lucita becomes aware of herself standing on the battlements of the Aljafería, the castle where she'd grown up, not long after sunset. The village of Zaragoza and the surrounding valley are flooded with rich ruddy light, while the mountains to the west loom black and knife-edged in front of where the sun went down. Nobody is very close to her, but the castle was filled with the noises of life.

Her father and Uncle Ramiros ride out on some unknown business to the south, leading a company of knights and soldiers. Her mother takes the other children out into the fields to the north. Servants gather and pack gear for villagers to carry away on stout wagons.

Gradually Lucita realizes that the castle is emptying out. Nobody comes in; they only leave. She would like to leave as well, but only those with a mission are able to depart (she somehow knows), and nobody has given her such a duty. Several have offered one to her, she realizes regretfully, but she declined them all, and so now she must wait.

As full night descends, the castle's last occupants make their way on out, and Lucita is alone. Now she is free to roam through all the castle. Some of the servants remembered to light the lamps and candles, though not all had, and it is not altogether dark, just dim and heavily shadowed. She wishes that the servants hadn't removed all the mirrors when they left, as she feels her hair graying and wishes she could check it. The thought of looking into a pool of water occurs to her, only to depart with the recollection that the wells are poisoned and would poison her if she gazed into them.

The chapel bells ring out in a dissonant carillon. It sounds like they're running into each other, and being pulled in completely unsynchronized ways. The horrible noise draws her to the chapel. Changing into a suitable gown, as best she can without the aid of mirrors, she crosses the courtyard to see who calls. The altar glows with votive candles, but there isn't anyone visible.

"Hello?" She calls out uncertainly.

"Hello...." The words float down from the bell tower. They have the musical harmony that the bells themselves now lack, and she can't identify the speaker. So she steps closer, to peer up the shaft.

"Hello?"

Father Monçada drifts down the length of the bell tower, supported by his obvious holiness. He casts no shadows, preferring to hold them in for his own purposes at his own times. "Hello, daughter."

"But you're not my father," she objects.

"Oh no?" he says indulgently. "Then where is your father?"

"He rode off and left me here all alone."

"Do you not give thanks in your prayers each night that your father does not abandon you the way so many lords of our time abandon their daughters?"

Lucita nods. This is unquestionably true. "Oh, yes."

"Well then," the priest says. "The man who rode off and left you here all alone cannot be your father, can he?"

Something seems wrong with this, but Lucita can't quite put her finger on it. With each abortive attempt at objection, she sees that the priest gains stature and authority. Her denial makes him great. Finally she asks about it. "How is it that you grow great on my refusal to accept you?"

"Ah, best beloved, you nourish the hollow tree that is my soul. Through adversity all things grow. I become greater so that in the end I will prevail and you will accept my rightness."

"But I don't want to strengthen you!" she objects.

"What you want matters very little, best beloved. What counts is what you do and why you do it. You wish to fight against me. Very well, but understand that this is the consequence. Knowing this and persisting in it, we see that you must indeed want it, or you would do otherwise." Now a cardinal, he smiles benevolently at her. Overhead, the fires of hell begin to devour the ceiling.

"Then the only way I can stop you is to do what you want?"

"Precisely right, my daughter. There is no future for you anywhere in heaven or earth except within my embrace, doing my will." He smiles more widely, and the darkness within him rises out of his smile to form a canopy against the approaching inferno. "Step in and be safe, daughter."

"No," she decides, and deliberately steps back. As the fires of hell melt the floor, she can look down and see heaven. It touches the earth just once, beneath her sire's feet, and slopes steeply away. If she were to fall, she knows, she would be utterly broken against the pearl of great price and the stone that the builders rejected. Nonetheless, she would not obey this man, who claims to be her father but had not ridden out and therefore could not be what he claimed.

He lifts a cautionary finger. "Remember that your refusal makes me stronger." He demonstrated by holding up the gates of hell with one hand, and absently banged the doors open and closed.

Damned souls crowd up in search of relief, but upon finding the cardinal standing on the threshold, they wait patiently for the opportunity to fly. "There is in the end nothing you can do or be but what I want of you. You will accept this, because you must."

"No!"

Lucita woke and wondered if she'd actually spoken that final refusal aloud. The air was still, and she decided that she had not. She had, however, sweated blood during her dream, and had to wipe it off while it was still somewhat viscous.

This was not the first time she'd dreamed of her now-destroyed sire, of course. She still wasn't sure if he had actually installed psychic commands to send her messages in the event of his destruction—in some ways it hardly mattered whether her own mind was haunting her this way or whether he had pushed it into doing so. In either case she was suffering from increasingly frequent and blatant encounters like this, undermining her faith in her ability to act independently. If she didn't find an answer soon, she feared, she would break from simple exhaustion.

She remembered listening to military commanders now and again, and their repeated refrain: When there is no acceptable outcome to a question, change the terms. She could not bring the old bastard back from the dead. She could not refuse to slumber. She could not change the contents of her subconscious mind, not without submitting to outside manipulation. But she *could* change how she responded on a conscious level. And a series of connections that she'd tried to avoid in the past suddenly came together now with the inevitable rightness of a mosaic, or a chain.

The cardinal had given up on anything resembling a human ethos long before she was born. Any humane appearance he'd made in public had been a carefully crafted act, perpetrated by one who believed that no lie counted—no sin of any kind counted—as long as it was in service to the mission of divine wrath. He had seen himself as a damned agent of the holy God, thrust into darkness to serve the purposes of the Lord of light. Anyone who fell into his clutches, including Lucita herself, had proven themselves his

fitting prey, he believed, since if God wanted to stop the cardinal, God could do so. Those who escaped must have the Lord's favor, or at least a destiny to meet judgment at some other hands.

This outlook always repelled Lucita. It struck her as an elaborate self-justification, a most convenient excuse for the cardinal to do whatever he pleased and feel no pang of conscience about it. She held herself to a higher standard, one which made no accommodation like the cardinal's creed, and...

And had very little to show for it, that was the first of the insights she had to acknowledge. Trying to live like a moral, upright human lady had not served her well. The increasing demands of vampiric survival—blood, most of all, and the violence required to resist her various enemies, and all the rest of the lies and sundry immoralities—wore her down, over time. She knew that she was more prone to killing rages than she had been while young, much more likely to drop into some extreme mental state and stay there. Obsession came easy, recovery hard. If she allowed herself to look honestly at her circumstances, it was clear that she would lapse into permanent frenzy of some sort in a matter of decades. Perhaps she could survive another century as a primarily self-directed individual, and perhaps not, but there was no question of her making it much farther than that.

In theory she could force herself to regain lost moral ground. She would have to give up her career as an independent assassin, of course, and she would probably have to flee the Sabbat. Young vampires still retaining some of their old vital energy could engage in the moral jury-rigging necessary to engage in the Sabbat's rites without altogether giving up their humanity, but she was old and rigid now. She could not perform the rites half-heartedly, and doing them whole-heartedly meant accepting more physical, mental, and moral violence than she was already committing. In addition, any effort to drag herself back to something like a humanely virtuous moral state would mean isolating herself from mortal society as well as Cainite. A truly virtuous soul could not risk the petty thefts and lies which were the basic coin of survival as a vampire among kine.

Lucita did not know that she trembled while standing in the midst of her hotel room, oblivious to the view outside her windows. She had no thought for her body.

Vampiric alternatives to human moral codes were ancient. If indeed there had been a world flood, then at least some of them must date back to antediluvian times. The roads or *viae* held well-defined places in Cainite communities, offering direction for those wishing or needing to leave their humanity behind. The lord of a particular domain might ban the practice of some of them, based on his judgment about expected complications, but the basic tenets of each were widely promulgated, available for analysis and proselytizing. Among these, the Road of Night reflected the Lasombra founder's ambitions—to be supreme in all dealings with others, to find others' weaknesses and bend them to the founder's will or destroy them, to be the object of absolute terror. There were others, as well, from the Road of Heaven favored by Lucita's lost mentor Anatole to... stranger things. Stories circulated of paths devoted to turning the worshippers of demon insect gods into things like their masters, of paths designed to allow vampiric minds to fly free of their bodies, of almost anything the teller could dream. Lucita knew that many of the strangest stories were the truest, too.

So the Sabbat's innovation was not simply the construction of new moral codes. What distinguished the Sabbat's new Paths of Enlightenment was the very systematic effort they put into building whole systems very quickly. And the results *worked*, to a surprising degree. In the course of eighty or a hundred years, Sabbat scholars achieved as many insights into the Cainite condition and how it might be managed as their predecessors had in several thousand years. From time to time Lucita wondered about this, as she did about the Vaulderie. Precisely who had sponsored those insights? Whoever it might have been, they'd (she was almost sure it was "they" rather than "he" or "she") kept quiet, and let the work speak for itself. Many of the crucial texts circulated entirely anonymously and with attention to covering the authors' trails that rivaled the best practices of modern security forces. The words were just *there*, wending

their way through Cainite networks, and they spoke impressive truths.

The truth of the moment was that Lucita *wanted* to look in some different direction. She was tired of thinking in terms of a slow slide from what she had been to an inevitable doom, and it wasn't just the fear of extinction that made her think so. Just as she'd defined her actions in negative terms—being whatever would most effectively inconvenience her sire—so with her moral code, which had consisted primarily of being no more sinful than she could usually manage. It had been quite a long time since she had had any positive ideals, something she strove *toward* that meant more than just surviving. She was ready to give up her way of thinking and feeling.

Lucita shuddered, though again she wasn't aware of it. She knew as well as anyone not already on a road, or a path, could how difficult the change was. Something in the psyche resists demolition and rebuilding on new lines. The vampire wishing to commit to a new way of belief had to first purge the old impulses, and that happened only through systematic sin. There'd been a heresy in early Christendom which said that because the whole world belonged to the Devil, enlightenment could come only by violating every law and norm, to break the hold of the world-system on one's soul. She had no clue as to whether it was true for human beings, but it certainly was for vampires. Only the dedicated, sustained transgression of all one's inner restraints could create the openness that allowed new doctrines to find their way through the conscious and subconscious mind. Of course the same transgression led directly to a largely uncontrolled state of rampant aggression.

She would need a mentor, a keeper, for the transition: someone who understood the path she would wish to follow and who was capable of holding her in check during the time she'd be out of control. The first requirement fit a fair number of vampires she knew, outside the clan as well as in. The second... that was harder. How many elders available to act as mentor were capable of dealing with her in a frenzy-driven, highly unfair fight? That list was a short one. After a few minutes' thought, she made a phone call.

Wednesday, 6 September 2000, 9:50 PM
Four Seasons Hotel Cairo
Cairo, Egypt

De Polanco had a simple policy about havens while abroad: he wanted the best. He enjoyed having the mortal world's best-trained lackeys serve his needs, and it gave him a chance to mingle with many movers and shakers. His time of being deeply concerned with the details of human affairs had passed long ago, but he still enjoyed cultivating the occasional attachment. Mortal society was more interesting when its political and social leaders occasionally did horribly self-destructive things without having any clear reason why, and de Polanco set up a few such catastrophes each year, when circumstances allowed.

Tonight, he thought, it would be good to go stir up some more mischief of that sort. A Spanish gentleman with broad if vaguely defined connections to key manufacturers and government ministries would have no trouble obtaining semiformal appointments for late dinners with local officials. And after that, well, they would remember only what he instructed them to. Granted that the Egyptian economy was already in fairly bad shape, he nonetheless felt sure that with a few minutes' effort he could ensure that it became worse in much more interesting ways.

His train of thought abruptly derailed thanks to a phone call. He gave that number to a very select handful of associates; it would be worth answering. "De Polanco."

"Excellency, it's Munther."

"Yes, Excellency. What brings me to your attention tonight?"

"I've been asked to request a meeting with you on behalf of another of our guests."

De Polanco nodded, before remembering that it was a useless gesture in a phone call. "And clearly you have accepted the request. Tell me who it is."

"I will. But first I must remind you that as guests here, you are both under the protection of the domain only insofar

as you avoid jeopardizing our ability to pursue our own ends. If you were to engage in a conflict of any sort that interfered with my plans, I would reluctantly have to apply corrective discipline," Munther said.

"But of course, Excellency. I have enjoyed your hospitality and would wish to do nothing to disturb it. Now tell me who this other guest is."

"Lucita."

De Polanco was now glad that Munther couldn't see him. "Now this is a surprise. Did she say what her business with me might be?"

"No, Excellency." Munther was smooth. "She merely provided me a phone number—for her hotel, I believe—and requested that I pass it along to you, along with noting that she agreed to the same stipulation about order in the domain that you just did."

"Well. Thank you, Excellency. I'll take that number now." Apparently it wouldn't be necessary to mess with deputy under-ministers of finance to have some fun this evening.

Wednesday, 6 September 2000, 10:31 PM
Cairo Tower Sheraton
Cairo, Egypt

"Lucita here."

"Good evening, childe of Monçada."

"Good evening, Excellency. Thank you for returning my call."

"It's been rather a while since I last returned a social request of yours. Seven hundred and seventy-six years, I believe, or thereabouts."

"Strange as it may seem, I didn't call just to harass you."

"Oh no? Be as that may, what makes you think that I have an interest in doing anything but harassing you? You always were a good target."

"I want your help."

"Of course you do. Unfortunately, the first step in any help I might provide would be to break down your pathetic little self-righteous hallucination of yourself as...."

"I wish to undertake the study of the Path of Night. I seek your aid as guide in this matter."

A long silence ensued.

"Excellency, you seem to have lost your voice."

"Is this a prank?"

"No, Excellency."

"I must know what led you to such a decision. Wait, I need to know more than is worth saying over the phone. We must meet in person."

"As you say."

"You know the way to the Great Pyramid, I believe. I will see you there at midnight."

"Thank you, Excellency."

"Don't thank me. Don't say anything. Just be prepared to offer an explanation."

Thursday, 7 September 2000, 12:00 AM
Great Pyramid of Giza
Outside Cairo, Egypt

Lucita had imagined the pyramids would be dark in the middle of the night. She arrived in a cab to find the area brightly lit, with parking lots and closed concession stands to one side, ongoing excavations on the other. Few people moved around at this hour, apart from archaeologists racing to get as many useful data as possible before their permits ran out, but it was not a favorable tactical environment. The pyramids themselves, fortunately, weren't illuminated, and she could go around to the far side to speak with de Polanco more comfortably.

She wore a simple pants suit and windbreaker, and with her Aragonese complexion didn't look wildly unlike the daughters of Egyptian officials and businessmen, out for some late-night stroll. Nobody questioned her as she proceeded through the lit areas, around to the eastern face of the Great Pyramid. Here the massive bulk of the thing blocked out not only the garish light close at hand but most of the lights of the city. She could make out the brighter summer stars and pace through the pyramid's immense shadow.

Precisely at midnight, de Polanco emerged from the pyramid's shadow, striding with a little twist to his heels that Lucita recognized would have accommodated non-existent spurs. Still a knight at heart, she thought, but she suppressed a smile. "Thank you for answering," she began.

"Let's not be hasty," he snapped. "I'm here to listen. You may not like the decision I make once you tell me what you think you're doing."

"Nonetheless," she said, "your being here without attacking me outright is itself a courtesy that I appreciate."

"Speak," he said. "I have responsibilities, not that you'd understand that. Persuade me that it's worth my while to remain."

For the next hour they walked, around the grounds and up the outside of the pyramid itself, climbing without

interruption to the conversation. Mostly Lucita spoke, explaining how she felt when her sire disappeared into the maw of the thing he'd called out of the Abyss, about the way the news of Anatole's destruction struck her, about the struggles of the past year. He prompted her for more details about her meeting with her old Assamite ally the year before and about her more recent clash with Fatimah al-Lam'a, and about her dealings with her new ghoul. Finally they came to a halt, near the base of the pyramid's eastern face.

"I don't especially *want* to believe you, you know," he said. "It would be much more convenient if I could go to the prisci and say with a straight face, 'No, it was all a trick in the end, so I destroyed her and that's the last of Monçada's lineage. So sad in a way.' That's what I *want*." She didn't interrupt.

"Unfortunately for me, I do believe you. Or at least I'm not entirely convinced this is a trick, and feel I ought to give you some opportunity to demonstrate your sincerity."

He looked back up the pyramid. "The real question at this point is whether I can make an effective mentor for you. And you know what comes next."

She nodded. "I do. Get started."

De Polanco drew the shadows running along each step of the pyramid into a dense shroud and draped it over her. She'd be intensifying her senses to overcome as much of its obstruction as she could, and in a moment she'd race out of it at supernatural speed. Up or down? Up, he guessed, to give her the advantage of position. He disliked the conventional Lasombra practice of shadow "tentacles," preferring to think of the writhing extensions of darkness he commanded as little maelstroms or whirlwinds. Thus he set up a gauntlet at the upper edge of his conjured shroud that resembled a storm front in miniature, a roiling zone of black hurricanes seen from God's vantage point looking down on the world. Lucita did indeed charge out of the main mass of the shroud into this turbulence, and nearly stumbled upon impact. Blood spurted from her left arm and shoulder where miniature funnel clouds etched wounds across her skin, until she closed off the gashes with a moment's concentration.

He let the shroud dissipate as soon as she was clear of it, and soothed the darkness winds as he set off in pursuit of her. The familiar heat of forced blood flow erupted through his legs as it transformed desiccated muscles and nerves. He also took the seconds necessary to begin unleashing the shadow-soul within himself, enhancing his physical form with manifest darkness. For de Polanco this was always a liberating feeling, a sense of coming into his true nature. He'd spend all night, every night, outside the confines of flesh if only he had a perpetual supply of blood to reinfuse the necessary vital energy. Knots of pure blackness coursed through his veins and across his skin like ground-hugging lightning, and in places his skin began ever so slightly to soften into black vapor. His skin became a dull mottled gray, and where it was darkest, finger-length tendrils of tangible shadow stretched out to taste the world around them. His eyes became pure black from lid to lid; his arms fell into shadow and split into branching clublike limbs. He was more himself now, and ready for the fight.

Lucita, he knew, didn't relish the comparable transformation she was putting herself through even now. For her the body was still in some sense truly herself, and the unleashed Abyssal power inside her the foreign intruder. Her aura radiated distaste and resignation. He would have to correct her there, once he defeated her. Her shadow-infused self had a classical look to it, like black marble set in motion, and tenebrous wings stretched behind to stabilize her rapid pace.

De Polanco was a bit slightly faster than Lucita tonight—he suspected that the difference was mostly a matter of comfort and familiarity with movement in this form, which was for him not just an effective tactic but a means of self-expression. He pulled level with her a few yards from the pyramid's summit and flung himself sideways, tumbling up to just the point where she expected to find footing. They tangled and fell together, his half-dozen forearms beating at her shell as her polished legs kicked toward his vulnerable knees and ankles.

She was on her feet before he was, by what would have been a single beat of his heart if it were beating. He saw with admiration that she didn't waste the moment hesitating; she

must have been considering her options even as she fell with him. Lucita threw her hands together at his head so fast that the air cracked as they passed, and connected solidly... or rather she would have connected solidly if there were anything solid there. But de Polanco had learned how to make the sides of his head soft and partially intangible precisely as a defense against such blows. Only the necessary parts of his brain and nervous system retained full solidity. All around them was a clutching thick mush that merely looked fleshly. Lucita's hands actually caught for a moment beneath his skin before she could yank them loose.

The moment's delay was enough for his purpose. He wrapped his arms around her and threw a flurry of blows at her spine. Bone splintered beneath her shadowy carapace, and she arced backward in pain. That provided the opening for the small tendrils all across his chest to grab her torso and neck, and twist her in counterpoint to the blows from behind. She might have wriggled free and continued, but he said, "I think it's clear that I can stop you."

She gave up struggling. "Yes."

"All right. We'll begin an effort to free you of your shackles. Come, you've lost blood; we'll want to be full before continuing."

Friday, 8 September 2000, 11:22 PM
Cairo Tower Sheraton
Cairo, Egypt

Lucita had hoped that Willa might call again, but "Ian's" communications system remained inert. Apparently it was up to him to initiate contact. Christobal and Angelica (who was showing a fine aptitude for the interrogative arts as she overcame her scruples) extracted all the necessary information before tying the spy to the front of a neighborhood mosque to greet the sun, but Lucita preferred not to use it just yet.

Tonight she faced the members of the hunting pack. "I'm going away," she said simply.

Andrew allowed himself a slight measure of pushiness. "Thank you so much for demonstrating a proper respect for the chain of command. I realize that this is new to you, but...."

"I'm going away with de Polanco, to study the Path of Night. Angelica will accompany to attend to daytime needs."

"Oh." Andrew shut himself up, hard. Methuselahs took precedence over newcomer pack leaders and bishops.

"I've been thinking about what to do next, and I've decided to lay claim to my sire's vacant position after de Polanco and I agree I've reached the point where I can pursue further study on my own."

"You... um..." Andrew was the only one who spoke, but the others clearly shared his confusion. "Um, do you mean the archbishopric of Madrid, or..."

"Yes, that's precisely what I mean. I know the city and have the power it takes to preside."

"You're also the new kid on the block when it comes to the Sabbath," Barry pointed out. He cringed, slightly, aware of just how much more personal strength she had than he did.

"That's true," she acknowledged calmly. "But the whole Sabbath was new once. The point of the position is to wield authority, and I am fit to do it."

Andrew mulled it over. "Your mentor will tell you when he thinks you're ready, then."

"That's right."

"Will you be expecting to rejoin the pack, or will you go for Madrid solo?"

"I would very much like the pack to join me. I'll need allies, and you are collectively good enough to..." She paused and smiled. "More than good enough to get me there." They all smiled at that, feeling great relief. This wasn't going to be a fight after all, or at least there was hope that it wouldn't come to that.

"All right," Andrew said, "I have business back home to take care of, and I believe some of the others do as well. We'll do that, then return here to wait for word from you. In the meantime, we have training to do."

Tuesday, 12 September 2000, 8:19 PM
The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela
Santiago de Compostela, Spain

It had been more than two hundred years since Lucita visited this cathedral, built on the site of the alleged tomb of the Apostle James (or Santiago, in Spanish), the patron saint of the Spanish war against the Moors. Since well before her time, this place had been a destination for pilgrims from all over Europe, seekers of some confirmation of God's power over a too-often wicked world, petitioners for miracles, or those simply hoping for comfort. The cathedral itself had changed very little—more construction around the periphery, but that was to be expected wherever a pilgrimage site continued to attract pilgrims. The town itself had changed quite a bit more, and again, that was no surprise. The small municipal airport's crew hastened to provide good service for the charter jet belonging to two such aristocratic Spaniards, though they felt obliged to extend little courtesy to the exotic Asian pilot. The same eager service greeted them at one of the small luxury hotels in the center of town. Now they looked at the cathedral in the last traces of twilight.

Coming here was Lucita's idea, an insight that emerged during her long conversations with de Polanco about the qualities that she felt defined her innermost self. It had been a very long time since she cared in any conscious way about religious duty, but that recent nightmare confirmed her growing intuition that her humanity was tied to the Roman Catholic faith of her mortal years. "I need a pilgrimage away from that goal."

De Polanco agreed readily. "That's a good starting place at least. Of course there's a certain difficulty, or rather a pitfall to be aware of. Blasphemy too easily becomes an affirmation of what it claims to reject. To truly blaspheme is to consciously and carefully use the symbols of the faith against itself, to draw power from the void created when the blasphemed-against collapses. Make sure that you do not fall into the trap of secretly affirming what you seek to reject."

Now they stood off to one side of the cathedral courtyard, watching the crowd gathered for evening Mass. "This still means something to you, doesn't it?" de Polanco asked.

"It does. It's not just the faith—it's the symbol of the nation, too. This is a *Spanish* place, not just a *Christian* place."

"Ah, yes, you would have had that in mind when you made the pilgrimage from St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port yourself, back when you traveled with that angelic fool Anatole." He saw her bristle. "None of that, now."

In that moment, she would have gladly struck him down. Indeed, she got most of the way to doing just that. Her fists clenched, vital fire flared in her limbs, her muscles tensed for launch. Her conscious mind intervened just in time, reminding the rest of her that she needed him. Gradually, painfully, she returned to a resting position.

"Are you quite done?" he asked conversationally. "Very good. As I was saying, this is the place we must begin to cut yourself away from what was. In time we'll see about filling the gaps with something new, but we start with the removal." He turned to Angelica. "Miss Trinh, your mistress does not require your services tonight. Return to your hotel and wait for word from me."

Angelica heard the first part of de Polanco's message clearly. The rest blurred as her will crumbled in the face of his psychic assault. She was vaguely aware that he had given her desires, rather than their originating anywhere in herself, but it didn't matter. The command must be obeyed; there was no other possibility. She waved briefly at her owner, who would be in touch with her when she wanted Angelica again, and departed for the hotel.

Lucita watched her ghoul go. "Was that sentimentality, Excellency?"

"Not at all. You invested some effort in training her, and it would be foolish to waste that pointlessly. I thought about having you destroy her as part of your conditioning, but there are other targets suitable for that. This way you won't run the

risk of destroying her accidentally. It's intelligent management of your assets during your upcoming incapacitation."

"Ah," Lucita said for the second time.

"Tell me the first station of the cross."

Lucita was already answering before her mind consciously retrieved the memory. "Jesus is condemned to death."

"Very good. Now, look out at the crowd. Think of them as all the children of God, made in His image. Look at them as adopted into the family of God thanks to Jesus' work. Look at them, and see what in them condemns them to death. Then condemn them."

She stared out across the courtyard, and let herself see the things she normally denied. They were in truth an untidy lot, all awkward motion and ill-formed thought. Their auras were not vibrant or complex, but bland and simple, showing base passions and weak virtues. Compared to the purity of the building they gathered to enter, they were ugly. They disgraced the beauty of this artifact to the search for heaven.

Such thoughts had come to her countless times over the years, but she had always rejected them as temptations to self-indulgence. Now she sensed for the first time that a greater discipline, one which could support her through the endless nights to come, lay on the far side of these ideas and emotions. Her disgust at the deficiencies of the flesh fueled her transformation to Abyss-supported form, and now there was less of mortality than usual in her shining black perfection. Pillars of thick darkness lifted her body up into the air just as her mind rose over its own mortality.

She opened her mouth to speak, only to find that she had no words to utter. What emerged was a shriek, free of language, laden with her sorrow at wasted years and rage at all the mortal ties which had helped keep her bound to stasis for so long. The gathered crowd turned nearly as one, shivering in fright. They were not reassured to face a black angel fifteen feet above them, its arms raised in counter-benediction, emitting that horrible cry. A stampede began in short order.

"Thank you," de Polanco said as the courtyard emptied. "Right now we don't want a confrontation with the local holies or constables. Control yourself." As Lucita shrieked

on, oblivious to everything but the reeking well of hatred for herself and the world that lay in the center of her soul, he pushed himself up on shadow legs and slapped her repeatedly. At last she stared at him, blank eyed. "I said that's enough. Come."

Her metamorphosis began to fade. "I..." she struggled for the words. "I saw them all, and I *hated* them. Not a one of them deserved anything else."

"That's right," he answered immediately. "There is none righteous, no, not one. If some latter-day prophet were to bargain for the sparing of humanity if five righteous souls could be found, he'd lose. They *all* deserve judgment. That's the first lesson, and in your heart you already knew it. You just had to let it out."

Wednesday, 13 September 2000, 11:29 PM
Santiago Inn
Santiago de Compostela, Spain

"Remind me," de Polanco said, "what the second station of the cross is."

"Jesus bears his cross."

"And what does that suggest to you?"

Lucita considered it. She still felt a tremendous satisfaction at her actions of the night before—after centuries spent carefully protecting the secret of supernatural presence from humanity, she'd stepped out into the light and told them just what she thought of them. And she was here tonight having done so, not suffering consequences for it, simply discussing it all calmly with another survivor of a bygone age. Part of her still expected to suffer for it and was prepared to flee the prospect of judgment, but another part of her felt a growing confidence that she might now stand outside the laws that had governed her so far.

"Hmm," she said at last. "I pronounced sentence on them last night. Perhaps I should return to give them a taste of judgment now."

"Do you propose to crucify them, perhaps?"

"No, no, nothing so literal. I was thinking that since I told them my judgment from darkness, the next step would be to cast them into darkness."

De Polanco nodded. "You have a consistent symbology here, and that's a good sign. Hold onto it in the difficult times when you have trouble coordinating your thoughts."

"What do you mean?" Lucita asked warily.

"You know what indulgence in destructive passions means: You lose self-control. In time we can guide you into a new set of moral strictures, but the clearing takes its toll. You must be prepared to watch much of your 'higher self' boil away in the heat of the moment before it can coalesce into the new pattern. In that transitional time, you'll rely on the doctrines you practice now, so it's good that they're orderly."

"Ah."

"Yes, 'ah,'" he nodded to reinforce his own point. "But for now, let's go greet the midnight Mass, and you can show me how you propose to have them carry the cross."

Wednesday, 13 September 2000, 11:52 PM
The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela
Santiago de Compostela, Spain

The two vampires stood just where they had the night before. Again the crowd was thick, and a middle-aged man with the look of a manager bumped into Lucita. "Excuse me," he said.

"Take no notice of it," she answered.

"Such a terrible thing last night," he remarked, since they were exchanging words.

"What's so terrible," she asked, "about those in need of judgment hearing that they are in need of judgment?"

He looked surprised. "Please! That's the sort of thought I'd expect from a peasant stuck in the Middle Ages. Whatever it was they saw last night, it was no manifestation of the divine."

"You're very confident."

"I should be," he said with a mixture of pride and humility Lucita found deeply offensive. "I have conducted a systematic study of these things, which I shall publish as soon as Mother Church blesses me with proper funding."

"And what will you tell those who read your wise words?"

"Why, that condemnation is always and ever of the pit, that God never gives judgment without mercy, and that therefore the only call to repentance is that which inspires as well as torments."

A sudden fury filled Lucita. This arrogant little man reminded her too much of her sire in that deep conviction of self-righteousness. He would suffer. She closed her eyes.

"Are you all right, miss?" It was the last thing he said. Shadows drew up around his feet, and the shadows in his throat congealed into a sticky mass. He choked, gasping for breaths that would not come. The air all around them dimmed, and nearby bystanders also found themselves enmeshed in acrid, choking darkness. Lucita said nothing, concentrating on pouring her anger into the work of shadow summoning and control. She stepped back out of the

summoned cloud to observe its effects. Very faintly she could hear the thuds of people with weak hearts passing out or dying outright of the shock, and she smiled bitterly.

De Polanco watched her carefully, pleased at what he saw. Her rage only grew as she turned it loose. She sent the writhing mass of darkness drifting across the courtyard at the pace of a rapid walk. The frenzied flight of those who saw it coming pleased her. The cries of those knocked down and trampled by more successful runners pleased her. Above all, the screams and sighs of those suddenly cut off from the world by this darkness of more than night pleased her. The darkness pressed down on them, and it crushed those who lacked the strength to resist. She didn't notice de Polanco cloaking the two of them in a softer shadow so as to hide them from prying eyes.

Lucita let the darkness go only when she felt so drained of energy that she could no longer sustain it, and then a torrent of bloodlust drove her to suck dry the first handful of pilgrims so unfortunate as to fall within her grasp. She made no pretense at subtlety or elegance, simply seizing each in turn with crushing strength, siphoning off their blood in rich torrents, and casting aside their battered remains. Replenished, she ran off into the night, away from this place of iniquity.

De Polanco followed calmly on foot, occasionally nudging her in more or less the direction of the pilgrimage road, past Monte del Gozo and on toward Lavacolla. Rising hills and turns in the road soon put Compostela out of sight, and it would be another night before they heard a radio news report about the mysterious terrors at the cathedral. The authorities blamed Basque terrorists for the use of nerve gas and mind-altering chemicals, while spokesmen for the separatist factions suggested that it was all a Spanish or Catholic plot. The victims called for explanations, and the authorities said that it was all perfectly normal. Lucita laughed at that.

Friday, 15 September 2000, 10:33 PM
Pilgrimage Road
Near Arzua, Spain

Lucita had a moment of intense déjà vu. Walking along a road at night, talking of theological matters... very much as she'd once done with Anatole. Though now the topics of conversation were somewhat different. "So we are damned," she said, half questioning.

"Of course we are," de Polanco answered. "How could we be anything else? Surely you don't think that this condition is a *blessing*, do you? We are bound to the night, to the grave, to dependency on others' blood for our very survival. We lose control in a dozen different ways. Whenever we gather in a group, we try to subvert and destroy each other, and in solitude we go mad. We fall in love with those who will lead us to our doom; we hate those who made us. All of this leads us to destruction, and only sustained force of will allows any other outcome."

"Then why not just destroy ourselves?"

"You can if you want to. I won't stop you. I'm sure that the peasants would be glad to help, if you asked them."

"Does the Path of Night actually encourage you to say that?" She was genuinely curious.

"No, I encourage myself to say that because I'm impatient with folly. The Path says that you should survive precisely because you can. The fact that the curse does not destroy you is, under the circumstances, good evidence that we are intended for something despite all our handicaps."

"Hmm. There's a certain sense in that."

"Don't get too confused about the logic at work here," he reminded her. "This is more in the nature of revelation than arithmetic."

"Yes."

"With that in mind, look at the facts of your condition and draw the obvious conclusion: We are predators. So we should be *good* predators. The rest of the major tenets all build

on the crucial insight that we are called to do well what we must do to survive at all."

"This sounds remarkably convenient." Lucita scowled.

De Polanco smiled. "It isn't. It's one thing to say 'I am chosen of God as the perfect scourge' and another to actually behave like it. Being God's whip requires discipline beyond just 'see the kine, bite the kine.'"

Lucita thought about that. "I see."

"So." De Polanco changed the subject. "Tell me what lies ahead on the stations of the cross."

"I believe I combined two back there the second night. At the second station, Jesus bears his cross; at the third, he falls beneath it for the first time. At least some of those souls certainly fell."

"Indeed they did. So, the fourth step?"

"Jesus meets his holy mother along the way to Golgotha."

"That should be interesting."

Saturday, 16 September 2000, 3:52 AM
Outside Arzua, Spain

"This will do, I think," de Polanco said. They'd left the main road an hour ago to wander in search of a suitable place to spend the day. Now they stood in front of a two-story villa in the midst of fertile field, set a little back from the side road. Nobody could see them from here, and judging from the condition of the driveway, the residents had few visitors. "Kill them all."

"Don't you want to know more about them, first?"

"Not particularly. However many there are, you're more than a match for them, and that's all that concerns me. Go clean them all out. I want to rest."

"Is this one of the stations, in your estimation?"

"No, this is simply a matter of sanctuary."

Lucita felt the sickness rising in her again. This time she tried to detach her sense of self from the body performing the acts. Break down the door, grab the men who rushed to see what the noise was, break necks and slit throats. Feed. Search the halls. It was all very predictable, and all outside her body. Hands reached out, fangs sliced, and none of it had anything to do with her, surely. It took her isolated self some time to realize that the slaughtering body had fallen into bloodlust-incited frenzy. The body rampaged up and down through the villa, and in minutes all the inhabitants were dead. It then set down to mangle their bodies, contorting them into forms vaguely reminiscent of corn-husk dolls.

The last thing Lucita was aware of was the short sharp shock of two bullets to the back of her head. Healing started even before she hit the floor, but it was more than enough to drive her into premature slumber.

Tuesday, 19 September 2000, 7:59 PM
Outside Arzua, Spain

Lucita woke hungry. She didn't know that she'd slept all the way through Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, but she knew that her body seemed to have almost no blood left in it. The bedroom where she lay wasn't familiar, though the view out the window told her that this was the villa she vaguely remembered clearing out. It was a pity she'd killed them all; some fresh blood would be very welcome right now.

She wandered downstairs to find newspapers spread out on the dining room table. The headlines and front-page stories remained in the same vein as earlier reports. Any real evidence of the supernatural was quickly getting buried. That made her angry, and she determined to act in ways that they couldn't so readily cover up.

I should feel ashamed, Lucita thought to herself. I should feel like the perpetrator of heinous deeds. But I just feel hungry and eager to move on. Was feeling guilty about the absence of guilt a sign of progress? She wasn't sure.

A few minutes later, de Polanco descended from the room he'd chosen to sleep in. "Ah, you're awake. Good. It's time to resume our journey."

"What did you do when they searched here?" This was a highly irregular and informal sort of greeting, but she no longer felt interest in such niceties.

"The policeman hasn't been born who can find something I don't want him to find," de Polanco said. "It was enough to lie low for the one day of their investigation, then come back out. And now none of them will think that there's any reason to check here again." He nodded at the papers. "So what do you think of your work so far?"

"I don't really know."

"That's good, right now. The whole point of this exercise is to leave your soul knowing that it's unanchored. We can fill it up after that. But as I said, it's time to move." He stood up and gestured for her to go out the door. They headed back up toward the pilgrimage road. "Now then, let's continue."

"We have already established that our role is to exist as predators. But all targets are not of equal merit. We have a particular affinity with and authority over those who seek out evil, whether they admit it to themselves or not. The holy is not our lawful prey, and I don't need to remind you of the difficulties we face in trying to stalk and feed on those possessed of genuine virtue. It's the rest of the race that's been given to us.

"Death is not really the point. Fear is the point."

"Eh?" Lucita was confused as well as groggy.

"I said, fear is the point. The phrase 'holy terror' is not a meaningless one. In the end, our target is not so much the sinner as sin itself. As the preeminent vessels of sin and degradation, we inculcate our spirit in ours. We triumph when they fear, when they hate, when they prey on one another. We are chosen to fill the world with sinners, and wherever we succeed, that part of the world becomes ours. God gathers to Himself the devout few who resist our temptations and intimidations; all the others are ours to do with as we will."

"What would happen if we killed some of the righteous few?"

"We cannot. Those whom God truly loves, He protects. If we can kill someone, then no matter how pure he seemed to us, he was guilty of offenses before God and had to pay the penalty, which is always death in the end."

"Ah."

"Ah, indeed. But enough of the sermon for now. You must feed, and it is time for you to face another test. Your assignment for the night is to drink to the death anyone you feed on at all. Fill the road with corpses."

Now Lucita felt the familiar sickness again. She wished that she was ready to adopt the Path of Night, but that deep resistance remained, and must be beaten into submission. So the war against herself continued, and the seekers of the apostle would continue to suffer for her difficulties.

Thursday, 21 September 2000, 8:28 PM
Laboreiro, Spain

This is how Lucita spent the night.

Rise in town shelter feed on host

Out into streets. see police. make police not see, pass on by.
feed on policeman just because

Hunt. Hunt is good I am good hunter I do God's work
destroying sinners I like to hunt

Behind me follows other vampire. he teaches me. my head
hurts from his teaching. I like to hunt

Crowd gathers too many out into the fields

Into the night

I like to hunt

Behind me follows other vampire. He... hurts me. I sleep
now.

De Polanco contented himself with following her for most of the night. She had created quite a panic among the pilgrims by now, with theories ranging from the nearly true to the absurd. He was sure that some authority must know the truth by now and be in the midst of searching for an experienced vampire hunter, but such things weren't easy to come by at the beginning of the twenty-first century. De Polanco judged that they had several more weeks before any real threat could arrive, and that would (he hoped) suffice.

In the meantime, it pleased him to watch the mighty Lucita reduced to such a condition. She'd woken on the brink of frenzy and plunged right in at the slightest provocation. At the end of the night he would shoot her in the head again, somewhere in a remote corner of a field or vineyard, and wait for her to recover.

Sunday, 24 September 2000, 9:43 PM
Laboreiro, Spain

Tonight Lucita woke hungry again, but feeling more in control of herself. She would not, she thought, fly into that killing rage at the slightest provocation. It was about time for her to make some more actual choices. "How long this time?"

De Polanco was pacing along the perimeter of the small grove of poplar trees where she rested out of sight, half buried in an old fox or badger den. "It's Sunday. You spent Thursday in a very impressive frenzy, and took this long to recover."

"I'm tired of this. I'm ready to advance to the next station."

"Very well, then. Lead on, and I will judge."

The town church had a distinctly Norman look to it—the legacy of devout crusaders hoping to help pilgrims along—and somehow that too offended Lucita. She wrapped shadows around herself and strode to the doors, slamming on them with her fists until a nervous little priest answered. She loomed over him, dark and terrible, and demanded, "Do you know who I am?"

He was terrified, but somehow he stood his ground. "You are a thing of the devil! Perhaps you are the great whore of Babylon, or some servant of hers, come to tempt me, but I resist!"

She pushed her way into the church, feeling no hesitation now. There was no holiness here to delay her in the pursuit of her mission. "Look at me!"

He stared into her eyes, which flickered yellow and black. Shadows formed a negative halo behind her head. Fresh thoughts cascaded into his frightened mind. "No... you are not God's minister...."

"Oh no? Do you not tell the sheep that God is terrible in beauty and wrath? Do you not recognize purity when you see it?"

His will crumbled. All his fears about his inadequacy, about whether there might be some qualification for salvation he lacked without knowing it, came to the fore. "Oh, God..."

"Not God," she corrected him. "I am the maiden who has never known a man. I am the pure vessel of the power of judgment. *Do you know who I am?*"

"Mary, Mother of God, have mercy on me, a sinner...."

"There is no mercy for you, now or ever, wretched sinner. I am the mother of your judgment, which is not flesh, never has been flesh, and never will be flesh. Judgment comes to you from the darkness which was before God spoke his first words and will be when the last fire burns it all away. I am the mother of your despair and failure. Your life will henceforth be empty, and you will not dare to take it for fear of what lies waiting for you when earth and flesh do not hide the rest of the truth."

She strode out, leaving him behind to sob quietly. Outside, she told de Polanco, "He met his mother on the road, and got precisely as much comfort as he deserved."

Monday, 25 September 2000, 10:02 PM
Outside Laboreiro, Spain

"I'm worried, Excellency."

"About what? This is all progressing very satisfactorily, in my estimation." That was true, too, and he hoped she was reading his aura to check for signs of dishonesty. It was important that she feel very thoroughly convinced that he meant what he said at times like this.

"The time I spend in torpor. Waking seems harder each time. I worry that I'm on the brink of doing like so many elders do and just sleeping away a few years, or a few decades. I want to be active now, but I don't think this course is quite viable for very much longer."

"Hmm." He had to admit that she had a point there, and did so. "All right. Next time you frenzy and don't recover before sunrise, I will attempt to bring you down by some means other than head shots. If I can, I will—but if I need to use the usual means, I will. This had better be satisfactory."

"Yes, Excellency." Lucita wasn't happy about it, but it was better than nothing, she supposed. She'd had nightmares about waking up to find herself penned for blood sports gambled upon by mortal spectators. Anything at all that reduced the risk of long-term torpor was better than nothing.

"Now, let's return to the matter of doctrine. As you know, there are a number of distinct interpretations of the Path of Night, but they all have certain key tenets in common. Among them is agreement that the first and foremost sin is..."

Lucita struggled to recall, but her last lesson was all a frenzy-addled blur. "I don't remember."

"The first sin is *repentance*, Lucita. Repentance is for those whom God may accept. He will never accept us, and to act as though we think He might is to deny what He has made us. You can go nowhere in that lie; you must never accept the temptation to repent."

"But what should I do when I actually have made a mistake?"

"Acknowledge it and move on. Have you expressed error? Well, error is part of the kingdom of darkness. Were you ignorant? Ignorance is part of the kingdom of darkness. Therefore, you have nothing to be ashamed of. By correcting your mistake, you let yourself manifest more *interesting* parts of the kingdom, the dark truths given into our care to inflict on the rest of the world. But you truly sin only when you seek the light. That's for those appointed to escape us. Never repent."

"That sounds," she said after some consideration, "remarkably convenient."

"Oh, it is," he agreed. "In many ways it makes the rest of the Path possible."

They continued in quiet discussion as they made their way across the countryside. The land here was mostly flat, planted in grains and hops; Lucita recalled that it was renowned in her mortal days for mediocre beer, and suspected that such was still the case. From time to time they crossed dry or nearly dry stream beds. In winter flash floods would fill them, but that was months away yet. Finally they came to a stretch of poorly tended fields with a somewhat battered building in the middle of it. There was a strong smell of fresh young blood inside. Making their way around to the entrance, they saw a sign proclaiming the St. Joseph and St. Santiago Orphanage, affiliated with the Brotherhood of St. Luke.

"I think you know what you should do here," de Polanco said. "But remember that wildness is a tool, not the end. See if you can maintain control for now; you'll learn how to use the unleashed emotions later."

Rather to her surprise, Lucita felt none of the familiar sickness. That voice of conscience within her wasn't altogether gone, but it was certainly battered and at least as confused as she was. The urge to run amok was strong, but not beyond her ability to keep it in line. She nodded and said, "I understand."

The orphanage was two stories tall, and was clearly a converted farmhouse. What had been the barn was now workshops, and the public rooms mostly held small craft works of various kinds: wooden implements, leather boots and

accessories, dried fruits and vegetables arranged as decorative wreaths. It took her only a few minutes to establish that there was nobody here in the wee hours of the morning, and she passed up the stairs. The original layout remained nearly intact, with three or four children in each room rather than a few big common dormitories. Two middle-aged women slept in the room at the end of the hall, their door open so that they could hear any disturbances.

Lucita woke the first with a gentle shake. The woman looked up to find the vampire smiling down at her, then lost all conscious awareness. Lucita's force of will blasted through all the woman's mental defenses in an instant. "Come with me," Lucita told her. The woman nodded; she could scarcely do otherwise. "Drink of me," Lucita told her, and she lapped up the blood eagerly. Her strength grew as the blood suffused through her, and soon she was stronger than any of the others in the orphanage could be. "You are Simon of Cyrene," Lucita told her, "and you will help carry the cross for each of the others." The woman smiled, knowing that what Lucita said was true.

"Simon," Lucita said, "come and hold this one." The woman immediately stepped up and grabbed the sleeper in a stout double arm lock. The sleeper awoke as the new ghoul's grip tightened, and she cried out to her comrade. None of it mattered, of course—a lifetime of service together as nuns and then as retired nuns in the service of the orphanage which had raised them was all wiped away by one glance and a few drops of blood from the vampire. Lucita understood this and was glad. The captive was nothing more than the canvas on which Lucita might write the story of her own existence.

"The blood is the life," Lucita said to the captive. "Blood carries sin. Blood washes away sin. Blood defines us, makes us what we are—what you are, and what I am." The captive was now confused as well as aching. She had not expected anything like a sermon from this monstrous thing. Lucita took one of the captive's hands in her own and began to squeeze it, starting from the fingertips and working her way up. Soon the arm swelled as blood welled up against the constriction. It was obviously becoming more and more painful for the

captive. The ghoul had no thought for her friend's misery, merely pleasure at the thought of her new master speaking of holy things.

Finally the blood vessels in the captive's arm gave way all at once. The blood overwhelmed Lucita's fragile self-control, and the force of the Curse of Caine rose within her. Suddenly there was no more room for detailed plans and carefully considered rhetoric. There was only the blood and the need to feed. Lucita sucked eagerly at the wounds until the captive was altogether dry, and for some time thereafter, until she realized she was getting nothing but air from empty veins. Her senses ran at fever pitch, and she could smell the blood of each of the two dozen children still sleeping upstairs.

A single pocket of calm drifted in the midst of the cauldron of her passions. It said, "Remember the stations. They must bear the cross." As Lucita charged up toward her new targets, her ghoul in hot, holy pursuit, she ripped off part of the stairway's balustrade. It was suitably heavy in her hands—cedar, cut centuries ago, not that she had time now for any such niceties. She thought of it as the crossbeam of the cross on which she wanted to nail all the living, and it sufficed. Her ghoul paused to break loose a similar span for herself, since it was clearly what the angelic messenger wanted.

The calm voice within her didn't seek to stop the lethal beatings that followed. She went from bed to bed, smashing heads in with a single blow for each child. The calm part of herself was like a steersman in the storm, who recognized that he could not make the wind blow other than as it would, but who knew that with small shifts of his tiller, great changes might follow. The children might have survived to sound the alarm if she hadn't been driven from bed to bed before feeling that she could stop to feed on any of the remains. Her inner steersman kept her from feasting on the first corpses until all the necessary blows were struck. Then he stepped aside again to let the wind have its head, and she fell on the bodies with utter abandon.

Only the approach of morning deterred her. Now the steersman surfaced again, and gradually he positioned the sails so that they were no longer quite so taut in the wind. The

wind itself began to die. She was once again more than the beast unleashed, though she remained that too. The sight of the carnage she had wrought brought bloody tears to her eyes, but they weren't altogether tears of despair. There was a cruel joy there too—she had done this thing, and she had survived to tell it. She would not become like the “mountain men” of her youth, the crusaders driven mad with guilt and shame who became uncivilized predators between kingdoms. She did feel the guilt and shame, but she understood in that calm place that they were just the beginning of what she would feel. She would endure, and this would enrich her.

Just as she was about to leave the orphanage, she thought again of the ghoul she'd made. She deliberately released all the mental commands she'd imposed. “Remember what you have done and know that there is no mercy for you. You have carried the cross for them, my Simon of Cyrene, and it has marked you forever.” Gradually the memories came into focus for the woman: helping to kill her friend, gathering the little bodies for easier rending by the thing in its fury, smiling and rejoicing at it all. Lucita left as the first tears fell.

Friday, 6 October 2000, 12:00 AM

Museum der Arbeit

Hamburg, Germany

Compostela seemed far behind Lucita now, and not just in terms of physical distance. That night in the orphanage had been a more important turning point than she had realized at the time: de Polanco chuckled at her steersman metaphor, but he explained to her about the role of that inner calmness in directing moments of otherwise uncontrolled passion. She'd read much about how that instinctual control was supposed to work, and observed it from the outside, but it was an altogether different matter to *feel* it.

The mortal authorities' effort to keep things quiet failed after the assault on the orphanage. The surviving caretaker told her story to enough people before she hanged herself that there was no covering it up. The unknown fiends were deliberately reenacting the stations of the cross in their reverse-route path of terror along the pilgrimage road. Terrorists with mind-altering drugs they might be, but they were also blasphemers of unusual depth and care. Reenacting the later stations became increasingly difficult, as Lucita and de Polanco had to put more and more effort into evading snares. One evening Lucita told de Polanco that she was ready to leave the pilgrimage and reenact the last station somewhere else. When she told him what she had in mind, he readily agreed.

They did not, of course, abandon slaughter altogether; they simply set aside the blasphemy for the time being. It took many more bouts of induced madness and loss of self-control for Lucita to begin to understand her steersman and his limits. He could not make her wise in the midst of the killing frenzy, only let her shift a few degrees from the most direct course. He could not make her subtle or discriminating, and she would have much work to do yet in learning both how to let the untrammelled desire gain its freedom and how to rein it in when she was done with it. She developed a new style of self-evaluation, a coldly, darkly rational appraisal that

gradually took the place of her old intuitive sense of right and wrong. It was not the comfort that her conscience had ever been, but it served her better in this new way of being.

One concession Lucita did make to conscience was sending Angelica away a few nights before they left the pilgrimage road. Lucita wasn't prepared to discard her ghoulish just yet, and she feared that she might accidentally destroy the pilot while learning how to control her unfettered passions. Angelica, of course, didn't want to go, but she did when told to. She was now in Cairo, continuing her training in violent practicalities.

Lucita found herself a typical vampire for the first time in a very long time. She grasped some principles of the Path of Night easily and had trouble with others, but her points of slowest progress were very common ones for students of the path. All the major formulations condemned aid to others and accepting aid from others as sins, and it took substantial exegesis to explain how this was compatible with anything other than total isolation. Likewise, she struggled to find a definition of "superiority" that allowed her to accept the tenet that condemned accepting the superiority of others as a sin without feeling that she ought to be out leading a new generation of Sabbat revolt. In the end, she worked with the most common compromise, that one could accept *status* without taking this as an admission of innate worth.

As she and her mentor continued to walk across Europe, she examined the various subdivisions of the path. There was the cold version, which rejected the sort of instinct within frenzy she was developing in favor of a more rational and detached self-control. That didn't appeal to her. The experience of mastered frenzy was new, the first genuinely new experience she'd had in centuries, and she had no interest in giving it up. There was a set of creeds that identified the individual vampire with the whole clan, and taught visions of the eventual merging of all Lasombra into a single entity, which would become the body and soul of the Abyss. That didn't appeal to her, either; the whole point of her search was to find a way to continue to exist as Lucita, and becoming a Lucita-cell within some new creature would miss that point.

She respected the power of the Abyss, but she had fought against one scheme to overwhelm the world with Abyssal power and she wasn't keen to aid any others. A somewhat esoteric school emphasized the quality of lightlessness as the quintessence of night, and had a special hierarchy of sins devoted to relying on sight. That was interesting, but struck no chord of sympathetic desire in here.

What did, in the end, appeal to her was what de Polanco described as the "Path of the Righteous Night." Only after she'd immersed herself in study and practice of its version of the creed did he mention that her own sire had written one of the definitive texts on it. She remembered her dreams and almost abandoned the project... but then she remembered as well that in her dreams and in waking life, she accepted that while she was his child, she nonetheless made her decisions for her own reasons. And she resumed her studies. The advocates of this creed taught the common interest of all vampires who accepted that they had a divine purpose, including not only the adherents of their own creed but the diablerists of the Path of Caine, the experience-obsessed visionaries of the Path of Cathari, and all the others who knew that God had made them thus. Where the central creed of the Path of Night condemned repetition and lack of innovation in killing, this creed condemned killing only when it was done in a way that did not strike fear into the hearts of sinners. Gradually she assimilated the lore, and began to feel the foundations of it take root in her soul. The rest would take time, but now that she could count on escaping the doom of those trying to remain humane, she knew that she *had* time.

In the course of their journey, de Polanco had questioned her in great depth about her ties to Cainite and mortal society. He did not tell her what she must do with each of her ties—keep it, change it, sever it—but under his guidance, she generally found a particular answer obvious in each case. Most importantly, Willa Gebenstaler must perish. She had sinned against Lucita, spying on her "Madame," and in any event she was the linchpin that held together all the scaffolding of Lucita's independent years. That edifice must fall, and

therefore Willa must fall. Lucita decided that this death would fulfill the fourteenth and final station of the cross, in which Jesus is laid in his tomb. Willa would be laid in hers, and would take the old Lucita with her.

The town clocks struck midnight, and any passersby would have seen the elegant Spanish gentleman and lady suddenly turn into two-dimensional shadows and creep along the wall of the museum. There were, of course, no bystanders; Lucita had learned that lesson long ago, and tonight she was cool enough to avoid any passionate foolishness. Soon they were inside the museum, and back in physical form. Without apparent effort, Lucita let loose the darkness inside her, and as she glanced down at herself, she was struck by the changes in her shadow-self. The smooth carapace was now rough and set with thorns, while her wings were tattered and torn. Her hands and feet hooked into razor-sharp claws. Her skin thickened into armor over her exposed surfaces, and it gave off a faint whiff of decay, as though rotting flesh were trapped inside. It was not the form of someone clinging to humanity any more, she thought, and wondered what transformations might lie ahead. De Polanco followed her lead and unleashed his own shadow-self, which looked the same as ever to Lucita.

At this hour, Lucita knew, Willa would be hard at work in her office. Her "office"—scorn suddenly filled Lucita. It wasn't Willa's *anything*, it was space stolen from the men and women who used the museum during the day, a tangle of deceptions such as a thief would need to perpetrate. Why had Lucita ever approved of this? What noble, proud, creative, truly vampiric thing could emerge from such a pathetic seed? No wonder Lucita's existence had been such a rut. It was so in part because she had approved of and relied on this little warren of an existence for the woman who was her window to the rest of the world. Time and more than time to have an end of it.

There was no dramatic confrontation when Lucita entered Willa's office. The elder vampire knew how to walk silently even with her clawed feet, and of course there were no reflections to warn Willa of Madame's approach. The first sign Willa had of anything out of the ordinary came when

the single light in her office became wrapped in shadows and went out. Lucita spoke in the darkness, "Hello, Willa."

"Madame." Willa was petrified, of course. Lucita didn't have to be a master of insights to know that. The secretary made her best show of confidence despite it all. "I am of course delighted to see you again. Or perhaps I should say, to hear you again. I must of course also wonder why you have chosen to present yourself in this manner, without prior arrangement."

"I would have thought you'd be expecting me after Mr. Davidsage told you where I was and then went silent."

"Ah." Willa made no effort to dissemble. "Truthfully, his information was less than sufficient for a really thorough conclusion. I already knew that you were consorting with the Sabbat, and he was unable to learn the sort of details I would want to have from a distance. I confess that it didn't occur to me that you in particular had destroyed him; I assumed it was one of the more experienced Sabbat."

"More than consorting."

"I beg your pardon, Madame?"

"I say," Lucita said the cool dry tone she'd been cultivating, "more than consorting. I have at last accepted my legacy and have been diligently studying. Soon I will assume power within the Sabbat and begin a new existence, the likes of which you can scarcely imagine."

"I take it that Madame will no longer require my services."

Lucita thought about answering. She could continue expounding for quite some time, answering all of Willa's remaining questions, even seizing the opportunity to use the lecture for Willa as a review and consolidation of her own thoughts. Exposition might be useful at this point... but no. Having decided on the course of action, what point could there be in prolonging the end? She fell on Willa with her claws, and in short order the secretary lay inert.

Just down the hall were three mummy cases brought back by nineteenth-century treasure-seekers and donated to the museum when they died. Lucita pried open the middle one, dumped the mummy on the floor, and put Willa into the case. Her former secretary was drained of more than

enough blood to keep her from waking any time soon. Lucita pushed two dowels through Willa's chest, relying on the informal stakes as a bit of extra protection, and sealed the case up again. Together she and de Polanco, who had watched the proceedings without comment, hoisted the case upstairs, over a block to a construction site, and tucked it out of sight in the forms set up for pouring a concrete wall. Come morning, the most prominent symbol of Lucita's old existence would be entombed forever inside a Lutheran administrative building.

"All right," Lucita said when they were done. "I have walked the pilgrimage road and observed the fourteen stations. I believe I'm ready for the next step."

De Polanco scrutinized her carefully. "So do I. Let's find out what the cardinals think."

part three:

The Astar



Saturday, 4 November 2000, 7:01 PM
Calle de Alcalá
Madrid, Spain

El Toro was on about his favorite subject once again, to everyone else's utter boredom. "El Juli's a *fucking punk*, I tell you. I've been *dead* longer than that fucker's been alive, so I don't want to hear anything about 'wonder boys' and 'natural talents' and all that shit. He's had about four lucky breaks, and as soon as the new season starts, he's going to be *fucking history* in two fights. Three, tops."

The vampires of the Salamanca Lords brood were all thoroughly tired of their leader's obsession with bullfighting. He got to indulge in it for one very good reason: He could beat any three of the rest in a fight, and they didn't yet feel that the problem was bad enough to warrant a whole-pack attack on him. They let him ramble on in the hopes that he would feel talked out for the moment; if necessary they might make a disturbance to distract him. It could be worse, they sometimes told each other—he could be a religious fanatic like the kind some of Madrid's other packs suffered under.

At least the hunting was good. In working-class neighborhoods like Lavapiés, people always came and went. If a few disappeared, well, that was no big surprise to any of their neighbors. If a few disappeared after being seen in the company of thugs full of tattoos and piercings like the Salamanca Lords, that was even less surprising. Enforcers for loan sharks, bagmen for extortion rackets, up and coming drug dealers looking to "recruit" new front men... the night streets were full of people who could make you disappear, or make you want to disappear before they could find you again. The Salamanca Lords actually did deal in drugs and stolen merchandise occasionally, just to avoid the problem of being visible without a visible purpose.

To make up for the shame of this, they also dealt out the occasional haunting or supernatural visitation. The authorities at large weren't yet paying attention to the rumors of unnatural things moving through the night where poor

people lived. They had more important things to pay attention to, like the unexplained violence around the Almudena, Madrid's cathedral. The Salamanca Lords could probably keep this up for quite a long time, as long as nobody emerged as a clear-cut leader of the area's Sabbat.

Saturday, 4 November 2000, 10:40 PM
Island of Sikinos
Aegean Sea, Greece

Officially, Cardinal Timofiev was missing in action, not that anyone expected him to turn up ever again. It seemed overwhelmingly likely that creatures of the Abyss got to him that climactic night in Sicily. It's just that there was no actual proof, and Lasombra tradition said that it was best not to be hasty in dismissing one's enemies or rivals. Elieser de Polanco presided over this gathering of the Court of Blood "for the duration of Timofiev's absence." Cardinals Mysancta and Menuven came in the hold of a private jet plane from Mexico City, and Zarathustra sailed from Turkey. The court was as complete as it could be.

Menuven had once again come with four host vampires, each bearing the distinctive crystal rods implanted in their skulls to transmit the thoughts of the disembodied cardinal. Zarathustra and Mysancta wore their favored shadow forms, and in the darkness of the Lasombra estate they were difficult to make out except when they spoke. De Polanco wore a modern suit with medieval embellishments in the tie tack, coat and collar studs, and belt buckle. They were attended by guards, of course, but tonight the guards kept a distance, not making an effort to restrain Lucita.

"Cardinals, lords, my brothers and sisters in the blood, attend me. In the beginning of history as we reckon it, our Father in Darkness laid down the rules by which we should exist. He instructed us how to resolve our grievances. We gather tonight in accordance with his rules, that we may judge our sister in the blood." De Polanco began once everyone gathered in the mansion's first floor living room. The drapes hung open, permitting a view of the night surf and freshening the air. There were couches and chairs for everyone, but for the moment all the vampires stood.

"It has been an eventful half-year," he added. "In addition to serving in the absence of our well-favored Cardinal Timofiev, I speak tonight as the member of the court who has

spent most time recently with the accused, Lucita, childe of Monçada. Does anyone question these qualifications, or wish to suggest another leader for this occasion?" Usually this sort of question had no more than rhetorical value; this time de Polanco took no chances, and waited long enough for a hesitant challenger to speak up. None did. "Very well.

"Lucita, childe of Monçada." He turned to face her. "This was the sentence of the court upon you: 'This court sentences you to investigation. You are a traveler and a gatherer of secrets. Very well. You shall travel and gather secrets for us and for all your family in the blood. You will find how that thing of the Abyss came among us tonight, who unleashed it, how, and why. You will return to us in Mexico City with the answer, and you will join us in taking what steps seem warranted to our council when we understand these things.' Do you agree that this was the verdict laid upon you?"

"I do."

"And what word do you wish to give to the judges about this verdict?"

Lucita stepped to the center of the room, illuminated in moonlight reflected from the sea. "I submit to the court that I have discharged the terms of my punishment and that I have earned recognition of this accomplishment."

De Polanco nodded, though she couldn't see it as she faced away from him at the moment. "Explain how your actions conform to the terms."

"First," she said, and raised a finger with each point, "I established how 'that thing of the Abyss' came among us at the trial. It was, like the other Abyss creatures, called up by a circle of nine summoners working in the Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel, in Sicily. The founders were survivors of the attack on the Castle of Shadows which ended in our founder's destruction; others were summoned by visions or messages based on criteria I can describe in detail later. The summoners thought they could bring the soul of our founder out of the Abyss. Clearly they couldn't, though they did deal with entities of great power.

"Second, the press of events prohibited my returning to Mexico City in person with information about where the

summoners were, but I did see that word went through the hierarchy as quickly as possible. Given the opportunity to act, I acted as quickly as Cardinal Timofiev approved a specific course of action. The resolution of the problem happened within a single night, with as much authority as was possible under the circumstances."

"You acknowledge that you do not know, or at least did not know then, whether your actions would seem warranted to the court."

This surprised her. "Yes, that's true."

"Nor do you know the truth of all the claims you've made here tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"When you speak of the 'circle of summoners' and the like, you speak of guesses and reconstructions made on the basis of the remains you found in the castle where you encountered them. You have no *testimony*, no *direct evidence* for your assertions. You ask us to judge you by something other than obvious clear meaning of your sentence because of hunches and speculations." He stood in front of her, braced as if expecting a charge.

"I..." Lucita thought how to continue.

De Polanco gave her little time. "You are fortunate, then, that we are willing to consider such an appeal." He faced each of the judges in turn. "Do you feel that the terms of our sentence have been completed to your satisfaction?"

The perpetual shadow that was Zarathustra stirred and spoke with a distinct tone of amusement. "Certainly the guilty one has failed to discharge the letter of her obligations. But she acted in such a way that the Abyss is returning to normal and no further attacks have taken place. I consider that the reasons we imposed our sentence have been fully addressed."

Mysancta did not stir within his robes, merely raised one shadowy arm to point at Lucita. "The guilty one has taken substantial liberties in interpreting her sentence. Had anything gone more seriously wrong, she could have evaded the completion of its terms by virtue of destruction *and* left the problem in place. However, not everything went as wrong as might be. In the absence of any reason to suspect her of

complicity in the disappearance of our brother Timofiev, I believe that she has complied with the essence of her instructions. Since the tradition of the *Amici Noctis* has always been spirit rather than letter, I am satisfied."

The vampires hosting Menuven closed their eyes to consult with each other. One of them opened his eyes and said, in the inflection-free tone that marked Menuven's voice, "I approved of the sentence as in practical terms a sentence of final death, leavened with the possibility of providing us with information we needed and which we could deliver to trustworthy soldiers. It was not my expectation that we would ever be in this situation. However, the actual verdict was not death, and it seems to me that the guilty one has done what we actually instructed her to do. I do not at this time wish to instruct her to destroy herself as well."

De Polanco waited to see if Menuven had any more to say, and finally decided that he did not. "I consider the sentence fully discharged as well. I have spent much of the last few months in Lucita's company, and she has fully satisfied me as to her convictions. I have seen a genuine change of heart and abandonment of the motives that led her into rebellion, in addition to her performance against the summoners. I am satisfied."

He stepped up to Lucita. "Lucita, childe of Monçada, it is the unanimous opinion of the judges who have considered your case that you have demonstrated by conviction and success that you have done all that the Friends of the Night require of you. You are therefore declared clear of all further obligations and may return to the condition in which you were taken. We will spread word to our brothers and sisters that the justice of the Lasombra is fully satisfied." He smiled. "We have other matters to discuss, of course, but I think this concludes the business of the court. You said you had a new petition to make, I believe."

Lucita sat in one of the chairs near the picture windows, silhouetted against the night. "I wish to claim the archbishopric of Madrid."

None of the others actually gasped, all being well past their years of imitating mortal gestures of surprise. All four of

Menuven's hosts did gape with open jaws, and the vampires in shadow form both twitched slightly. Only de Polanco took it in stride; he'd worked long hours with Lucita on preparing her claim. "Tell us why you wish this, and why you think we should heed you."

"Of course. In brief, I know that Madrid has lacked leadership above the pack level since my sire was destroyed—since I helped to destroy my sire—and I am qualified to fill that lack."

"You'll expand on that, I hope."

"Yes." Lucita laid out the situation as she'd come to understand it after discussing it with de Polanco during their long walk and after going through Willa's voluminous archives. (She noticed that she could speak of that without feeling the slightest twinge of self-recrimination tonight, and was pleased.) In the early modern era, after both sects had come into being and fended off initial threats to their survival, a consensus emerged that one vampire per hundred thousand people could dwell and feed without creating enough trouble to attract mortal attention. The Sabbat often violated that guideline by a wide margin, so that the five million human beings living in Madrid and its suburbs might easily support fifty to a hundred vampires fairly safely.

Monçada, however, governed the vampires of Madrid with the proverbial iron hand, ruthlessly restricting the right to sire new vampires and using both mortal and vampiric spies to keep his flock in line. He preferred a smaller, more manageable vampiric population. His obsession with enduring forever in the face of all obstacles extended to his congregation—he would not allow them to court collective risk through individual irresponsibility. There were no more than forty vampires residing in Monçada's jurisdiction at the time of his destruction.

When the cardinal perished, there was a brief free-for-all, when every would-be ruler in his flock made a bid for power, and outsiders from across the Iberian Peninsula rushed in to stake their own claims. Treasure hunters also rushed in to try looting Monçada's haven and any other place they thought might provide portable loot. The ensuing carnage

attracted the attention of the civil authorities, which was bad enough. It also kindled the crusading impulse in a handful of local priests who proved much better vampire hunters than anyone realized until it was too late. By the time Lucita and the hunting pack had their final battle with the summoners, the vampiric population of Madrid had dropped from forty to twenty. The survivors kept themselves concealed enough for the volunteer Inquisitors to wander off in search of other monsters to slay. A few newcomers trickled in from time to time, but the total population remained low.

"Madrid needs leadership," Lucita concluded. "Without firm authority exercised on a regular and reliable basis, the Sabbat can accomplish nothing significant in the city. And it is too important to be left in this sort of chaos. Sabbat influence over Madrid can affect not only the city but the whole country, both by example and by direct connection."

Zarathustra interrupted. "This is all very well and good. It's a good presentation of the evidence and a reasonable conclusion drawn from it within the assumptions of Sabbat outlook. But why should the clan or the sect trust you in particular with the authority you say the situation needs? Have you not spent the entire history of the Sabbat to date engaged in acts of sabotage against it, driven by both personal motives and mercenary concerns?"

"I can answer that," de Polanco said, but Lucita held up a hand to stop him.

"Thank you, but no, I must be able to answer this in my own words. It will come up again, after all. Yes, sir, I have indeed fought the Sabbat as an institution and individuals within it. I have changed my mind this year, and have made my initial submission to Bishop Andrew Emory, and studied the Path of Night under the supervision of this court's own Elieser de Polanco. In the course of this study, I have demonstrated, I think, a practical desire to sever myself from past associations related to my earlier activities, along with providing the Sabbat access to useful information by and about its enemies." She looked up at de Polanco. "Now you're welcome to add anything you want."

De Polanco didn't smile as he turned to pace the room. Nonetheless, Lucita recognized a certain set of his shoulders that indicated satisfaction. "It's true, brothers, that Lucita sought me out while we were both in Cairo and asked me to instruct her in the Path of Night. I knew, of course, about her expression of desire to join the Sabbath, but I was as skeptical as any of you are now. I set her difficult challenges against which to break down her innate resistance to enlightenment, and she overcame them all. As we continued our studies, she voluntarily led me to several of her old associates and destroyed them, delivering their assets into my care. She has demonstrated in the most practical terms her sincere change of conviction."

The second of Menuven's hosts spoke. Lucita could distinguish it from the first only by looking at it, since the voice was the same. "Elieser, you are an enthusiast. How many times have you given your complete support to a cause only to acknowledge doubts and reservations later? You describe nothing more impressive than the initial fervor of a convert."

"Your pardon, Eminence," Lucita addressed Menuven. "You said earlier that you approved my sentence as tantamount to a death sentence. I therefore deduce that you would be just as happy if I were to pass from this earth."

"Indeed," Menuven's first host answered. "You have been a constant source of trouble, who escaped punishment first by having the good fortune to be the object of Monçada's indulgence and second by having the good fortune to perform a useful service. I do not trust you with authority."

"Do you think it likely that I could impose order on Madrid?"

"No."

"Then from your point of view, allowing me to assert authority over Madrid would be tantamount to a death sentence. If, as you suspect, I fail, then you get the result you wanted originally," she said in her most reasonable tone. "For certainly the inevitable result of a successful challenge to my mismanaged authority would be my destruction." The host nodded in agreement with this. "If, as I suspect, I succeed, then you get a desirable result and a further demonstration of my sincerity and reliability. My victory would not constitute

a full refutation of your concerns all by itself, but at least it would warrant letting me proceed to the next challenge. It seems to me that you have nothing to lose by giving your approval, and possibly something to gain."

"Hmm." The Menuven hosts closed their eyes again, briefly. "Do you really propose to risk the security of our presence in Madrid on an experiment?"

"No, Eminence," Lucita answered immediately. "I propose to reestablish the security of our presence there. As it is right now, the security of all vampires and vampiric activity there is at substantial risk. A little systematic effort could destroy them all. I can scarcely add to that risk, but I may be able to relieve it."

"You have a point. I do not approve of your bid for power, but I will not oppose it. If you succeed, we will discuss your further career at an appropriate time."

"Thank you, Eminence. I know what my mentor in the Path thinks. What do you others say?"

Mysancta remained sitting, a shadow in black robes. "Surely it's no secret to any of us here that the late cardinal always intended Lucita to be his heir. He gave her those early assignments to cultivate self-reliance and independence, lessons which she obviously learned rather too well. It remains to be seen how well she can actually lead, but I'm willing to give her the chance. As she rightly points out, her failure would solve the problem for good. Her success would be an asset. The sect's situation in Europe is not what any of us might wish, and there's substantial propaganda value in Lucita not only joining us but working within the regular hierarchy. I approve."

Zarathustra waited to see if anyone had something else to add before speaking his piece. He addressed Lucita directly. "You remember the advice I gave you on addressing your inferiors." When she acknowledged this with a single bow of her head, he continued. "Therefore, all I have to say to you now is that I will not oppose your move at this time."

De Polanco bowed to each of the other judges. "Thank you all, brothers. We will see that you continue to hear the news. I hope that this will prove an interesting and rewarding time for us all."

Sunday, 5 November 2000, 9:08 PM

Island of Sikinos

Aegean Sea, Greece

"...and under the circumstances, you are all invited to assist the new Archbishop of Madrid in the establishment of her regime. Let me know what your decision is when we have all risen tomorrow night. Good evening, brothers and sisters." De Polanco concluded his presentation and withdrew, leaving the hunting pack alone in a second-floor library.

Andrew summed up what they were all thinking. "*Now what the fuck do we do?*"

It was the first time they'd all gathered together for more than two months. Andrew had devoted his time alone to improving his mastery of shadow manipulation, particularly to techniques for combining it with mind control and straightforward intimidation. He knew that Barry had pursued path studies in Cairo and Venice, and was reported to be making good progress. Simon Peter and Roxana were among the crowd going over the summoners' archives, trying to work out authoritative versions of the many rituals the circle wrote down over the centuries. Rosa remained under suspicious scrutiny as an unsuccessful rebel and successful diablerist-without-authority, and had stayed in Sicily as well, part of the security force fending off independent looters from the summoners' stronghold.

Andrew had much less idea what Conrad had been up to. "Personal matters," she'd said the night before, and she cared to say no more. He suspected that she was up to something that the gathered Friends of the Night wouldn't altogether approve of, as a way of demonstrating to herself that she might be "with" the Sabbat but was not altogether "of" them.

They'd received what were allegedly invitations to the mansion on Sikinos two weeks ago, written notes stating that Lucita's judgment was up for review and that their presence was requested for a fullest consideration of the matter. None of the judges had actually spoken to them, though, and now Andrew

realized what this was. De Polanco wanted to get the reestablishment of order in Madrid underway with really minimal delay, and the pack was to be manipulated into agreeing. He was immediately inclined to resist, but wanted to find out what the others thought before expressing his own opinion.

Barry spoke up first. Simon Peter began to say something a fraction of a second later, but yielded to the priest. Andrew tensed, though he didn't show it; he knew that those two had a building grievance, and that sooner or later it would come out into the open. "That's obvious, surely. We want to sign on."

"For God's sake, why?" Simon Peter now got his words in.

Barry looked surprised. "Because we've got a good situation that we need to make better."

"How do you figure?" Roxana asked, sparing Andrew the need to intervene himself.

Now Barry got a little pedantic. "We're famous as the ones who brought Lucita down while she was out rogue, doing what nobody else managed to in the whole history of the sect. And we're the ones who helped stop the summoners. That makes us look good. The details aren't out, but a fair number of Sabbat know that we've got survivors of the great revolt all worried about something and asking strange questions. That makes us look bad. So what we need right now is a mundane, normal sort of victory to help establish that we're reliably good and not a threat or anything."

"Makes some sense to me," Andrew said in the most neutral tone he could manage.

"You're nuts!" Simon Peter shouted at Barry. "Lucita's trouble, she's always going to be trouble, and if you do anything but stay well way from her, you're going to get yourself trashed. Maybe you missed how she's been treating her old friends."

"You know as well as I do," Barry said with some heat, "that making a change of morality requires some deliberate desensitizing. We all have to be unusually monstrous to set ourselves free for anything else... but of course you wouldn't know that, because you're still chickenshit enough to keep from taking the first step. Sorry about that."

"You're about this close to getting yourself smacked," Simon Peter said through clenched teeth.

Barry turned around to look at Andrew. "Is there any reason I can't take him up on it?"

Andrew thought fast. "It looks to me like there's a mutual grudge here. I'd rather have it taken care of here and now than let it continue to poison our discussion. Go to it."

"Thanks." Barry turned back to face Simon Peter, and as he did, he thrust a pair of shadow tentacles out of each shoulder. He kept turning his right side and shifted his weight forward, throwing a trio of punches at Simon Peter's rib cage. All three hit, and the sound of snapping ribs filled the room. Simon Peter stumbled back two steps and frantically tried to force healing blood into the wounds. Barry took a second step forward, and threw the trio of punches from his left side. Two landed on Simon Peter's upper arm and shattered it.

Simon Peter tried to simultaneously heal his injuries and make the basic gestures needed for defensive blood magic, and neither effort worked. The pain and surprise of the attack distracted him too much. The others could all see in his manner that he'd expected to be the one to attack first. He couldn't figure out how to modify his strategy, not in time to do him any good.

Now Barry stood directly in front of Simon Peter, and grabbed the blood magician's head with both arms and all four tentacles. He twisted. His victim's neck snapped. He continued to twist, and the whole head came off in his hands. Brackish ichor oozed from Simon Peter's neck for the few seconds necessary for crumbling rot to begin at the blood magician's feet and work up to his head. Soon there was nothing left of him but blowing dust. Barry watched the corpse fall without saying anything about it.

The whole pack felt Simon Peter death, but it was a distant echo. They hadn't partaken in the Vaulderie in several months, and the bonds of blood had weakened. Barry, they realized, had known this, and taken the opportunity to act before his own rites bound him anew to all his packmates and made destroying Simon Peter unthinkable. Andrew looked around the room. "Does anyone else have an objection to committing ourselves to Lucita's new order?" Nobody did, but they accepted the Vaulderie readily

Saturday, 11 November 2000, 11:38 PM
Calle de Alcalá
Madrid, Spain

Most weekend nights, the Salamanca Lords spent going from bar to bar, soaking in the ambience and selecting a few choice victims to prey on. It was very safe—they'd never had a problem with it, and it kept them fed. Even now, with the early winter rain making it no fun at all to roam the streets, plenty of living people were out to eat and drink and parade the quality of their blood before the vampires. Tonight, though, they weren't alone in the pursuit. It took two bars, but Marta and Julio realized that one of the tough guys in very well-worn leather wasn't breathing except when he made a conscious effort to do so. Whenever he got distracted, the deception stopped. Together they nudged El Toro and pointed him at the guy. When the Lords stepped out into the street again, the guy followed them around the corner into a littered little courtyard.

El Toro grabbed for him... and missed. That put the whole pack on the defensive. Their chief might be a loud-mouthed obsessive fool, but when it came to sheer speed and power, he had them all beat. The stranger was therefore not someone they wanted to underestimate. El Toro satisfied himself with a shout. "What the hell are you after?"

"Fuckin' Christ, don't you bother finding out what you're grabbing at?" It was a hick voice, the voice of someone who'd spent time around farmers. Anyone who talked that way and dressed like this guy probably had something to do with the "mountain men," descendants of vampires who'd succumbed to one passion or another and gone feral. The legends of wild men in the mountains had more truth than most modern humans realized. And some of those wild men had progeny, who didn't always suffer from the same derangements. The younger ones made sometimes useful allies and dangerous opponents.

El Toro recognized the potential for trouble and drew back. "Okay, okay." He carefully avoided anything that might

be construed as an actual apology, of course. "Welcome to Madrid, stranger. What you want with us?"

The stranger straightened his coat. "I got told to do this, so don't give me any grief."

"Told by who? I mean, who told you?" El Toro hated to get tangled in his grammar, and would keep rephrasing until he got it the way he thought it should be.

"I come from the Lions." That got everyone's attention. Stories differed about who the first Lion was—maybe a crusader gone bad, maybe some refugee from the Reconquista or the Inquisition. In any event, there was a brood of vampires with a flare for shape-shifting that made things risky for urban vampires who thought they could go from Madrid to Barcelona without consequence. The Lions looked very poorly indeed on anyone who threatened their herds.

"I gotta tell you, we haven't been anywhere near your territory," El Toro began.

The stranger cut him off. "No, it's nothing like that. No, the elders thought they'd do you a little favor."

"Oh, yeah? What kind of favor? And what's it going to cost?"

"It's not going to cost you anything right now. There'll be a time when you have the same kind of favor to return, and you'll do it then. And here it is: You've got a new boss coming to town."

"Oh, yeah?" El Toro immediately regretted repeating himself, but there it was.

"You've had the place to yourself for a year or so, but get set for the new boss. We hear that you've got a new archbishop coming in any night now, and she's all set to make her mark on the place. And on you, if you get in her way."

"She? Anyone we know?"

"That depends, I guess," the stranger said. "You ever have a chat with Lucita?" He bared his fangs in a gesture of amused superiority at the Lords' shocked silence.

"You're shitting us," El Toro rallied, unwilling to let the stranger enjoy any more superiority than he really had to.

"Not me. The pointed-hat crowd gave her the okay, and she's going to take up right where dear old dad left off. I guess

you should be bracing for some new discipline. And no, if you get into trouble, you can't go running to the Lions."

"Great. Thanks."

The stranger shrugged. "Hey, this way you've got a little lead time. Make the most of it. And who knows, maybe sometime you'll return the favor. Now, I've got other people to talk to in this mess you call a city. Anyone want to make trouble about it?" None of the Lords did. "All right, then. See you around."

After he sauntered off, the Lords decided to head for another bar, and they argued as they went. Was it for real? It might well be. The Sabbath didn't usually leave a major seat unfilled for a full year and then some, but then this was an unusual set of circumstances. The Lords had enjoyed not having anyone bossing them around except for local turf issues, and they weren't keen on having to knuckle under again. Should they leave, though? Could they really hope for a better deal anywhere else? In the end, for want of anything better, they decided to wait and see.

Monday, 13 November 2000, 11:46 PM
Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Almudena
Madrid, Spain

Cold rain pelted down from heavy clouds, garish in the reflected glow of the city's lights. The streets were slick after several dry days—the accumulated oil and dust were still working their way up out of cracks to sluice downhill. There'd been a whole series of nasty car accidents earlier in the evening, and Lucita and Conrad had been obliged to wait at their hotel for emergency vehicle traffic to die down before proceeding out. Now they stood in front of the cathedral which had been Monçada's haven and had the square to themselves.

The Almudena didn't look like a work of the sixteenth century, which was when its construction began. Delays—revolutions, succession crises, even simple embezzlement—held up work for years or even decades at a time, and the bulk of the cathedral was finally completed in the middle of the nineteenth century. The exterior had little distinctive charm; it was, as Monçada once remarked, "little more embellished than the local post office." Neither vampire cared to dawdle for sightseeing. Lucita flattened into shadow form and slipped through the gap between the main doors, unlocked them, and let Conrad in.

Inside it was a different matter. White buttresses soared to vivid tiled domes far overhead. A few scattered lamps illuminated paintings and statues in alcoves through the length of the basilica, and a pair of brighter lights made the gold statuary of the altar gleam. "Do we want to leave a little desecration behind?" Conrad asked Lucita.

"I think not, tonight. Perhaps later." Lucita pointed to a nondescript stairway to one side of the altar. "There. Let's head on down. Some of the priests make late-night devotions, and I'd prefer not to be present."

The stairway led down to the cathedral's catacombs, a long procession of low vaulted chambers. Graves and commemorative markers older than the cathedral itself held

places of honor, having been moved from earlier resting spots. Lucita ignored them to point at cracks in the ceiling. "There, and there, you can see where they lifted whole chunks of fallen ceiling back into place. They did a very good job matching the new plaster to the old. This looks like minor earthquake damage rather than the aftermath of a major underground battle."

Conrad followed the traceries. "You fought Leviathan here?"

"Not here. Below." Lucita pushed a sequence of studs on a marble sarcophagus and gestured at the opening created by a door sliding smoothly open. Elaborate carvings depicting important moments of Lasombra history flanked the vampires as they descended.

Then they were in the heart of Monçada's haven. It was a ruin. No civic or religious crews had come here to clean up, and after the final battle, vampiric treasure hunters came down to tear into walls and fixed objects in search of hidden riches. The debris of countless mirrors mixed with dust and rubble to form an irregular, sharp-edged mess across most of the floor. Furnishings and statues lay in smashed heaps where they'd stood. Toppled bookshelves lay on the broken spines of books ripped open by clue-seekers. The chaos resembled the aftermath of a deluge.

Lucita stood motionless in the center of the haven's main hall, her eyes closed. She remembered the swirl of emotions she felt the last time she was here: absolute hatred for and fear of her sire, overwhelming concern for the well-being of her comrade of old, the sense of her existence spinning into something altogether beyond her control. So many passions, so many fears. She'd needed to come here to find out what her heart would tell her this time. The old passions still lingered, but as memories rather than desires. She would always hate the ambitious schemer who'd made her a vampire, but she also knew that she had triumphed over him—she could surpass his accomplishments in time. She regretted the loss of friendship with her comrade, but that was the choice Fatima made in the desert when Lucita still needed her support; let the Assamite fight her own battles now. Above

all, she felt that her destiny had returned to her control. She had a future again, an interesting and challenging one.

Conrad waited patiently while Lucita contemplated; the African looked curiously at the remains of what had been one of the clan's most famous havens, but did not reach out to touch things. She had little interest in anything the cardinal might have hidden and trusted that anything she might have wanted was either destroyed in the general collapse or taken away sometime since then by skillful looters. It was the ruin itself which interested her, a tangible demonstration that no individual escaped the end forever. "Not wave, not rock, not sun or moon," as a funeral chant of her people put it, survived all challenges, and vampires were not immune to the universal law. Some night the moon would rise and there would be no Conrad to welcome it—but then that was true of her enemies, too. It was fair enough.

Finally Lucita stirred. "All right. We can go now."

"Satisfied?"

"I think so. I was wondering how much of the cardinal I'd feel here, and the answer is 'not much.' I could try detailed psychometry for residues of his presence, but there's nothing at all of a general aura. He never was the type to share power, with a place anymore than with a person. It went down the hole with him. I expected it but needed to see. Let's go see about making our own place."

Tuesday, 14 November 2000, 12:51 AM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

They walked through midnight streets from the cathedral to the spot Lucita had chosen as her center of power. Its twisted towers emerged over the roofs of nearby office buildings, guiding them to its rippling front.

The architect Antonio Gaudí worked all of his adult life in Barcelona. Rejecting the straight line as something unnatural, he built buildings which curved and twined organically. "Temples of life," he often called his work, places holy to the spirit of life. His buildings rose like corals, like vines, like the logic of dreams. Inevitably he attracted the attention of vampires who shared mortal interests in aesthetics. His health failed with increasing complications as he got older, and he would have died in 1926 in his seventy-fourth year if it weren't the intervention of one Guillermo Arsuaga, a Toreador *antitribu* of Madrid. Gaudí was critically injured in a collision with a trolley car, and he grasped at any chance to finish the works still uncompleted. Guillermo sustained the architect for one more year on a diet of undead blood, long enough for Gaudí to design his first and only major work in Madrid. The design completed, Guillermo let Gaudí return to his beloved Barcelona and there pass away peacefully.

As soon as work began on the Hotel Rey Pasero in accordance with Gaudí's plans, local aesthetes denounced it as a nightmare. Instead of echoing the mysterious depths of the sea or the grand reaches of the sky, the hotel was a slice of the underworld brought to the surface. Shafts led curving routes through black stone like the work of great worms, and the towers resembled the rib cages of animals still being scavenged. Gaudí's religious faith had deepened in his later years, and the experience of owing his life to a creature which make a cheerful mockery of damnation haunted him. The torment etched itself into every detail of the plans—much to Guillermo's satisfaction. Rumor credited the abstract stained glass windows with the power to induce nightmares, and locals

said terrible things lurked in the basement to prey on the hotel's guests.

That last part was untrue. Guillermo never made a haven for himself in the hotel, and never let any other vampire do so. He preferred to visit and mingle with the hotel's clientele. Soon enough it developed a following among rich occultists, would-be and otherwise, and other travelers who preferred the highest standard of privacy for the pursuit of their various vices. The fortresslike depths and open yet secluded heights offered plenty of exotic environments and proved just what some people had always hoped for. For a vampire of a lineage given to obsession over beauty—sometimes as defined by rather esoteric standards—it was the perfect constant source of nourishment and entertainment. Successive mortal managers maintained the ambience Guillermo wanted. In times of conservative power, the hotel plied its trade discreetly; in more liberal times, it flaunted excess. There was always room for accommodation with the authorities of the moment, given the potential for money and other compensations.

Lucita remembered the place from her last two visits to Madrid and had decided on the airplane from Athens that she wanted the Rey Pasero as her haven and base of operations. As she told Conrad, "The cathedral was Monçada's style. I am no priest or would-be priest. And I like the look of the place."

Now she stepped to the front desk and said, "I wish to deliver a message to Señor Arsuaga."

The receptionist, a handsome middle-aged man, gave the pair a calm, condescending look. "It is not the business of the hotel to discuss Señor Arsuaga's comings and goings."

Lucita smiled. "I am sure that Señor Arsuaga has an administrative assistant in residence. Please tell that person that Doña D'Aragon seeks to speak with him at his earliest convenience. He will remember my father, the late Don Ambrosio Luis, and will wish to know that I want to speak with him about resuming the family business. I come escorted by Miss Conrad, who as he knows has experience in this aspect of the enterprise. Please take a note to that effect and deliver it to the assistant."

The receptionist gestured to his own assistant, a young man of impeccable manners, who wrote down the essentials of what Lucita had just said and went out of sight down the office hallway. The receptionist invited the ladies to take a seat if they wished to wait, and they accepted graciously. Thereafter they conversed in low tones on matters the receptionist couldn't quite make out.

Twelve minutes later, the reception assistant returned. "If the ladies will accompany me," he said, "Señor Arsuaga's administrative director would be glad to speak with them further. In his office." He glanced nervously at the receptionist, who scowled very briefly and waved them on. The assistant led them down a hallway paneled in deep oak to one covered in redwood, and to an unlabeled door at the end. Plush carpeting absorbed the noise of their footsteps. The assistant knocked twice. When a man inside said, "Enter," the assistant opened the door, let the vampires step through, and closed it behind them.

The office was almost entirely black: ebony panels and furniture, black porcelain vases, a wallpaper of black roses. Gray silk curtains and tapestries in muted colors provided soft contrast. The man sitting at the desk was likewise dressed entirely in black. The smooth dome of his bald head and his bright green eyes were the only notes of color. He rose with a serious expression to greet his guests, both of whom were several inches taller than he. "Is it really you?"

"It is, Guillermo," Lucita said.

"I was under the impression that you'd appeared before the Friends," he said as tactfully as he could.

"I was," she agreed. "I'm here now because of it. I have the approval of the Friends to claim the archbishopric here."

Guillermo was used to a predictable existence, where anything strange in his vicinity happened because *he* chose to make things confusing for others. He was bewildered. Finally he looked at Conrad. "Is this true?"

"It is," Conrad answered.

"I... see. I'm sure there's a story there, and sometime you must tell it to me. But for the moment, what does any of this have to do with me? I sincerely hope you aren't here to

try to get me to assist your crusade. With all due respect to the Friends..."

Lucita made small movements with her hands, and the room began to crawl. Guillermo's hands rested on his desk, since he hadn't come around from behind it. Now shadows crawled out from underneath it to writhe across his hands. He found it difficult to tell just where Lucita stood: Her feet seemed to remain stationary, but she loomed taller and shorter unpredictably. When she opened her mouth, shadows flowed out from it to frame her face. Now he couldn't see her eyes beneath the canopy of darkness running across her brow.

"Guillermo, be still."

He froze in place, though the almost-sensation of shadows running up and down his arms made him want to shout and flee. He tried to summon the will to regain his composure, but failed. His soul recognized superior power even as his mind wished to deny it.

Calmly, Lucita stepped forward and bent down slightly, so that she could look directly into his eyes. She probed at the barriers in his spirit, tracing lines of weakness and pushing at them until she felt herself in command of his thoughts and desires. "You have been chosen, Guillermo," she said so softly Conrad could barely hear it, the verbalization reinforcing her mental instructions. "You are the first here to recognize the worth of my claim and to commit yourself to backing it. I have chosen to reward your insight. We will reside here, in quarters you will provide for us and conceal from others. As we have needs, you will provide them; and in return, we will grant you what you need to pursue your own dreams. You are grateful for this."

"I am grateful for this." His voice sounded eerily like hers.

Thursday, 23 November 2000, 10:22 PM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

Andrew and the others looked around the lobby. They were still dusty from their trip—by cargo ship from Greece to Barcelona, and in the back of a truck from there to Madrid. Andrew and Barry had agreed that the pack needed time to train together again. They had tactics built up on the assumption that Simon Peter would be there; all of those needed adjustment. Now, most of a month later, they moved as a group, never getting in each other's way, never blocking each other's views. Nor had their training been purely physical. Renewed celebration of the rites had reinvigorated that sense which overwhelmed Lucita in her first observance, of each-in-all, committed to each other, bound in understanding and devotion even when they didn't particularly like each other. There could be no recurrence of the Sikinos challenge.

"Very nice," Andrew said. "Aren't we a little under-dressed for the occasion, though?"

The lead receptionist tonight was the young man who'd been assistant the night Lucita arrived to take over. "Mr. Emory and party?"

"Yes, that's us."

"This way, sir. Miss D'Aragon has arranged suites for your party in the East Tower. She asks that you meet her in the tower dining room at midnight."

The suites were four stories above ground level, with deeply inset windows that twisted like part of a sea shell. The decor was all deep red and muted gray. Rosa was the first to say, "Where's Bela Lugosi? It's just not the same without the count slouching around."

It took the hunting pack some investigation to find out just how well-prepared for vampires the suites were. In addition to thick drapes, there were metal shutters that could draw across the windows, halfway down their thick sills.

Canopies could cover all the space around each door. In a discreet compartment at the back of each suite's bar, flasks of chilled blood waited in quick-warming insulating blankets—not the most comfortable or tasty of drinks, but they could reach close to room temperature in a few seconds. No mirrors or strongly reflective surfaces adorned the hallway connecting the suites with the tower's elevator.

Fresh clothing waited for each of them. They showered and made their way down one floor to a dining room composed of booths that could be almost completely screened off. Lucita and Conrad waited in one of the larger booths. So did two wan, living Spanish men of indeterminate age. They both had slight tremors and such worshipful looks toward the vampires that Andrew suspected they must be ghouls hoping to score a new blood supply in exchange for their service. Lucita greeted each of the pack members in turn but didn't introduce the Spaniards.

"Where's Angelica?" Andrew asked.

"She's in one of the offices, going over flight records we got from Willa's archives. She says she thinks she can show some patterns of collusion relating to the Atlantic Coast debacle, and that's a better use of her time than this meeting would be." Lucita spoke dismissively. "But enough of that. I want to talk about strategy for establishing my authority, if everyone is amenable?"

Everyone was. She continued. "I think it best to proceed in as direct a manner as possible. We intend to gather together all of the vampires in this city that we can identify and simply require them to take part in a Vaulderie commemorating my accession to the archbishop's see. Those that resist should be destroyed immediately, for the encouragement of others. I want you present to help with the destruction."

Andrew nodded. "Keeping it simple seems good to me. How many vampires do you expect to show up, and how do you know how many there are?"

"Ah, that information comes courtesy of the gentlemen here." Lucita gestured at the living men. "My sire used to maintain an extensive staff of ghouls, including messengers. Most of his ghouls perished when he did, or not long after,

but a few managed to survive. Danilo and Lazaro here were messengers, and they have a very good idea how many vampires there are in these parts because they've been hunting them down as necessary. You can see by their manner that they've tried not to take any more blood than they really need, which is part of why they're still here listening to us talk about them rather than lying dead in a convenient alley. In any event, they have quite detailed maps of routes to havens and notes about occupants. So we can deliver our own message with a minimum of difficulty."

"Sounds good," Andrew said, and the others agreed. "I assume that we'll accompany the messengers."

"Not unless you feel like risking a suntan," Lucita answered. "You can check up on them if you want, but I want the notices waiting for my subjects-to-be when they wake up."

"Ah, all right."

Lucita didn't precisely smile at Danilo and Lazaro, so much as bare her fangs at them. "Do your part well, and you'll get your share of the blood spilled by those who resist. Won't that be a lovely treat?"

Friday, 24 November 2000, 6:53 PM
Calle de Alcalá
Madrid, Spain

Marta was the first of the Salamanca Lords to wake this evening. She opened her eyes to feel pleased at having chosen well. They had a good deal here, in a bed-and-breakfast halfway down the Alcalá from luxury to slum, whose owners were clearly desperate for tenants. If she'd let El Toro have his way, he would have killed them outright, and then done nothing very clever with the bodies. By letting them live, she ensured fresh blood each evening and the opportunity to practice her intimidation skills. A week after the Lords moved in, the owners must feel themselves fallen bodily into Hell, and Marta loved every minute of it.

She was the youngest of the Lords, and knew that the others often underestimated her because she was young and middle-class. They accepted her in the first place only because her sire, an old Salamancon Malkavian, could require them to do so.

In life she'd been a thorough-going sociopath. Indeed, her sire spotted her because he'd come to meditate by a local homeless shelter, enjoying the accumulated misery as an aid to spiritual clarity, the night she dumped off her brain-damaged husband. The brain damage was itself at least partly her fault, since she'd encouraged the excessive drinking that catastrophically impaired his reflexes; naturally she denied anything of the sort in the ensuing investigation, and the authorities couldn't prove otherwise. After he left head-trauma rehabilitation, she found his altered personality less than satisfying, so one night she told him that they were going for a little sightseeing ride. She stopped in front of the shelter and told him that she needed something out of the trunk, and would he get it? Once he was out of the car, she set down an overnight bag with a few changes of clothes and drove off. She never saw him again, and again managed to evade official responsibility for the act.

(She'd tried to remain friendly with the rest of her ex-husband's family and never did grasp why some of them felt

so much resentment about her behavior. What did they expect? But then she often found ethics mysterious.)

That particularly straightforward disregard for her husband's well-being impressed her sire, and he began to watch her. As the years went on, she made her way through successive challenges with the same artless grace. She knew when boyfriends molested her children, but did such a good job confusing the children with inconsistent explanations that their stories sounded merely incoherent to investigators. One of them committed suicide a few weeks before her seventeenth birthday, but the other remained a commodity that Marta could trade for drugs and other pleasures all the way through his college years. He ran off one day and she never heard from him again, much to her annoyance—it took years to cultivate alternative flesh trades with neighborhood children. The Malkavian continued to watch.

No single act motivated her Embrace. Her sire simply decided that the time was ripe, and took her out of life. Early on he compelled her to write a true narrative of her triumphs over official explanations as the price of blood. Her disappearance happened after he thoroughly demolished her apartment and left the confession behind. She and he both enjoyed the resulting confusion and counter-accusations; even now, more than a decade later, civil suits and internal investigations continued. He trained her and then called in boons to make the Lords take her on. She'd flourished, to the other Lords' surprise.

Now this, the note on their haven's front door, in a parchment envelope with wax seal. It looked terribly official... but it was addressed to "The Lords of Salamanca." That scared Marta, and fear made her angry. Someone would have to pay for the implicit threat—anyone who could leave mail for them could bring arbitrary force against them. Marta did not care to deal with that sort of fear. She tore open the envelope and found a single sheet of paper inside:

Her Excellency Lucita of Aragon, Archbishop of Madrid, invites the Salamanca Lords to a gathering of all her subjects at the Hotel Rey Pasero on Sunday next, the 26th of November. You may attend early for informal discussion of matters of concern to

all adherents of our creed, or present yourself for formal participation at midnight. Your new archbishop looks forward to meeting you and reaffirming the bonds of authority.

Marta stared. She could hear the others beginning to wake, and she thought fast. If El Toro read this she knew precisely what he'd do: He'd suck the innkeepers dry for extra blood and rush right off to the hotel and try to fight this Lucita. (Surely she couldn't be the *famous* Lucita, could she? Must be someone else of the same name.) There was really only one thing to do, so she did it. "Toro?" she called softly into the ground-floor hallway. "You up yet?"

"Yeah," he grunted. "What you want?"

"Got something to show you," she said in her best sultry voice. She was sometimes impressed at the ability of a man who'd been dead several times as long as she'd been alive to be such a thorough lecher, and she'd deliberately avoided trying to exploit it so that it'd be handy for a serious emergency. "You just stay right there."

His room was, of course, a mess. She had to push to get the door to open, thanks to jumbled dirty clothes, and it took effort look suave while closing it again. He was still lying in his bed, eyes open but otherwise not moving yet. "What you want?" He repeated.

She stepped close and looked deep into his eyes. She'd been practicing the art of inducing madness in others. She gathered up all the differences between her outlook and the worldviews of the fucking tedious bores who'd surrounded her in life, threw in the endless repetition of that moment when her sire had said that they'd talked enough and bared his fangs at her, and let it flow out of her in a thick wave of passionate dread. El Toro was helpless to resist. Fear overwhelmed him, and he began to tremble in his bed.

"Pretty neat, isn't it?" she said as she picked up the small shovel he liked to keep handy and bashed his head a few times. He wasn't precisely unconscious, but he was more than stunned enough not to resist as she drank him dry. When she was alone with his ashes, she stood up, brushed herself off, and went out again to show the rest of the pack the letter and explain what she wanted them to do.

Saturday, 25 November 2000, 11:30 PM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

The hotel had two grand ballrooms, one with windows looking out to the north and one occupying most of the first basement level. Lucita chose the underground one for her purposes. It reminded her of her sire's old haven, and she thought it wise to have that association fresh in the minds of her new subjects. It also had two hidden connections to the outside world, one leading to the city storm drains and one to a warehouse a few blocks away, for the convenience of celebrants who would prefer not to enter the hotel lobby.

Just half an hour now until the formal occasion, and attendance was fairly good. She counted eleven vampires already here, and knew that six more were about to arrive through the storm drain route. That would leave another even dozen to show up—or not—in time for the rites. She suspected that most of them would in the end make an appearance. The intimidation value of hand-delivered notices waiting for their recipients to waken had been every bit as great as she'd hoped. The vampires were scared and wondering how on earth she knew where they were. (The ghouls who'd done the work were well away from here tonight, and Lucita believed they'd left little psychic residue to reward any dowser.) When one or two of the new arrivals dared to ask about that, she merely smiled.

The makeup of the packs and individuals here so far was what she expected. There were two Lasombra packs, one a multi-generational affair with sire presiding over childer and grand-childer. That one claimed to be in the lineage of Marcellus Rufus, an ancient schemer who went mad and withdrew from the world during the Spanish Civil War seventy years earlier. It might even be true, though Lucita was inclined to doubt. Pack leader Cesario, she strongly suspected, had intended to make his play for dominance in Madrid sometime soon, and would very likely seek to challenge her authority. So much the worse for him.

The Salamanca Lords, just entering, were a mixed-clan lot here for the pickings and perhaps to flee troubles in their hometown. Their leader, the massive bull-fighter, wasn't present; Lucita peered more closely and detected the black aural streaks of diablerie surrounding the young Malkavian Marta. Aha. That might keep things interesting.

Then there were the unattached: a lone Toreador trying to avoid making an actual commitment to the Sabbat, another Toreador sire and childe fresh from thirty years of subversion within the French Camarilla and delighted to be expressing their true natures again, one of the now-scarce Ravnos who dealt in forged artwork, two Brujah obsessed with a quarrel dating back to some obscure matter of their lineage's history. Lucita anticipated no particular trouble making any of them toe the line, any more than with poor will-shattered Guillermo here.

Lucita enjoyed a moment of conversation with Magdalena, the Ravnos forger and dealer. A stray remark on Lucita's part about a client of hers in the 1920s sparked recognition in Magdalena, and gradually they established that on at least four occasions, Lucita had executed contracts on vampires for whom Magdalena had acted as broker, once the buyers discovered they'd been swindled. They agreed that sometime soon they must plan a scheme that would make use of their mutual experience for a wide-ranging fraud that could resist the usual means of discovery. Fifteen minutes to midnight now, and eight vampires—one pack and three individuals—had yet to show.

Ah, here came one of the stragglers, Sulayman. She'd spoken with him the night before, after he got his invitation. Centuries ago, several lineages of the Assamite clan, infuriated at their leaders' capitulation in a struggle of the time, joined the Sabbat; in Sabbat usage, they were Assamite *antitribu*, though they always claimed to be the guardians of the clan's true heritage. Recently one of the Assamites' very ancient elders, apparently of the fourth generation, had emerged and thrown the clan into confusion. For Lucita's old comrade Fatima al-Faqadi, it meant a fresh crisis of faith. For Sulayman, it meant only that there was fresh proof the Sabbat had been

right all along, and he brought renewed holy fervor to his work.

Midnight. Time to begin.

"Brothers and sisters in the legacy of Caine," Lucita began as a distant clock chimed, "we are gathered here to restore the proper order and spirit to this city. When I and my associates destroyed my sire, Cardinal Ambrosio Luis Monçada, you and the others who dwelled here then allowed disorder to descend. You brought disgrace on the Sabbath's profession of holy truth. You have behaved disgracefully. If your superiors were to decree destruction for you all, it would be no more than you deserve. You have had a year—indeed, you have had most of two—in which to demonstrate a capacity for courage, leadership, or even rudimentary self-interest. Now it is time for other measures.

"I do not claim the archbishopric of Madrid by virtue of inheritance, though it would be mine by right if I wished. No, I claim it as an individual within the Sword of Caine who has proved her devotion through service and who now wishes to fix this blight on the sect's honor. You may join with me and prosper, or resist me and perish."

To her surprise, one of the Brujah immediately spoke up. He was of indeterminate age, Embraced relatively late in life some unknown time ago. "I do not accept your authority, now or ever. You speak of honor, but if you had any honor, you would yourself be gone now to brighten sunsets. You shame the Sabbath by your ridiculous profession of devotion, which cannot ever undo the harm you have done to the cause of freedom as some of us understood it from the beginning." He looked around for a moment, spotted Barry, and pointed at him. "I call upon your lapdog of a priest to acknowledge this challenge and adjudicate it according to the rules of monomacy."

Barry bristled. "This lapdog wants to know who you are, asshole."

"'Rodrigo' will suffice, lapdog."

"Barry, I accept the asshole Rodrigo's challenge." She smiled at him. "Preside."

He thought it over. "Brothers and sisters, challenge of

monomacy has been made and accepted, and as presiding priest, I deem the matter serious enough to warrant the duel and urgent enough to warrant immediate resolution. Let the contest take place here, in a space twenty feet square, with the duelists limited to the weaponry of their minds and bodies. Anything they can do in themselves, with or without the assistance of extra blood, is legitimate. Anything else is grounds for automatic forfeiture. The fight will be to final death." He moved to the center of the room and supervised the marking of corners with small brass candlesticks. "Let the duelists move to the corners of the dueling floor."

Lucita and Rodrigo did so. The others fell back to give them space. Barry raised both hands. "Ready? Begin." He lowered his arms.

Rodrigo quivered for a moment and raced at Lucita faster than nearly anyone present could make out. Almost instantly, she shook with pain after he struck two quick, powerful blows at her knees. Blood oozed out where shattered kneecaps pierced her skin, beneath the silk trousers she'd chosen for the evening.

He paused long enough to get his bearings, and was lost. His gaze met hers, and in the instant of meeting she said, "Hold." Her will overwhelmed his, freezing him in place. He could conceive the thought of flight or attack, but his body had lost any sense of what it might mean to do such a thing. "Hold," she said again as she approached, simultaneously healing her knees. Darkness erupted from beneath her skin, tentacles waving beneath the crystal chandeliers, her skin crackling off in charred flakes. She was an angel of the night now, and he wished very much to escape.

That was in fact his last thought. Her tentacles scooped around his limbs and pulled him flat onto the floor. At this point no simple command of hers could be very binding—the desire for self-preservation overwhelmed such relatively minor utterances. Given time, she could construct demands that he would have to heed all the way to self-destruction, but she didn't need to do that now. She placed one shadow-laced foot on his head and pushed. He managed to pull it partway out, but all that did was create a whole line of fractures

rather than a single point of breakage. His skull crumbled and the brains within splattered against the small tendrils surrounding her foot before he could say or do anything else.

"I pronounce this challenge over and declare Lucita the winner. Does anyone wish to contest the verdict?" Barry kept it formal.

Sunday, 26 November 2000, 1:00 AM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

Barry was getting better all the time, Lucita thought to herself. He paced himself in gathering and blessing the blood for Vaulderie so that the last participants drank their share just as the distant clock chimed one. She rested an approving hand on his shoulder while assimilating the new sensations in this bunch of Vinculum bonds. By now the members of the hunting pack had become familiar to her, and it was an uncomfortable shock to once again feel strangers in her soul. Such a motley, unorganized bunch, and the differences weren't just that. These outsiders, non-Lasombra, had distinctly different patterns in the very depths of their souls. Different Antediluvians left differing legacies of curse and inclination, and she had no experience in feeling that nearly as deeply as she felt her own identity.

She must act to keep from losing herself in that morass. "Brothers and sisters," she said, "we have shared in the fundamental rite, as administered by our brother Barry, and we are made together anew. Our differences do not disappear in the Vaulderie cup. But something new joins them, a bond that lies alongside and underneath those differences. We will continue to disagree, to imagine differently, to quarrel, even to duel as I did here tonight. But in spite of all that, we are yet all together the Sword of Caine, a weapon which strikes at the world with a single will.

"In the nights to come, I will speak with each of you. There is a place for you within the Sabbat's will. It may not be what you would most prefer. But neither will the Sabbat command you to sacrifice the qualities that make you most distinctively yourself. These are the gifts of your lineage and your soul, and we will together discover how to put them to best use. Now go, mingle or disperse as you choose. Our business here tonight is done." She sat down in the solid high-backed chair she'd selected as a *de facto* throne and tried to fight back more of this inner turmoil.

Conrad stepped beside her. "That went smoothly. More smoothly than I expected, really."

Lucita shook her head. "There will be more challenges. I can feel it. That Salamancan, Marta, certainly. Likely one or the other of the infiltrators. Probably others, too. They simply chose to rein themselves in for the moment after seeing what happened to Rodrigo." She shook her head again. "At least one of them will make an attempt in the next week or so, and another will take the formal route the next time I convene a general gathering. I expect to win, of course, but I'm not looking forward to it."

Saturday, 2 December 2000, 9:39 PM

Plaza Mayor

Madrid, Spain

The cold rain fell again, and Lucita wondered if something in her might actually draw it forth. Such disturbances weren't altogether unknown... but no, that was self-indulgent thinking, a form of self-pity which was just one brink from that most basic of sins, repentance. She had no time for it.

Conrad and Lucita found that they got some of their best planning done while walking through the city. Tonight they considered the problem of stupid, or at least foolish, sires. Conrad and Lucita both understood very well why one of the ancient rules of thumb existed: Don't make childer until you're at least a century old. The reason was simple enough. Childer could smell the richer blood within the sire's veins, and the sire had better be capable of fending off an attack—and better yet, of demonstrating enough toughness to discourage the childer from trying. Age itself wouldn't do the trick, as Rosa's example demonstrated, but too-young sires almost inevitably became the victims of diablerie. Lucita preferred not to rule over a realm rich in diablerie. It set a bad precedent.

"We could just execute all the too-hastily-made childer," Conrad said thoughtfully. "There's certainly going to be no problem finding excuses for it."

"Unwise," Lucita countered. "It would breed resentment. The fools won't believe the problem until they see it demonstrated. I think we should wait for the successful diablerie by someone who accepted my authority last week and *then* mount a purge."

"I think you're setting yourself up for trouble, but it's your decision." Conrad shrugged. "Do you want to do anything particular about Marta? I think she's going to be the single biggest thorn in your side."

"I agree. Violence in support of the bishop is part of the templar's duties, correct?"

"Violence in support of the bishop is precisely and entirely what the templar is there for yes."

"In that case," Lucita said, "I would very much like my templar to make Marta disappear."

"I hear and obey, Excellency."

"Notice," Lucita added in a lecturing tone, "that I said 'disappear.' I want her body never to be found. I want the circumstances of her disappearance never to point at you or me. There must be a maximum of mystery about the whole situation. Dread will serve me well in this matter."

"I understand. I imagine that we..." Conrad broke off as gunfire echoed through the plaza. One bullet ricocheted off the pavement near Conrad. Another plowed into her left thigh, a third grazed her hip. "Ouch, dammit!" They both dropped to the ground and reflexively dragged shadows over themselves. Once covered, they started to crawl toward the nearest covered walkway. "I don't see the shooter."

"Nor I," Lucita said. "Let me feel your hip." She traced the welt and imagined Conrad as she'd been standing when the shots were fired. "Up on the roof, to the east."

As they continued to crawl, a second volley of three shots rang out. None of these landed closer than eighteen inches from either vampire. Apparently the shooter knew they were making for cover but couldn't make out their position with sufficient precision. That, at least, was reassuring. They had time to draw up against the inside edges of pillars supporting a heavy stone canopy, built for the convenience of promenadors at times when the plaza was home to inclement conditions. Lucita doubted that being shot at was one of the unpleasant situations the builders had contemplated, but the canopy did as well against gunfire as it did against rain.

"Are you armed?" Lucita asked Conrad.

"No. I only carry a gun when I expect to want it, and that mostly for intimidation purposes. Otherwise I rely on myself."

"Sensible enough. Get those wounds healed. I'll go around the long way from here and let you take the short route up. Meet you on the roof." Lucita wrapped denser darkness around herself and sped off around the courtyard.

Where the canopies joined, she made her way up between the pillars, pushing herself up in three strong boosts. The darkness muffled the sound of her approach, and by staying low, she avoided obviously distorting the rainfall.

The gunman proved to be a nondescript European—Italian, she thought. He had a sniper's rifle shielded from the rain under a tarpaulin tent. It had a strong scope, but apparently not one useful against Lasombra shadows. Lucita wasn't entirely sure whether he was human or vampire, and decided not to risk discovery while analyzing. When she noticed shadow-clad Conrad approaching, Lucita leaped and landed directly on the shooter's weapon, shattering the scope and bending the barrel. Conrad grabbed the man himself and pulled him backward to the rooftop. After Lucita broke the gun, Conrad took one of the tripod legs and rammed it through the man's wrist to pin him.

He was a vampire, they found. In addition to the rifle, he had two pistols and a satchel with three hand grenades; they were suddenly both very glad he'd not started with the grenades. His wallet had a variety of obviously false identity papers and currency for half a dozen countries.

Lucita spoke mildly. "You have not properly presented yourself for recognition. Who are you, and what is your business in my city?"

"*Your* city!" He laughed. "Your nothing, bitch! This city was Ambrosio Monçada's, and now it's no one's at all until a *real* successor emerges."

"What is it you know about the propriety of my position that the Friends of the Night do not?"

"Your pathetic little cabals know only that one bad Lasombra deserves another. They must have been ever so grateful that you..." he paused to heal some of the damage in his wrist, though he couldn't pull the tripod leg loose, "that you wanted your sire's work as your own. If you'd had to deal with the *real* Sabbat, they would have made short shrift of your delusional claims."

Conrad looked over his body at Lucita. "We have a critic, it seems."

"The first of many," he said. "You stopped me, but there will be others. You are a blight on the continent, and Sabbat of true heart and strong courage will never rest until you are forced to give up your usurpation."

Lucita knelt down beside him. "Tell me. What business is it of yours what happens in Madrid, anyway?"

"It's not just Madrid."

"What, then?"

He raised his head to look her in the eyes. "I was a priest in Milan. Do you know what happened there?"

"Of course." Lucita had been as surprised by the news there as anyone else. "Three years ago, Archbishop Giangaleazzo made himself into Prince Giangaleazzo, and led a slaughter of his former subjects. It was quite the coup for the Camarilla."

"And so it was," he agreed. "I wasn't there the night of his proclamation, because I was still recovering from injuries I won in a fight against Camarilla spies. Spies who were, I know now, there with Giangaleazzo's blessing, helping prepare for his strike. I just barely managed to flee the city and recover."

"Terribly sad, to be sure," Lucita remarked. "But what does any of that have to do with me?"

"Until you came here, nothing. But we lost Milan in a disgraceful, treacherous way. You destroyed your sire two years later, and Madrid did not fall, though it became disordered. We retained our authority. Until that lunatic assembly you call the Friends of the Night gave you permission to set up housekeeping. You are no Sabbat. This is no honest work. You are here to take another city away from us, and you will not be allowed to do so."

Conrad beat his head against the roof until he fell into unconsciousness, then ripped his heart out and watched his body crumble. "That wasn't too hard, but what if he's right? We could have a serious mess building up here."

Lucita nodded. "True enough. Though... hmm."

"Yes?"

"Wherever we have the opportunity, let's put out word of our designated troublemakers as particularly loyal and valuable subjects. With a little luck, perhaps any future assassins will take care of some of them for us."

Wednesday, 6 December 2000, 1:42 AM

An abandoned farm

Soria, Spain

Marta would have recognized the young vampire facing half a dozen elders across the space of a barn abandoned years ago. He was the stranger who'd brought the news of Lucita's impending arrival to the Salamanca Lords. Now he brought news back to his own sire and the other elders of the Lions brood. "...and then the next night she and her templar took out two more real assholes down from France, hoping to make their mark. They were way weaker than the Italian guy."

"Thank you," one of the elders said. They all wore matching hoods, as was their practice when considering matters of significance to the Lions as a whole. "You may go, now. But stay close; we will almost certainly be sending you back to Madrid."

"Yes, sir," the stranger answered with a surprisingly graceful bow for a vampire of such ragged appearance. He stepped out quietly and watched traffic on the distant highway. Inside, the elders gathered at one end of the barn and discussed the matter quietly.

"I don't like it," one of the elders said. "The last thing we need now is another damned Sabbat fanatic right in the middle of the peninsula. And why *her*? The last I knew, she had done in the old bastard! In the Father's name, what the hell is she doing there?"

"You weren't paying attention," one of the others answered. "They caught her and put her through one of their show trials. Apparently the experience led to a change of her heart."

"Fuck," said the first with deep, passionate sincerity. "I've got no use for damned Lasombra politics, anyway. I just want them well away from me. I got to liking not having them interfering with everything."

"Do we want to try to do anything about it?" asked the one who'd spoken to his childe, the leather-wearing messenger, earlier.

"We could, I suppose," mused one of the elders who hadn't spoken yet. "If we were to throw in one or two strong waves..."

"No, no," said the questioner. "I was thinking of something a little less wasteful. We don't have so many childer that I want to get rid of any."

"What, then?"

"Two things. First, we should make some small probes of our own. Second, we should rouse the independent broods closer to Madrid. If we can persuade them that they have a stake in keeping Madrid disorganized, fine. If not, we can make them believe they're under attack by an expansion-minded archbishop out to rebuild the holy empire. We have the impersonators for that, I'm sure."

The others nodded in agreement, but the first elder to speak still had another question. "What do you think you'll get by doing it that way?"

"It's a matter of psychology," the sire explained. "We know that Lucita is necessarily a recent convert. You heard our spies say she spent time with de Polanco, and you remember the accounts of the nuisances on the Compostela road. All of this tells me that she's working frantically to make up for lost time in developing a Sabbat-ish sense of herself."

"So?"

"So she's fragile. Whatever strength she shows in public, there's a head full of poorly digested obsessions and denials sitting on top of her shoulders. If we keep her subject to constant stabs and provocations, inevitably she will shatter and the whole edifice will come down again. Then we can take better steps to secure our own freedom."

"Ahhh," the first elder said. "I like that. Let's do it." None of the others disagreed.

Friday, 8 December 2000, 7:29 PM
Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Almudena
Madrid, Spain

Rosa couldn't really have said what it was that made her come to Monçada's haven tonight. Lucita had made it clear that she did not prohibit the hunting pack from entering or exploring it, though she would as soon that they didn't. After the assassination attempt, Lucita was far too busy to spend much time in discussion with the others, and Rosa was still curious about how it was that she and Lucita had sometimes shared such vivid dreams. She invited Roxana along, suspecting that the younger thaumaturge might help her interpret any peculiarly coded records she might find.

One corridor off the haven's main chamber led to a series of small laboratories. They were stripped of their equipment, of course, but there were still some diagrams and notes written on the walls. Rosa recognized in this a sign of the cardinal's age of origin. Still a medieval man somewhere deep inside, he'd never quite trusted paper and ink; for some things it was just safer to make a note in paint on plaster.

As they studied the inscriptions, they spoke of other matters. "I so much enjoy this business of waking earlier and sleeping later," Roxana remarked. "Maybe I should try to convince Andrew that he wants to go be the bishop of Reykjavik or St. Petersburg or someplace like that. I've never spent more than a few nights this far north, and I like it."

"Trust me," Rosa said earnestly, "you don't want to do that."

"Really? Did you ever do it?"

"Oh, yes. Rudesi had this scheme at one point to see if he could manage perpetual wakefulness. This was in the 1960s—early 1960s, when long-range jets were still very much a work in progress. He was going to spend the winter in the northern hemisphere, the summer in the southern, and use the fastest jets available to fly from one to the other while staying in night. Naturally, where he went, we went."

"So did he do it?"

"Certainly," Rosa said. "We did it for three full years. And at the end of it we were all nervous wrecks, I think the modern expression is, ready to slaughter anything in our path and needing a great deal of remedial instruction in our various paths of enlightenment."

Roxana looked puzzled. "Why?"

"We're not really made for the poles, I guess," Rosa answered. "There's a spatial hierarchy in our condition—up to the sun, across the earth, down to the grave. When the sun dangles on the horizon for days or weeks on end, it upsets the balance of things. We started to feel like the sun was leaking into wherever we tried resting—not that we could really sleep—and it got worse and worse. Then it would go all the way down for the long night, and we'd feel like we'd been cut loose and might drift into the sky, without the sun there to balance it out. Everything was out of proportion. In the end, Rudesi gave it up and returned to the Mediterranean."

"Huh." Roxana lacked any better reply. "All right." She peered more closely at a ledgerlike list. "Emmanuel Rudesi, right?"

"Right."

"Well, here's a list of what look like abbreviated names, and one of them is Emm. Rud."

Rosa crowded over to see Roxana's discovery. "Yes. Very good. This one that shows up twice, Vin. Day, that must be Vincent Day, one of the roaming paladins."

"Damn, I should have recognized that. I had a couple of encounters with him."

The bitterness in Roxana's voice amused Rosa. "He made as good an impression on you as on me, I take it."

"Oh, yes. Sanctimonious little terror. Anyway, do you recognize any of these others?"

"Not immediately, but let's make a note. And these numbers next to them..." She paused. "Ah ha, these are day numbers. I remember Rudesi being interested in yearless systems. He had a whole speech about how such measures of time were inappropriate for the brood of Caine. I never heard of Monçada liking such things, but perhaps he did it to humor Rudesi." She considered further. "I want you to watch me."

"Why do you need watching?"

"I'm going to try a little divination here, and see what I can recover from the sensations around these marks. Lucita said that most of the cardinal's aura is gone, but in case I start showing signs of harm, break the connection immediately." Ignoring Roxana's slightly panicked look, Rosa laid her hands on the top two instances of her sire's name, and felt the world drain away.

Rudesi what a fool, the thoughts echoed in her mind, as if from her own memory. But a useful fool. He says that nothing has come of the first experiments. We must try a stronger infusion perhaps or a different ritual of fusion. It would be good to blood bond him too and he's almost stupid enough to let it happen not quite not yet. Not necessary for the time being. I wonder if I can bring in his childer and examine them myself but what to tell them.

She shifted down to the last marks with Rudesi's name in them. Rudesi still has no real suspicion of what I attempt. He thinks that it stops with observation; he cannot dream of— There was more, but it was overlaid with the shock of Monçada's discussion. Rosa's eyes opened, but she didn't see the world. Her pupils were pulled closed, and vague images from her divination displaced anything the eyes might perceive. The shadowy figure of the cardinal paraded with sedate gravity, mixing blood for some unknown end. She finally forced her eyes open and banished the phantoms.

Roxana had seen her go into shock, and was relieved when she began to recover. "Did you learn anything?"

"I suppose I did," Rosa said, half to herself, "but I should discuss it with the archbishop first." She needed to understand a great deal more before she was ready to say anything about it to others, even her packmates.

Friday, 8 December 2000, 9:48 PM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

Lucita's preferred office looked east and west over the city, between the hotel's two middle towers. The east wall was decorated in Spanish styles from her own era to the present: tapestries, helmets from suits of armor (armor which had actually been worn in combat, she made sure), maps of exploration and conquest, small landscape paintings and photographs. She had not experienced much of this history itself, but it was all part of her legacy, and she preferred to emphasize the Spanish element of her nature.

"Cesario," she said to her guest, "thank you for coming." She stood beside him as he examined the Reconquista armor, his body language suggesting more admiration than his voice admitted. He was taller than her, lean and dark, the very image of the mysterious Iberian gentleman who might turn out at any moment to be the secret hero or the unsuspected mastermind of the story at hand.

"Of course... Excellency. You will forgive me if I say it seems strange to address you that way."

Lucita bristled. "I am a student of the Night, Cesario, and I do not forgive. I do understand that we do not overcome history in a single night, and I will provide you time to adjust to the new situation. That is all you get."

"I understand, Excellency." Cesario spoke a little more rapidly now. "How may my offspring and I serve you tonight?"

"Look at the city." Lucita gestured at the vista. "Three and a half million men and women in the city itself, and another million and a half in the area. Food for dozens of vampires even by the standards of the Camarilla and their fetish for hiding. But what do we find? Two dozen, as tracked down by... by highly reliable means." She stopped herself before hinting at the role of Monçada's ghouls; let that be her surprise for now.

"Yes, Excellency. The battles after your predecessor perished took a serious toll, both in those destroyed in combat

and those who chose to go elsewhere. I believe that our losses have been the gain of cities from Seville to Barcelona."

"You may look, Cesario, but you do not see." Lucita didn't bristle this time, but anger gave strength to her words. "You have not thought about the situation as it does, as it must, seem to our enemies. A stronghold of the Sabbat, laid low by my actions and their consequences, ready for exploitation. Now, in addition to the openness and vulnerability, my own arrival and ascension. There are unseen vampires here, Cesario, count on it. They have been arriving individually and in groups. They gather where we do not and see where we go. When the time is right, they will strike."

"Your Excellency knows this?"

"Cesario, do you doubt that I was good at my profession, in my time as an independent agent?"

"Absolutely not," Cesario said, and with perfect conviction. "If you had been anything less than superb, you would have perished long since, with or without the cardinal's assent. I counted myself fortunate that my interests and yours never intersected."

"Then believe me now. They are out there."

"If you say it is so, Excellency, then I do believe it. What shall we do about it?"

"You understand, I hope, that we share a burden of authority in this city. The rabble may regard themselves as partners in the great work, but we know that they cannot be. The keys to the Sabbat belong always in Lasombra hands."

This was reassuringly familiar territory for Cesario. "Yes, indeed."

"So you understand that I must give some of the most challenging work to my cousins in the blood, because I cannot trust the others."

"Ahhh, yes, Excellency."

Lucita stepped back from the window and looked directly into Cesario's eyes. "I realize that I'm charging you and your offspring with a risky duty. But we must find the enemies among us, and I must have that search performed by someone who possesses a real insight and capability for response to danger. So you and yours must begin scouring the city. Start

with the places where we know of no havens. Look at centers of power which might be used against us. Find them, and the destroy them."

After Cesario left, Lucita looked again at the city, watching lights go out as people went home and to sleep. Were there truly significant numbers of potentially hostile vampires out there? She wasn't sure. She felt a nagging sensation, but it wasn't the sort of oracular warning given to her, nor the result of a careful tactical appraisal to supplement the strategic and personality evaluation she'd given to Cesario. It was... a hunch, much like the preconscious sense of direction that now let her exercise tactical control in the midst of combat fever that would otherwise run amok. That was why she trusted the sense, perhaps, as she'd come not only to trust but rely on that aptitude in combat. It would have felt like a betrayal of her new commitments to ignore it.

Yes, that was of course it. Now, on to other matters.

Saturday, 9 December 2000, 8:00 PM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

"...and that was all I could discern," Rosa said, concluding her account of the trip to Monçada's haven.

"I see," Lucita said. Her manner remained calm, though she was highly agitated.

"I think..." Rosa paused.

"Yes?"

"I think he was trying to establish something more than the empathic link he told Rudesi about. I think he envisioned something more like a blood bond, or a Vinculum tie. Something that he could use to control one of us by controlling the other."

This was exactly what Lucita guessed, and she feared it greatly. She decided to try a bit of misdirection first. "This may account for why those dreams faded."

Rosa thought about it. "Oh, of course. The blood fades."

"Just so. Your last opportunity for an infusion would have been... October or November of last year. The bond can last a year or more, but you've burned off a great deal of blood and exchanged more in Vaulderie rituals. So you went numb in that direction in time to miss feeling what it was like for me to adopt the Path of Night."

"I think I'm just as glad to have missed that." Rosa shuddered. Her own moral realignment had been difficult enough; she had precisely no desire to experience another's so intimately.

"I suppose that what I really wonder," Lucita said contemplatively, "is whether the control part would have worked as well as the empathy part. The thought of the bastard—the bastards—with us like puppets on their strings is unsettling." The storm circulated inside her, but the steersman managed to keep her pointing toward calm. She just had to do *something* to regain a sense of control.

"I think it would," Rosa said. "At least, I don't see any reason to believe that the other steps wouldn't have followed, once they knew this one succeeded."

"That's what I think, too." Lucita stood. "Rosa, look over here." Rosa looked up, and in that instant the full force of Lucita's will descended on her, blood-strengthened commands pouring through the shared gaze. The memories at the forefront of Rosa's consciousness evaporated into nothingness like ice cubes thrown into a furnace. Even the steam soon cleared. The present moment slipped back and back...

"...and that was all I could discern," Rosa said. As far as she knew, she was just now completing her account of the trip she took with Roxana.

"Thank you," Lucita said, seated once again. "There's mischief afoot. I want you to embark on a search of known thaumaturgic collections. Even though whatever else it was that the bastards may have intended clearly failed, I would like more understanding of the matter than I have. Start with Willa's lists. Take Angelica with you, perhaps; she's good at such things."

"Certainly." It all made great sense to Rosa. Thank the powers that be that this scheme failed, but they must be on their guard for repetitions. She left to begin her new assignment.

Lucita watched Rosa go and hoped that she wouldn't have to destroy her packmate. Rosa was more like her than the whelps, the product of an age not altogether unlike Lucita's and reared in the traditional Iberian Lasombra manner. Lucita could be comfortable with her in a way that just wasn't possible with those products of the twentieth century. Only the direst extreme would warrant an action like destruction, of course, but surely the possibility of using any other vampire, even Rosa, to control Lucita from a distance warranted removing the risk. Time would tell, as always.

Wednesday, 20 December 2000, 11:04 PM
Museo del Prado
Madrid, Spain

Lucita remained quiet at first, watching Marta examine their meeting place. The Prado had long chambers both above and below ground level filled from floor to ceiling with the works of art not on display at the moment. This one, like the others, was lit by a cool fluorescent illumination, temperature and humidity rigorously controlled to preserve the paintings here. A forger or thief could have had a marvelous time here, given works to substitute or tamper with. Another time, Lucita thought, she could do a little educational work through suitable embellishment of some of the classic religious images. But for now other concerns needed to take priority.

"Excellency," Marta said in a tone that Lucita found coarse and unpleasant, "what leads you to call me to meet with you?"

"I have a difficult matter, and it seems to me that you're uniquely qualified to deal with it, Marta."

"Yes?"

"You know, of course, that there are two packs composed of my clanmates here."

"Yes, Excellency."

"I doubt the loyalty of Cesario and his pack."

"That's... troubling, Excellency." Marta managed to avoid actually smiling.

"Yes, it is. One would like to think better of the Lasombra—not, of course, that you would quite understand the issues of clan honor at stake, your tradition being what it is. Nonetheless, Cesario and his offspring have been spending a peculiar quantity of their time on mysterious errands in parts of the city where we know no vampires are."

"Excellency..." Marta waited for an angry retort to her interruption, but none came. "Excellency, how do you know this?"

"Surely you are not questioning the information given to you by your archbishop."

"No, Excellency, of course not."

"Very well, then," Lucita said with a perfect poise that Marta found more intimidating than overt hostility. "I have this understanding. What I wish from you is not second-guessing of it but action upon it. Specifically, I wish you and your pack to watch Cesario and his. See just what it is they do. If you find that they are acting contrary to the interests of my archbishopric, you must act for its good. Destroy the traitors and report to me."

"Yes, Excellency." Marta still managed to avoid smiling, but it was getting harder. She listened solemnly as Lucita explained secure lines of communication and recommended some neighborhoods to start investigating in. Marta asked for the actual locations of Cesario's haven, but as she expected, Lucita wasn't willing to provide that. Still, there was more than enough here for the Salamanca Lords to have some fun.

Lucita watched Marta leave through a door to which Lucita had the key, thanks to earlier visits to the Prado. It didn't take an aura reader to see Marta's motives. She would look for the bare minimum of justification and then start trying to slaughter Cesario's brood. Any outcome of that battle would be satisfactory to Lucita. Lasombra incapable of fending off the rabble were no asset to her, and if Cesario and his childer perished, good riddance to them; Lucita could destroy Marta and her pack at her leisure. If, on the other hand, the Lasombra made short shrift of the Salamanca Lords, then Lucita would be rid of the most ambitious threat from within her domain, without having to take direct action.

Time to see who fell next.

Thursday, 21 December 2000, 9:44 PM
St. Luke's Sanctuary
Near Toledo, Spain

Not very long ago, the only treatment for leprosy was confinement in a sanitarium or other remote place. Advances in medicine opened up new possibilities, but some patients still preferred the solitude, and a few leprosariums remained open even now. St. Luke's Sanctuary enjoyed a reputation among those who needed or wanted its services as a place where the monks of a nearly vanished religious order provided the best care possible and worked with patients to find ways for them to be useful even in the gravest throes of the disease.

The arrangement provided the real masters of the order, who were vampires, with two advantages. Since they were immune to the disease themselves, they had no worries about feeding on the patients, and they enjoyed having such a reliable source of blood available for so little effort. In addition, they were chroniclers of the world's affairs, and enjoyed checking their accounts so far against the fresh information and perspectives new patients brought with them. Thus their existence remained both safe and rewarding. There was no charity in this, not as the patients or other mortals might have thought of it—it was a reliable scheme, and one that required little deception or tremendous effort to maintain. Should it ever become necessary, the vampires of the order could slaughter all their charges without compunction, but that had never been necessary.

Tonight there was unwelcome news. The stranger from Soria arrived shortly after dark, clearly injured and exhausted after some recent fight. He spun them a ghastly tale. The new pretender to Monçada's throne had embarked on a purge, he said, of all the animals that vampires could use as familiars to spy on each other. Pesticides against the creatures of hearth and sewers, shooting of birds... she'd spread stories of plague or some such nonsense, and reaped a bloody harvest.

The vampires who founded the Order of St. Luke belonged to the Nosferatu clan. Among their legacies from

their founder was an aptitude for understanding and controlling animals—it was one of their most distinctive features, along with the riotous array of disfigurements that each member of the clan developed. This was clearly a strike against Nosferatu advantages. And the vampires of the order could not let a Lasombra and a Sabbat gain that sort of edge. It would be necessary to remind this upstart of the limits of her power.

Monday, 25 December 2000, 12:00 AM
Calle de Atocha
Madrid, Spain

Recorded church bells announced the arrival of Christmas Day all along the major shopping districts. Here stores were still open, and last-minute throngs filled the streets and sidewalks. Most of the shoppers felt more harried than celebratory, but at least looked forward to being done soon, and coming in out of the slush to their respective homes. It wouldn't work that smoothly for many of them this year.

The trouble began, witnesses agreed, at the intersection of the Calle de Atocha and the Paseo del Prado. All the lights at the intersection blew out within a few seconds of each other, overloaded by power surges. The first casualty was the young woman in the uniform of the municipal power company, whose body was never found at all. Half a dozen bystanders were also electrocuted, and twice that many seriously injured by flung shards of glass.

The strangeness began shortly thereafter, when a thick black cloud flowed out of the shattered lights and up out of manhole covers. It stretched the width of the street and up a full story, moving about as fast as the shoppers could walk. Those engulfed felt disoriented, lethargic, confused. All of those who wore Christian religious artifacts—cross necklaces, pendants for patron saints, and the like—felt moments of blinding pain and discovered their artifacts broken. Some also suffered inexplicable gashes in their face, neck, or arms; several collapsed and were found to have lost far more blood than their wounds could account for.

Eight blocks up the street, a big Christmas tree stood in front of one of the new department stores. The darkness gathered together, flowed up and over the tree, and then dissipated. As it cleared, shoppers found the tree smashed to splinters as if repeatedly struck by powerful hammers. They'd heard and seen no such tools, of course. Unharmful bystanders noticed their damaged neighbors and began phoning for emergency help, which arrived a few minutes later. By then

there was nothing left of the darkness, and the official investigation suffered for lack of any conclusive hypothesis.

The morning newspaper and television reports floundered for an explanation. The Basque separatist movement, ETA, issued a prompt denial of responsibility which only reinforced many Spaniards' suspicion that the terrorists must be behind the attack. Some reporters linked it to unconfirmed reports of chemical weapons being used in the sewers against dangerous animals, and more recent reports (some of them better-supported) of peculiar outbreaks of hostility among those same sewer animals. That led in turn to the official story: The events were the tragic result of chemical weapons, stockpiled during the Spanish Civil War or World War II, breaking open. Anything apparently impossible was a matter of hallucination. The authorities would begin an immediate citywide scouring for any further such stores.

Privately, people who heard first- or secondhand accounts of the tragedy weren't satisfied. They knew better than to make public nuisances of themselves and risk scrutiny as suspected collaborators with ETA or other designated villains. But... since when did nerve gas care about holy symbols? Distrust tainted many Christmas gatherings this year.

Sunrise on Christmas Day wasn't until 8:36 AM, and with some forced effort, Andrew and his pack were able to stay up long enough to see the initial reports. They were very pleased. At the accounts of how the poor utilities woman had perhaps been vaporized in the initial outbreak, the others all congratulated Roxana on her performance as the doomed innocent. She took the compliments well, remarking that the mortals were so stupid that none of them could tell the difference between ritual magic preparations and mechanical maintenance. Barry was most pleased at the precise synchronization they'd managed with their respective clouds of near-Abyssal darkness. They took turns boasting of their quick attacks on chosen victims within the darkness, and

scrutinizing the eyewitness accounts to match up their memories with the various recorded moments of suffering.

"Make them fear," Lucita had told them. They hoped that she'd enjoy her Christmas present.

Monday, 25 December 2000, 10:32 PM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

Lucita did enjoy her Christmas present, but she barely had time to convey her appreciation to the hunting pack. The most serious bit of unaddressed archbishopric business waited for her tonight. Seven of the city's unbound vampires waited for her in her office tonight. Up until now she'd been willing to let them figure out the necessities of existence on their own, but it appeared that they would need a push.

"Good evening," she said as she entered. "None of you have accomplished as much as my pack did to celebrate this holiday in a matter befitting your condition, but perhaps you will still have time to do something appropriate when we finish here." That set the tone, she thought with satisfaction. They were on edge now, and defensive, easier to manipulate.

"The pack is the fundamental unit of Sabbat organization," she lectured them as if they were the rawest fresh childer. "The Vaulderie, the ritual that binds us together and gives us the strength to overcome our enemies, is celebrated first and foremost among the members of a pack. Leadership and discipline begin with the pack. The pack hunts together, wars together, triumphs together.

"As scattered individuals, some with childer of your own, you are liabilities to my bishopric. You lack the strength necessary to prosecute our war against superior numbers and well-entrenched power. You are good for nothing but cannon fodder. This is not an acceptable situation, and I do not accept any longer. You have failed to bind yourselves together, and so I must do it for you." She paused, expecting some objections.

She was not disappointed. One of those warring Brujah—formerly of Marseilles and piracy throughout the western Mediterranean—stepped forward. "Madame, I don't accept your authority. You are a rebel and a traitor, and I can conclude only that some of your clan's elders are attempting to weaken the Sabbat for reasons of their own. I had hoped to wait

patiently until your inevitable downfall, but since you make an issue of it, I will speak openly. I will not obey your orders and will not heed any orders given in your name."

"Jean-Marie, isn't it?" Lucita waited for him to nod. "Jean-Marie, you are brave, and this is a credit to your sire and teachers. I do not order you, since you do not accept me as archbishop, but I ask you to approach, as one child of Caine to another." She held her hands open and at her sides in an ancient gesture of welcome.

He was suspicious, but he approached. When he got within two paces, she flooded her body with hot blood and lunged forward, bringing her hands up and in front of her. They plunged through his rib cage and into his chest. With her right hand, she twisted his heart loose and pulled it out; with her left, she mangled the lung on that side and swept down to pull out his liver. He barely had time to look startled before toppling forward. Final death followed immediately. "Thank you, Jean-Marie. Now that the rest of you see how much more sociable I am when freed of the responsibilities of office, is there anyone else who rejects my authority?" Silence ensued. "I thought not."

She put the six remaining vampires in a line and examined them quietly for a few minutes. There was Sulayman, the most reliable of the bunch, an experienced warrior and intimately familiar with all of central Spain. At the other end of the line there was Magdalena, the Ravnos forger and dealer in forgeries. Lucita enjoyed her company, but doubted her qualifications for leadership—Magdalena was too committed to her own vision to have room for the devoted subservience Lucita sought. Still, she'd be better than any of the others between Sulayman and herself.

Marik and Pavel, the recently returned spies, were unquestionably loyal to the Sabbat—nobody spent thirty years in the court of the enemy, risking final death for the sake of elegant schemes of sabotage and espionage, without serious devotion. But neither of them were good leaders or group players. Juanita, the Toreador *antitribu* dabbler, was even less suitable, unwilling to make even the most rudimentary commitments. Stolon, Jean-Marie's rival until just now, had

the capacity for effective leadership, but Lucita suspected that centuries of feuding had diminished his practical abilities in that regard.

"As of this moment, you constitute a pack within the archbishopric of Madrid. I could assign you a ductus and a priest, but I choose not to do so. You will choose your own leader by the oldest and most direct of means: combat. Members of my pack will escort you from this hotel at ten-minute intervals. Once you leave, you may proceed as you see fit. Three nights from tonight, you will all gather here at the same time that you came here tonight, and you will each give an account of your encounters with the others. The demonstrated victor against all rivals will lead; the next most effective champion will teach and guide.

"That is all. Are there any questions?"

There were none. The vampires had expressions ranging from immediate calculation (Sulayman and Magdalena) to outright shock (Juanita). But none of them felt inclined to risk the sort of response that Jean-Marie had earned. One by one, members of the hunting pack came in to escort the new pack's members out. It all happened very quietly.

Tuesday, 28 December 2000, 10:30 PM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

Lucita entered to find only Sulayman and Magdalena waiting for her. She wasn't entirely surprised. "Good evening," she greeted them.

"Good evening, Excellency," they said almost in unison.

"Have you settled the matter of leadership?"

"Oh, yes," Sulayman said. "I am to lead, and Magdalena is to teach. Of course I have only her to lead, and she has only me to teach."

"Tell me," Lucita commanded.

Apparently her reputation for truthseeing served her well tonight. Sulayman and Magdalena seemed very honest with her. They had met up immediately upon leaving the hotel on the twenty-fifth and decided to work together. They would have preferred that the others simply submit to their combined authority, but things couldn't be that tidy. Stolon managed to escape them, and was either somewhere in the city they weren't looking or had fled to some other city altogether. Each of the others had shown a regrettable desire to resist more than was wise, and had ended up destroyed. The victors produced trophies from among the losers' personal goods.

"Very well," Lucita said at last. "You have demonstrated a pleasing cooperation as well as competition. I confirm you as ductus and priest, and you may both participate in the rites with your new authority. Since you now have no followers to add, I give you two additional instructions." They looked uncomfortable, hoping very much that they weren't about to be done in themselves. "First, the next three refugees seeking our protection will join your pack. Second, you will both be allowed to create progeny in the new year. You may present your chosen candidate for my consideration any time between the spring equinox and the summer solstice." The others looked vastly relieved.

"On your way now," she told them. "I have other business to attend to."

Thursday, 11 January 2001, 11:10 PM
Palacio Real de El Pardo
9 miles north of Madrid, Spain

Well, well, Cesario thought to himself. *There was something to it all after all.* He and his progeny decided early on that Lucita put them to a completely pointless quest out of sheer paranoia, and they spent several evenings discussing the logistics of potential coups. After the disastrous "Christmas pack" affair, Cesario planned to recruit the survivors for his scheme. But now...

The palacio was precisely the sort of authentic sixteenth-century edifice that Monçada's cathedral wasn't. The grounds were laid out with classical gardens, and the decor was familiar and comforting to Cesario. Against this satisfying background, the nagging sense of something out of place was far more intense than it would have been in town. He knew his childer sometimes doubted his instinct in such matters, but they were well-trained and obeyed without fuss when he broke them into pairs and sent them to scour the grounds. He searched himself, figuring that he'd be a match for any force that couldn't just overwhelm all his progeny at once.

A Roman-styled bridge carried a stone causeway over one of the small valleys surrounding the palace itself. Cesario noticed small nicks on the curb stones that reminded him of the marks someone using superhuman strength might make with a tight grip. He bent down to look over the edge, and saw similar marks on down the side to where a dry culvert exited the bridge's solid edifice. Carefully, he lowered himself down, making sure to keep a hand free at all times in case he encountered an unexpected attack. None came.

The culvert itself hadn't been used for drainage for a long time... or rather, only some of it had been used recently. A small plastic pipe ran from the causeway drain overhead to just inside the culvert rim. One would have to be actually inside the culvert, as Cesario now was, to realize that it wasn't working just the same as always. In the middle of the area now spared from moisture was a fenced-in enclosure, with a

pair of suitcases and what Cesario had to think for a moment to recognize as an old-fashioned lap desk.

He felt quite sure that this was the haven for some vampire spy. Still, it always paid to check assumptions. He extended a shadow tendril through the enclosure's mesh and lifted up the lid of the lap desk. Inside, page upon page of neatly handwritten notes waited. He chose not to risk disturbing things by dragging the desk around, but even from this angle he could see that the note taker had spent time observing the cathedral, Lucita's hotel, and several places where Madrid's Cainites gathered regularly. After a moment, he realized that he could make these things out because the note taker favored the same Renaissance scribe conventions that Cesario did himself. That pretty well clinched it.

Tomorrow night the note taker would face a surprise.

Friday, 12 January 2001, 7:52 AM
Calle de Alcalá
Madrid, Spain

"So where are they?" Marta demanded.

She wasn't very happy with the spy game. It would have been fun if they'd immediately gotten something they could use to justify wiping out those old patrician snobs, but no such luck. Instead, Marta and her packmates went out night after night, following investigators who were themselves not finding much of interest. Marta had formed the strong suspicion that Lucita set all this up to distract *both* packs from something interesting, and she was on the verge of dropping the whole thing in favor of spying on Lucita for a while. But now something had at last come up.

Juan was the big silent type, the offspring of a deranged Gangrel which fancied itself a mountain monster. Usually Marta appreciated having someone around who wouldn't interrupt or ask embarrassing questions. Right now she wished that he were just a bit more articulate. "Palacio. In the gardens."

"Did they find something?"

"I think so."

"Well, *what*?"

A long pause. "Something in a drain pipe. They went climbing all over. Then settled down in places where they could see it when they got up."

"So they're staying at the *palacio* today?"

"Yes."

That was a surprise. They must *really* have something, Marta thought. "Okay. We're going to go out ourselves and meet them tomorrow night. I think this is the chance we've been waiting for. Get set to hurt them."

Friday, 12 January 2001, 6:40 PM
Palacio Real de El Pardo
9 miles north of Madrid, Spain

It was another night of confusion and dread for the people of Madrid. The trouble started half an hour after sunset, on one of the rare January days when the clouds broke early and made the sunset visible to all. The clouds were closing in again when the first reports came of gunfire at the palacio. By the time the police arrived, there were multiple fires burning all around the palace, some from vehicles lit on fire and some apparently from explosives. Fires reached the palace itself before the fire department made it there, and half a wing of irreplaceable art and artifacts went up in smoke.

Naturally the police hunted for the perpetrators, but without result. Unfortunately for them, too many citizens had police-band radios, and some of them recorded the exchanges of drivers and helicopter pilots. There were awkward pauses and moments of downright confusion, which led in the end to a departmentwide investigation of drug use. The hapless officers on duty this night always protested their innocence, and few of them were ever believed. Tales of glowing eyes and moving shadows did nothing to increase the officers' credibility in the minds of any except the most superstitious.

Gradually the official search moved back toward town, and then the second phase of troubles began. The lead copter's radio man reported that a car "appeared out of nowhere" on the Paseo de los Recoletos, on the outskirts of town. That part was not believed, of course; everyone assumed that the copter crew simply noticed the car for the first time then, perhaps because of a change in its acceleration or something else of the sort. Everyone believed the sounds of gunfire that followed, and above all the final screams just before radio silence as the helicopter exploded and crashed.

Violence swept haphazardly through town for the next three hours. The police continued to report vehicles and shooters appearing and disappearing, despite pressure from their superiors to cease such foolishness. The shootings

continued. So did the chase mounted by what serious, sober reporters described as wild dogs come down from the hills. More exuberant observers said that werewolves or some other such creature had come to exact revenge on the fiends who damaged the palacio. ("I didn't know he was an art fancier" became the punch line to a number of jokes of varying degrees of humor in days to come.)

Then, right around midnight, it all just stopped. The police continued to scour the town for the rest of the night, but nothing else remarkable happened.

Saturday, 13 January 2001, 12:09 AM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

Marta and Cesario reached Lucita's office at nearly the same moment. Both were tired, scratched, and scorched, and full of dread. Lucita's packmate Andrew let them into the office and waited inside to see what would happen next.

Lucita remained seated. "What on earth are you doing to my city?"

"Keeping ourselves intact, or trying to," Cesario said. He explained about his discovery the night before. "It turned out that I made one mistake in my analysis. It wasn't the haven of a vampire."

"Hmm?" Lucita interrupted.

"It was the haven of *seven* vampires," Cesario explained. "I couldn't make out their lineage, beyond the obvious fact that most of them had some shape-shifting ability and all were formidable in combat. My brood and I were waiting above and below the culvert for the individual we were expecting. Suddenly all seven broke free and engaged us. Three of my brood perished immediately, and the rest of us scattered. We fought our way to our cars and headed back to town. The culvert dwellers came after us in wolflike form.

"I must admit it: I panicked. I completely lost self-control for most of the way back to Madrid, and treated anyone approaching as an attacker. That panic is why you have seen news items of Lasombra attacking the police so openly."

"You will of course be punished for that, Cesario, but all in due time. Marta, precisely what were you doing there?"

"Following Cesario," Marta said promptly. The others looked surprised, so she continued to spin her yarn. "My packmates know something about his turf and habits, so when his whole line drove off to the palacio, we figured that something was up that we should pay attention to. We had this sense that it just wasn't a good situation. We were right, obviously."

"Spare me the analysis," Lucita said sharply. "Tell me what happened and I can analyze for myself."

"Er, yes, Excellency." Marta forced herself into a more disciplined presentation. "We arrived just after the initial gunfire..."

"Arrived how?"

"We drove up in stolen cars just after the initial gunfire, and saw Cesario and his progeny being attacked by unfamiliar vampires. We set about making diversions, with shots to set cars on fire. Some of the parked cars proved to have explosives in them—we don't know the details there—and they went off in a big way. The explosions did succeed in distracting the other vampires, and the surviving members of Cesario's pack got to their own cars and headed back to town. We drove a couple of burning cars into the main building and then followed.

"You already know about the rest. I lost half my pack when the outsiders caught the car in a sniping ambush. They were burning before the rest of us could get here. I want revenge against those fuckers."

"Thank you, Marta, that will be all. Please go downstairs and wait for word from me. Revenge you shall have. Cesario, I'll have a few more words with you." Cesario tensed; Marta didn't. Lucita noticed the differing reactions. Once again, the Lasombra showed themselves superior, even in the case of this tiresome little disaster of Cesario's.

Andrew spoke as soon as Marta left. "Shall I handle it?"

Lucita shook her head. "No. I'll call Barry and let him do it."

Like the other members of the hunting pack, Barry had been troubled by the night's disturbances, and he still had little idea what was going on. But Lucita's message was clear and unambiguous, and he looked forward to carrying it out. When Marta exited the elevator, he rose from his seat in the lobby. "Excuse me, Marta, Lucita's asked me to attend to you. Before you go anywhere, step into the office for a moment."

Marta was tired now, and Barry looked friendly enough. She nodded in distracted agreement. Not until she realized that Barry had locked the door behind them did she begin to suspect that anything was wrong.

"Do you believe in God?" Barry asked her in a casual tone.

"What?"

"I asked if you believe in God."

"What the fuck does that have to do with anything?" Marta didn't feel scared, precisely, but she was confused, and she didn't like being confused. None of this matched up well with her sense of how her existence ought to work.

"There are vampires who say that there is no God," he said conversationally. "They say that our founding myth isn't just a myth in the sense of an explaining story, but a myth in the sense of being an outright falsehood. Vampires are just a natural phenomenon or something like that. What do you think about that?"

"I never thought about it," Marta said, and it was very nearly true. Introspection never came easy to her, and theological arguments just bored her. She'd given the question of God about as little consideration as any vampire could without being totally oblivious to her condition.

"That's a shame for you," Barry said.

"Why?"

"Because it means that I'm going to have to explain that much more to you. Now, hold still," he said, and stabbed her with a paper cutter from the office desk. It was a good blow, sliding through her rib cage and into her heart, and it immobilized her until he could break off a leg of the other chair and hammer that into her heart as well. Now she was altogether immobilized. "I know I'm cheating you of the right of response, but it doesn't seem that you have anything very interesting to say."

Barry loomed over her. The lights dimmed, and their shadows danced obscenely. She knew that it was just a power the Lasombra had, but it felt wrong in a way that none of her abilities did. "You see, God does exist, and He is the God of wrath and judgment we were told about by stupid preachers who never grasped the significance of their own doctrines. He made the first vampire both as punishment for that man's sins and for the punishment of others' sins. He made Caine the damned instrument of damnation. Same with each of us."

Marta would have liked to scream then. Without changing his delivery, Barry began methodically breaking her legs with blows from another leg of the other chair. Feet, ankles, lower legs, knees... it was very precise, and paced to match the rhythms of his speech. "There is no hope or forgiveness for us. We may not have seemed like great sinners in life—though I hear you did pretty well in that department—but we were, or God would not have let His damned angels of vengeance claim us. Each of us is removed however many generations from Caine, but like him, we are also at no steps at all from God. He is always watching us, always judging, always using."

Her legs broken beyond hope of repair, he set to work on her arms the same way. She'd spent the last of her excess blood in a futile effort to heal her legs, and now couldn't even try to deliberately numb her limbs. Nothing to do but wait. "That last part is key. Each of us is called to act a certain way. It's our mission. And you neglected it."

The talk went on and on, but Marta lost the ability to make any sense of it. Her final thoughts were of an image constructed out of his many points of lecture: God stood there in the shadows, judging her. When at last her soul let go of her body, it would be only the beginning. Hell had torments to make this seem pleasant. She would have cried as she met final death, if it were possible for her to shed tears. Shortly before morning, the last of her mortal form crumbled, and Barry retired to rest with the sense of a job well done.

Outside time and space

The Abyss

Lucita drifted in realms of the Abyss with passions associated with Madrid. It was familiar territory to her now. She felt the complex knot of spiritual force that was Elieser de Polanco drift up from his own concerns. "Lucita, what exactly is going on in Madrid?"

"We're under siege."

"I thought as much. Tell me, just when were you planning to tell me, if I hadn't asked?"

"Not quite yet, of course. I wanted first to see if I could solve the problem on my own."

"And have you?"

"Not yet."

"Lucita, the siege began almost four months ago. Yes, I know about the palacio 'terrorism' and all the rest of that first night. You have not managed to fend off the attackers. You don't even know much about who or what they are."

"Have you been talking with one of my subjects?" She was curious more than she was angry at the prospect.

"No. Not that I would tell you if I did. No, I merely pay attention to the mortal world's news around you as I would around any of my other pupils in the paths of Night. And I am very disappointed."

Now she was angry. "Would you have done so much better?"

"I would have, just as I *did* in similar situations in the past. You are not the first Sabbat master of a city to come under this sort of attack from would-be rivals, but you have distinguished yourself by a remarkably poor history of command."

"Command was not part of my existence for a long time."

"Surely you aren't offering me an excuse. I would be insulted if I thought you were, and would have to discipline you for it. In any event, it doesn't matter whether you were experienced at the start of your reign. You had expert advice on hand. Did you consult it?"

"Conrad? No. She soon proved useless. She lacked any vision of the details, and since I had to do the practical planning anyway, I prepared the strategy, too."

De Polanco snorted in derision. "You have been foolish."

"I reject this assertion."

"Disprove it if you can. You have lost more than half of your vampires. Your sire's old haven is under continuous occupation by a pack of Gangrel and Nosferatu too powerful for you to dislodge, and all roads north of town are subject to their terror. You did well once on Christmas Eve, striking the right sort of unsolvable dread into mortal hearts, but now they're doing far better, far more often. Indeed, they're doing almost too well and may have to be dealt with... but not by you."

"What do you mean?"

"The time has come for you to step down. You may, if you wish, pretend that it's your idea and worry about what your judges will think. I tell you that if you do not take this step, your judges will consider your Sabbat existence a failure and remove you altogether. You know I can do it, please don't waste our time with denials."

"Elieser, I'm not done yet." She let her urgency and desire show through.

"Yes, you are."

"I have one more maneuver underway, to probe the territory around the museum. Judge me after that if you will."

He laughed, the no-sound sending ripples through the Abyss. Soon they would have to leave; he'd attracted the attention of powerful, deep creatures. "Pleading is itself a sign of unworthiness. But I will grant you one more opportunity, in hopes that you will cease to delude yourself. Meet me in this state again after that."

Sunday, 11 March 2001, 7:30AM
Hotel Rey Pasero
Madrid, Spain

The fire broke out three minutes before sunrise and spread too rapidly through air vents. Investigators later wondered if were arson, but the lack of any triggering artifact and the haphazard nature of the fire's spread both suggested that it was merely a particularly tragic accident. Cleaning chemicals stored in the basement not far from the central air ducts caught on fire early on, and soon the rooms in both wings and the middle mass of the hotel were flooded with a complex brew of toxic gases. More than half the victims died of asphyxiation, nearly all of them in their sleep.

The first that the hunting pack knew of the fire was someone pounding on the door, shouting, "Fire! Fire!" Roxana pulled herself groggily from slumber and staggered over to the door. The blood lay thick within her, ready to hide from the sun and rebuild the vigor she'd spent. It didn't want to be active. Nor did the curse itself wish to confront daylight or any of the daylit world's works. Still, this warranted attention. When she opened the door, a bellhop shouted at her, "Get out! Fire! Fire!" Then he dashed on, leaving her to try to assimilate the warning.

Finally it registered on her. *Fire!* She staggered back over to the beds on which the others sprawled and tried to shake them awake. It wasn't easy. They were all dimmed in mental alertness and had half or less of their usual strength and coordination. Gradually they grasped the threat, partly because the air in their rooms now had a distinct green tint and particularly acrid smell.

Where should they go? That was the next question. Lucita retained most self-control—centuries of vampiric existence had toughened her beyond the capacities of the others, and Lucita at half-strength was still a rival for nearly any living person. "Out. Down and out."

"Down to the cellar?" That sounded appealing to Barry.

"No." Lucita struggled to explain. "They'll check the basement and everywhere once the fire's out. Also we can't risk getting burned. Must go somewhere else."

"Okay." Together the members of the hunting pack struggled down smoke-filled stairs. There were flames on the second and third floor, not big but enough to kindle vampires' native dread of all fire. Fortunately they just had to dash across the halls to get to the next flight of stairs in each case. Lucita was glad that none of them panicked just then, as she would undoubtedly have killed anyone who did on the spot.

Lucita had intended to make for the lobby and then out, but they could see from the first-floor landing that the lobby was rapidly filling with firefighters. They'd have to get out another way to avoid difficult questions. Tired, aching, wishing only to rest, they went back up a flight of stairs and jumped through the windows of the second-floor landing, hitting the ground in a jumbled heap and heading through the gathered crowd to the safety of an alley. They didn't so much run as limp with more than human speed.

Overhead it was dawn now, but they were sheltered for the moment. All the younger vampires were dozing off, and even Lucita found it difficult to retain self-control. Somehow she managed to hail a cab and direct the driver to take his apparently drunken charge to the Prado. There she herded them down into the deeps of the museum's vaults, and sent the cab driver on his way with garbled memories of the incident.

Lucita didn't notice the rats gathered around the hotel, watching it burn and the vampires flee, turning little rodent heads all in synchronization. Not far away, the chosen agents of the vampires of St. Luke's watched through the rats' eyes and felt pleasure at their deeds. The hotel wasn't destroyed, alas, but it would take months to repair, perhaps years. And Lucita had been forcibly reminded of just how vulnerable she could be.

Friday, 13 April 2001, 9:47 PM
Somewhere in the storm drains
Madrid, Spain

Angelica was deeply relieved to be back home with her owner. These long stretches away—weeks at a time in Hamburg or Willa's other offices—took a terrible toll on her soul. She had become deeply attuned to her owner's divine madness, which guided her along like a powerful slipstream. Left to her own devices, she had unsettling moments in which her old personality surfaced to torment her with questions like "Is this what you wanted?" and "What have you become?" None of that happened when Lucita was near.

Home wasn't perfect, of course. Angelica felt her owner's sustained annoyance with these petty attacks from outsiders trying to score points, or make a reputation for themselves as the mighty Lucita-slayer. Perhaps it was lucky that this ambition went so seldom with the ability to cooperate effectively—that might have been much worse than these individual raiders, no matter how good they were. Still, home was home. Angelica could review her latest findings decoded from Willa's storehouse of encoded information and earn her owner's approval. That felt good.

Well, it felt good when there was good news to report. This time there wasn't very much. For some reason Lucita had become very curious about esoteric matters of blood magic theory and practice, including the former havens of thaumaturgic scholars who fell in the Anarch Revolt. Willa didn't have any information about such matters, nor was it reasonable to expect that she would have. Willa had dealt in the present, and in the past only insofar as someone in the present wanted to pay for it. It was scarcely either Willa's or Angelica's fault that this was so, no matter how much Lucita might want to blame them for it.

Tonight was better, though. Angelica had uncovered some interesting simple rituals, including one that heightened the ability of a blood bond's creator to feel what the recipient was experiencing. Lucita asked Angelica if she'd like to try it

out. Of course Angelica would; since Lucita wished it, Angelica submitted patiently to Roxana's magical attentions. She went forth into the night-time city aware that she was as vivid in Lucita's experience as in her own, and she was very grateful to once again be making her owner happy.

Angelica had a route to follow, through various main streets and side passages, then down into the storm drains. She wasn't sure why her owner wanted to know just what all this felt like. No, that wasn't true, she did. She remembered hearing Lucita speaking with her "hunting pack" about the recent rumors about strange monsters in the sewers. Lucita suspected that there were indeed at least a few monsters, summoned or created by her enemies with the power to command beasts. Through the heightened bond, Angelica could feel her owner's calm curiosity. If there were something here, no doubt it would notice Angelica.

And there it was, something massive crawling low in a passage parallel to hers. She could see its bulk through the occasional connective passages. Angelica hoped that her owner would come to rescue her soon and felt unsettled as she realized that Lucita was still sitting in her hotel room. Angelica seemed to be all alone. Now she felt afraid.

Finally the thing lunged at her. Angelica was vaguely aware of fur and bare hide, and intensely aware of huge teeth lunging for her throat. With her preternatural strength, she could hold it at bay, but she couldn't get the leverage to do any more than that. The stalemate seemed likely to continue for some time... until a horrible pain erupted in her back and she realized that there was another creature on the other side of her, waiting for her to turn its back on her. She called out in her mind for her owner to help, and heard a single word, carefully articulated: "Good-bye." Then the connection broke, and she was alone with herself and the creatures.

She didn't last long after that. As the creature behind her shattered her spine, her grip on the forward thing's jaws slipped. Terminal pain came from both sides. She slid down into painful darkness.

A mile away, Lucita opened her eyes and looked at her templar. "There is indeed a creature in the sewers. Or rather at least two, since one attacked Angelica from behind as well as from in front. I couldn't get any very good details about what the things are, damn the girl's panic. Giant rodents of some sort, I think, but I can feel no confidence in the result."

She stood up and delivered one of her calculated sighs. "You know, this situation has become untenable. No matter how many challengers we defeat, there are always more to come. If we continue this way, we are going to attract more mortals' attention, and there's a limit to how much mind rape and diversions we can arrange. Our enemies are not compelled to make sense, and they can engage in fruitless acts of self-destruction which nonetheless make collateral problems for us."

"Are you really proposing to give up?"

"I'm thinking seriously about it. I speculate that when I staked out a new claim for myself, one that didn't seem to compete with the old bastard, I'd... well, there would still be some challenges simply because of who I am, but fewer based on who he was."

Conrad pointed at the talisman Lucita had used to enhance her blood bond. "Is this just a fit of guilt or melancholy about her death?"

"Hmm? No, not at all. I was growing tired of her adoration. If she hadn't been able to die usefully like this, she would have perished soon in some convenient accident. She was an increasingly unpleasant reminder of how I used to make decisions. I'll need a new aide who can do what she could, but I won't be rushing to endorse any successor. I need time to get the stench out of my nostrils before making any more still-living slaves." Lucita wasn't quite shouting, but she was clearly passionate about it.

"All right, I just needed to ask. It's part of my duty to see that you are in condition to make wise decisions."

"Of course. It's not your fault. It's simply a matter that was already very settled in my mind."

"I understand. Now, about the withdrawal. Did you have a destination in mind?" Conrad felt sure that Lucita had quite a few details in mind—it was the elder's habit not to speak of a plan until she could lay it out coherently. The proper forms of address required her to ask in the way she did, however, to avoid embarrassing her bishop with awkward personal details.

"It's been a long time since Zaragoza had a significant vampire presence," Lucita said contemplatively. "It's so important in the history of the Lasombra and Iberia, and yet it's been largely fallow for centuries. I think that it's time to fix that—time to start a new brood and build them up, correcting some of the problems we've found in Madrid."

"Have you given any thought to what the court will say?"

"I have indeed. They'll say that I failed, and indeed I have. I cannot see how I might establish lasting authority in this city that doesn't create more problems than it solves. I'd have to wipe out the memory of my relationship to Monçada on a continental scale to get any reprieve, and I don't believe anyone with that much mental power is willing to let me use it."

"Presumably not," Conrad agreed. "But I wasn't just thinking about their disappointment with your performance as archbishop. I was thinking that they might decide that your temporary reprieve from earned distraction should be over, and send you on to the same reward as Angelica just now."

"Ah." Lucita sat back down. "That's always a risk, isn't it? Is there ever a point where some of them *aren't* looking for an excuse to destroy me?"

"There is," Conrad said judiciously, "a difference between knowing that they're looking for an excuse and handing them one ready to go."

Saturday, 14 April 2001, 11:02 PM
Museo del Prado
Madrid, Spain

Lucita addressed Andrew and Cesario together for the first time since the initial trouble in January. "I'm leaving Madrid," she said without preamble.

For a moment neither of them could quite find the words to speak. Andrew was first to recover. "Do the judges know?"

"They do. I consulted with them in the Abyss, and they've agreed to approve my resignation. They'll appoint a successor once I leave. For my part, I've decided to return home."

"Which is where?" Cesario asked.

"Zaragoza, in Aragon," she said. "That's where my family was. At the moment it's in something of a state of disorder. I've started a correspondence with Rufus, who holds our sect's authority in the Pyrenees, to discuss a suitable boundary with him. As soon as that's accomplished to our mutual satisfaction, I'll take up the archbishopric of Aragon, with Zaragoza as my see."

Andrew wondered, "Are there many Sabbat in Aragon?"

"Not many," she said. "The archbishopric hasn't been vested there in... well, since before your mortal birth. I'll be starting nearly from scratch. In time I might bring some order to Barcelona as well. My living family united the land once, and it's none too soon for it to happen again."

"That's as may be," Cesario said impatiently. "What of Madrid?"

"The packs which remain will choose one or more bishops from among their ranks, and those bishops will consult with the others of the area. The old term for it is 'consistory.' Since having the archbishop declared from above didn't work, this time those who remain can see how declaring one from below works. Perhaps there will be a little less spiritual anthropophagy this time around."

"This is a rather substantial admission of failure." Cesario was almost admiring.

"It is," Lucita agreed. "The failure itself was rather substantial, and warrants atonement to match. I will be paying the price of my failure for a long time to come, I think."

The two men spoke almost at once. "I'll go with you," Andrew said, while Cesario said, "I'll stay."

"That's what I expected from each of you. Now if you'll excuse me, I have another duty to perform."

Alone again, Lucita looked at her desk. The stationery on it bore the logo of the Chateau de Lyon, and she wondered just how that had happened, which larcenous aide was furnishing offices in mismatched accessories. The thought made her smile briefly, for the first time since that unhappy Abyssal encounter with de Polanco. The smile passed as she contemplated the task ahead of her.

Long before there was a Sabbat, there had been an ambitious Tzimisce lord a little older than herself, one Myca Vykos. Over the centuries, he (sometimes "she," given the Tzimisce fondness for manipulation of form, and often "it") had been a thorn in her side. They'd conceived an instant dislike and reinforced it at every meeting over the first few hundred years of her existence, until they drifted out of contact in the wake of the Sabbat's founding. Even if she had not had the personal crusade against her sire, the mere presence of Vykos in a position of authority would have repelled her from the Sabbat. She knew that he had often tried to arrange for her destruction, just as she often sought out—without success—contracts from anyone willing to pay a suitable fee for assassinating him.

She had not attempted to communicate with him since her decision to join the Sabbat. She'd wanted to present him with a magnificent accomplishment. But now she would need to say something to him, or he could wreak great havoc in her efforts in Aragon. He must be satisfied as to her motives, and perhaps ever so slightly intimidated or even just bewildered into leaving her alone. She set the first sheet of stationery into the vintage typewriter and began.

My Dear Wykos,

It is not without a sense of irony that I find myself writing this letter, and I'm sure that you're not without your own sense of something similar—whatever it is that approximates emotions in your malign little heart—as you read it. You no doubt know by now that my sire, Archbishop Ambrosio Luis Monçada, has met with his final death. Part of me suspects that you knew before I did. Not only was he a contemporary and sectmate of yours, he was part of that hideous little cabal of monsters who crawled forth from the Middle Ages and gouged a place for themselves among these modern nights without yielding the tiniest iota of their former habits. For this, despite my hatred for him and my admitted lack of fondness for you, I salute you both. I salute also those fallen in the effort. Those of you who died without compromising your Cainite natures deserve a nod for your commitment. Those who served without compromising—who have reached the letter Z—I afford you the reverence due to your fiendish selves.

It was no secret that the archbishop and I had our differences. I am no stranger to the whispered tales of his decadence, and no stranger to the rumors of the carnal knowledge we shared of each other. Quite simply, you know that never to have happened.

I am glad he is dead. The very fact that he rose each evening weighed heavily on me, and I knew that the only reason I was given to achieve the great heights that I have was due to the old beast's last impotent and Heaven-denied urge to have one last fuck before he went to his place at the devil's right hand. He was a faithful Cainite, and I was the embodiment of his failure. I never wanted to be that; I never asked for it. When he pulled me under the shroud of night, I was a stupid, impetuous girl who accepted the curse of undeath only in an effort to spite my father. I can hear the leathery lines at the corners of your mouth curving right now, Myca—"You two deserved each other," I can hear you croak. You are right, much as it embarrasses me to say it.

I have come to a turning point in my unlife because of this. His final death, my understanding of what I meant to him, and a long-dormant sense of that wretched but unavoidable progeny's guilt have stirred the primal fire within me. I have played the dangerous game for almost a millennium. I have taken the side of right (or the side as closest to right) for as long as I have been able. I have divorced myself from the morality of the Damned long enough to hinder the

twin evils of the Camarilla and Sabbat. I have studied futile, obsolete arts and devoted myself to killing and later to making amends. I have been a whore for war and a whore for peace. I have been a martyr and cynic, a killer and saint. I have watched demons poison the earth around them (with your help...) and I have led feints for the Ancients more times than some Cainites have uttered the word "Antediluvian." Our own games of gambit and counter-gambit, Myca, have colored history, threatened the world with genocide, served as blinds for the true masters of the Jyhad and killed those who may possibly have risen one night to places as leaders of the world. I have watched history occur; I have contributed to the color of cultural advancement with the crimson of my own blood. I have seen miracles, and have been a miracle to many.

I don't want to do it any more.

Let them drop their jaws in wonder, Myca. Let them curse me for abandoning the fight against Gehenna on their terms. Let them call me a traitor, place me on their absurd Red List, curse me for a coward and a selfish fool. I am sick of playing the game the world has set before me. The time has come for Lucita to do what she should have done centuries ago. Despite the horror and wonder and fate-shaping I have done and seen, I am still no more than my sire's child. I must step down from the world's stage. I am no longer a figure; I am one Cainite attending to her own matters.

Please allow me to surprise you now, Myca. I mentioned before that I believe you knew of the archbishop's final death before I did. Well, allow me to turn the tables and make your introduction to the archbishop who will succeed him. My own domain will be the new archbishopric of Aragon, because I want to go home for a while.

Open your arms to welcome me, Myca. I am Sabbat.

Sister to your brother,

Lucita

She thought with great satisfaction that this would keep the fiend busy with speculation for a while. She knew that he spoke from time to time of "getting that bitch." He might yet some night, but this move in the struggle gave her the advantage. For now he would respond to the actions she initiated, and that suited her very well. Of such things is eternity in darkness made.

epilogue



Wednesday, 21 June 2001
Hotel Vista del Castillo, 6:40 AM
Zaragoza, Spain

The night's business was done. Or rather, as much of it as she could manage to do in the night was done.

It was so difficult to get much of anything done in these short passages of darkness, when the sun so obviously still ruled the world and flouted Lasombra ambitions. She and her subjects had so much to do, so little time... she knew that it was a self-indulgent complaint and that the complaint itself wasted time, but she remembered very vividly being a girl in the long summer days, when it had seemed there was time to do not just anything but everything.

It could be worse, of course. They weren't under siege here. She'd even spoken, once, with some of the leaders of that assault on her holdings in Madrid. The invaders proved to be under the command of what she thought of as the "mountain men," the descendants of vampires of her own time who'd gone all but feral and led predatory, purposeless lives in the mountains between human kingdoms. These latter-day mountain men seemed primarily to want Madrid's Cainites led by someone who wouldn't challenge their existence, as they feared she would. (They were right about that, too. Had she been able to secure her position, the next step would have been alliances with and conquests of the domains all around Madrid. But she didn't tell them that.) Zaragoza could be hers, they said, as long as they deemed her no threat.

So she, and Conrad, and the surviving members of the hunting pack—Andrew, Barry, Roxana, and Rosa—made their way northeast. Here there were only scattered solitary vampires, all of whom would yield as soon as she summoned them. She knew that things had gone so terribly wrong in Madrid partly because she had inherited a complex situation devised largely by her sire and therefore tainted with attitudes and outlooks she hated. Starting essentially from scratch, she knew that she could build a better kingdom for herself

here, a better tribute to the principles of the Sabbath as applied to the challenges of these troubled times. Final Nights, as the mystics said? Perhaps so. If so, she would at least lead an army worthy of the name "Sword of Caine" into battle.

The Hotel Vista del Castillo was happy enough to rent out an entire floor in exchange for hard American currency, and she presented a different enough appearance that the staff didn't associate her with the strange woman who left behind charred furnishings on All Saint's Day, 1999. They knew her as a young woman come from far lands to revisit ancestral glories and, perhaps, to build up new businesses that could offer employment to the town's many needy and of course highly deserving youth. In the longer term she would need other means of persuasion, but for now she could let the hunting pack study the situation and prepare their own plans. They were such good holy terrors, she felt little worry on that account.

The rest were gone to their rests now. For reasons she could barely identify to herself, she felt that she ought to greet the dawn a second time, a sort of commemoration of who she'd become since the last such occasion. Tonight there was no friendly family ghost to speak with her—indeed, no ghost at all. She suspected that they could sense the growing aura of mastery within her and no longer regarded her as someone they might manipulate for their own ends. The dead were loathsome things, and never more so when they were so restless as to refuse to stay in their graves. They were part of the realm of the night, fit only for use in accordance with Lasombra wills.

The realm of the night. There was a phrase to conjure with. It wasn't just the night, it was the perpetual absence of the manifestations of God's will for the waking world. There was a tension there, the dream of endless night in defiance of the God who said "let there be light" and perfect service in damned obedience to the God who said "an eye for an eye." It wasn't anything she expected to resolve anytime soon, either—every Lasombra library of philosophy and theology had its share of long tracts about the matter. It might well be part of the reason there were so few truly

perfect masters of any form of the Path of Night; perhaps only those who managed to leave the world altogether behind could escape the dichotomy, by moving out of the flesh and its complications.

A stray thought crossed her mind, a fragment of conversation with Munther in Cairo shortly before she began her studies under Elieser. She'd commented on the unfolding evidence from the Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel that the summoners there had unwittingly created the great beast themselves. Munther smiled tightly and asked her why she thought the Abyss was so ready to produce such a thing in response to a few desperate souls. At the time she hadn't given it much attention beyond the obvious response that their lineage had always been associated with the Abyss and had a sort of understanding with it. Now she realized that she'd been hasty leaping to that conclusion. There was no account of anything like what the summoners had done before the founder's "destruction" and disappearance. Now the Abyss responded as it never had. Perhaps it was not so much that the founder had gone *into* the Abyss as that the founder and the Abyss were one, or at least growing together. If so, then it was all just a matter of time.

She also supposed that she would likely never know the truth of the matter. Gratiano was wrong and would never be able to learn it. She could also be wrong and might never suspect it. Had the founder grown more malicious after centuries away from the flesh? Who could ever say, until the founder chose to speak? It was even possible that the founder was truly destroyed and had worked all those changes in one final instant in the flesh before perishing forever... comforting, that thought, but not one she wanted to gamble on.

Sunlight again struck the ramparts of her ancestral home. She would reclaim that home and turn it into a suitable seat of power. The financial maneuverings might take a year or several, but she had time. She'd need to make more ghouls to replace poor unsatisfactory Angelica, ones with more strength to sustain them in difficult times. No more weaklings, Lucita thought to herself, but pillars of

strength whose souls would reflect her own growing strength. They would hear and obey, not whine about lost friends and hobbies. Soon enough they would present her the keys to the castle, and Zaragoza would gradually become a byword for the power of the night.

It was harder to stay awake now than it had been on that All Hallow's Eve. Then the remaining taint of humanity had protected her from the full war between the force inside her and the sun and what it stood for. Now that was gone, but she was still so new to the Path of Night that her defenses were weak. The reflected dawn hurt worse than anything she could remember, worse than that last sun-kindled fire or the terrible flames when Andrew and the others hunted her down. (She wished she could make them pay for that, but it was not hers to do that. She knew them now and trusted them as much as any student of the Night could sensibly trust another, but still, it would be good to hear them scream. Something to plan for the future, perhaps.) She would not be able to endure the few minutes she had last time....

...She came to herself still awake, still smoldering, buried beneath the covers of her bed. In a moment of total unconsciousness, the Beast she carried had acted to protect itself, pulling her away from the window. Now she could hold off sleep no further. Her last waking thought was this:

And this too shall pass. Final Nights, perhaps, but first Final Days, after which the sun would fall before her like all her other enemies. In the end, it would all be hers.

About the Author

Bruce Baugh lives in Portland, Oregon, with a cat named after a character in these books. He writes and develops for White Wolf Game Studio, Hogshead Publishing, and other roleplaying game companies. The books of the **Clan Lasombra Trilogy** are his first novels, and he's enjoying it so far.

Acknowledgments

That writing is a solitary undertaking is a cliché, but it's true—I work alone at the keyboard many months before you read the published work, just like everyone else in this business. During that interval, I wonder and worry about what you'll think of it. Over the years, many of you have written to me or spoken with me in person about just what you like in my work and just how much you like it. Your enthusiasm makes a tremendous difference in my own enthusiasm. This book would not exist without all those expressions of good will. Thank you, readers, for making it possible.

The letter that appears at the end of Part Three of this novel first appeared (in a slightly different form) in the **Vampire: The Masquerade®** supplement **Midnight Siege™** and was composed by Justin Achilli.