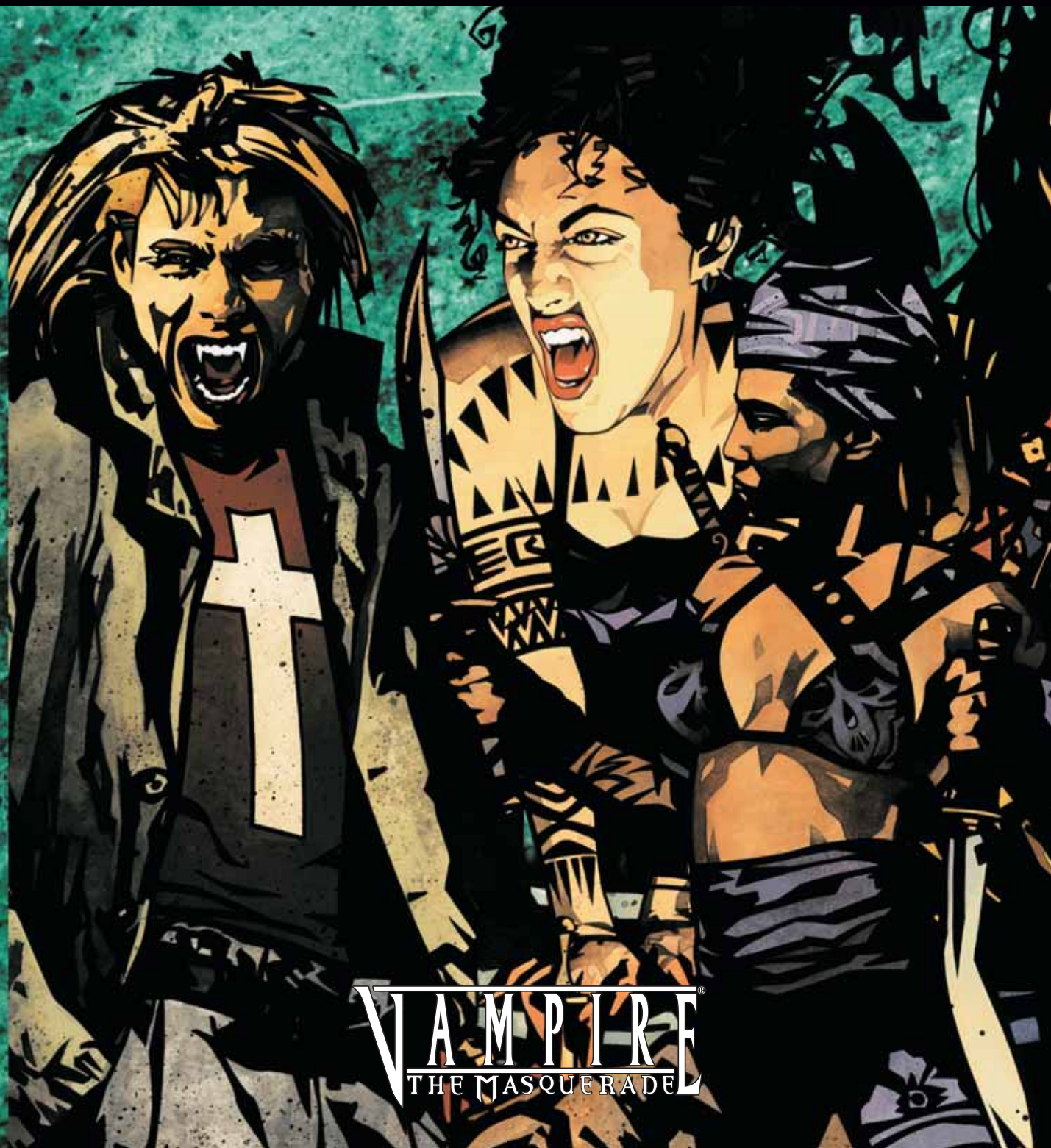


CLAN NOVEL SAGA™: VOLUME ONE

THE FALL OF ATLANTA™

wieck, Fleming, Griffin, et al.



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THE FALL OF ATLANTA™

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CLAN NOVEL SAGA™: volume one

THE FALL OF ATLANTA™

From the most Ancient of Times
to Friday, 2 July, 1999

Book one of Four



by
stewart wieck, gherbod Fleming and Eric Griffin
with Kathleen Ryan and Justin Achilli
and additional contributions by
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Foreword:
DO or Die
and Then
Die Anyway

by Stewart Wieck



Wednesday, 9 April 2003

3:28 PM

Chicago, Illinois



Somewhere, probably on a PDA I haven't used for a couple years*, I have a digital photo of the enormous, wall-sized dry-erase board that John Steele (a.k.a. Gherbod Fleming) and I covered with scrawl plotting this "million-word" Clan Novel Series. Fortunately, unlike at a point later in this gigantic story, our scrawl was not in blood, though it felt like we were spilling plenty of it. It was a weekend of intense plotting that followed weeks spent assembling puzzle pieces, especially with the help of Justin Achilli, the then, and present, mastermind behind the events affecting the vampires of our World of Darkness.

(By the way, Justin was very late delivering his **Clan Novel: Giovanni**, but I'd like him to know that I have now forgiven him, especially considering how he recently led an ad hoc basketball team of folks from the White Wolf office to victory in a grudge match against the warehouse team, all in my name. I'm not certain how I became the center of that mess, but I guess that's something new to blame on Justin.)

Interweaving the events of thirteen novels involving thirteen, or more, protagonists and point-of-view characters was no small task. Every decision had fallout throughout the entire course of the series and plugging plot holes (okay, we didn't plug them all) necessitated backtracking through the prior dozens of decisions and reformulating yet again. Much easier to be an undying vampire and have a little more time for such plotting.

This level of difficulty held true even though we primarily plotted only the main story arc. We allowed the rest of the story to be "up to the author" of each individual novel. That was really just a seemingly generous way of saying we'd pretty much maxed out our brainstorming with the main story arc—involving the Eye of Hazimel, the Tzimisce Antediluvian beneath New York City, and the near-end of the World of Darkness—and so whatever portion of the novel wasn't required to address those issues of the larger plot was the responsibility of the author. That turned out to be a real pain in the ass when it came time to write the novels we assigned ourselves.

(In my case, I wrote two—**Clan Novel: Toreador** and **Clan Novel: Malkavian**—plus portions of **Clan Novel: Ravnos**. John was the main workhorse behind the writing of the series, with five novels plus some pinch-hitting on **Ravnos** with me. Together we addressed the continuity of the series overall and especially the contributions of authors besides ourselves.)

The main story was our focus because it *had* to be good. You see, the future of fiction in the World of Darkness was riding on the success of the Clan Novel series. Some prior World of Darkness novels, trilogies and anthologies had achieved respectable sales, but only the best of them. The others were not moving off the shelves the way we thought they should, nor even well enough to warrant publishing more titles.

So the Clan Novel series was to be an about-face.

(Credit to Chris McDonough for his long-time encouragement of novels based around individual clans. I'll remind him that he never proposed a mega-series format, but it was his continual pressure that prompted the creation of the series in the first place.)

We wouldn't pull any punches and so would use *all* our best-known characters. We would promote the hell out of the series, and we would make certain the novels reflected the nature of the events as portrayed in our game setting. A disconnect between our games and our fiction was long thought to be a major weakness in our early World of Darkness fiction, and correcting that was fundamental to the effort of this series (and fundamental to making fiction readers out of our game players). As it turns out, some of the mythology the Clan Novels added to the World of Darkness has been embraced now in other WoD formats as well, including an Eye of Hazimel card and story line for our **Vampire: The Eternal Struggle** collectible card game.

In a vastly complicated reflection of the convoluted World of Darkness, the story line for the series would operate on a number of different levels. Each of the Clan Novels was supposed to tell a self-contained story. The backdrop for those stories was the Camarilla vs. Sabbat war, which raged along the entire eastern United States and contained innumerable elements and conflicts that were central and classic to the setting, such as Old World vs. New World and elder vs. anarch.

But it was the step beyond even that conflagration that was the true heart of the series. That step took us to ancient generations of vampires that had previously never been detailed and it took us deep into the recesses of New York City, where the Tzimisce Antediluvian dwells. Befitting the layers-within-layers nature of the Kindred and the World of Darkness, the one million words of the Clan Novel Series demonstrate the patterns of action and reaction that such an unfathomably powerful being puts into motion when it senses a course of events that threatens its survival—all without truly stirring from its deep slumber. With the barest glimmer of awareness, this Antediluvian initiates activity—including the entire Camarilla vs. Sabbat war presented in the novels—that ultimately puts it beyond the reach of those who would harm it. That's the central plot of the Clan Novel Series: the shrug of an Antediluvian. Don't worry, I promise that the actual million words are more exciting than that base breakdown.

Of course, an ancient vampire that opens an eye might continue to rouse and soon open a fanged mouth hungry for Kindred blood, so something had to happen—*someone* had to save the world from destruction. Well, one of our protagonists did, but the events in the World of Darkness, unfolding as you read this, show that the story isn't quite over.

The Clan Novel Series upped the ante, alright, but it also served to create a new benchmark for Armageddon.

—Stewart Wieck
Clan Novel Series Editor
Co-creator of the World of Darkness

**Despite my technological intentions, I always find myself using pen and paper to organize my day.*



prologues:
Games Among
the Dead

From Times Most Ancient to
Thursday, 31 December 1998



**From *The Book of Nod*
Edition circulated in Kindred circles in the mid 1990s
by the Noddist scholar Aristotle de Laurent**

THE TALE OF THE FIRST CITY

In the beginning there was only Caine
Caine who [sacrificed] his brother out of
[love].⁴⁷
Caine who was cast out.
Caine who was cursed forever with immor-
tality.
Caine who was cursed with the lust for
blood,
It is Caine from whom we all come,
Our Sire's Sire.

For the passing of an age he lived in [the
land of Nod],
In loneliness and suffering
For an eon he remained alone
But the passing of memory drowned his
sorrow.
And so he returned to the world of mortals,
To the world his brother [Seth, third-born
of Eve,]
and [Seth's children]
had created.

He returned and was made welcome.
[For none would turn against him,
due to the Mark that was laid upon him]
The people saw his power and worshipped
him,
[He grew powerful, and his power was
strong,

his ways of awe and command were great]

[And the Children of Seth made] him King
of their great City, The First City.

But Caine grew lonely in his Power.
Deep within him, the seed of loneliness
blossomed, and grew a dark flower
He saw within his blood the potency
of fertility
By calling up demons
and listening to whispered wisdom
He learned the way to make a child for his
own.
He came to know its power, and, doing so,
decided to Embrace one of those near him.

And, lo, Uriel, Dread Uriel, revealed
himself to Caine
that very night
and said to him,

"Caine, though powerful you are, and
marked of God,
know you this: that any Childe you make
will
bear your curse, that any of your Progeny
will forever walk in the Land of Nod, and fear
flame

and sun, drinking
blood only and
eating ashes
only.

And since
they will
carry their
father's
jeal-
ous
seed,
they
will
for-
ever
plot
and fight
amongst
themselves.

Doom not those of Adam's
grandchildren who seek to
walk
in righteousness. Caine!
Stay your dread Embrace!"



Still, Caine knew what he must do, and a young man
 named Enosh, who was the most beloved of Seth's kin,
 begged to be made Son to the dark Father.
 And Caine, mindful though he was of Uriel's words,
 seized Enosh, and wrapped him in the dark Embrace.

And so, it came to pass that Caine beget Enoch and, so doing, named the First City Enoch.

And, so doing, did Enoch beg for a brother, a sister, and Caine, indulgent Father, gave these to him, and their names were Zillah, whose blood was most-favored of Caine,
 and Irad, whose strength served Caine's arm.

And these Kindred of Caine learned the ways
 of making Progeny of their own, and they Embraced more of Seth's kin, unthinking.

And then wise Caine said, "An end to this crime.

There shall be no more."

And as Caine's word was the law, his Brood obeyed him.

The city stood for many ages,
 And became the center of a mighty Empire.
 Caine grew close to those not like him.
 The [children of Seth] knew him
 And he, in turn, knew them

But the world grew dark with sin.
 Caine's children wandered here and there,
 indulging their dark ways

Caine felt anger when his children fought
 He discovered deceit when he saw them



make word-war
 He knew sadness when he saw them abuse
 [the children of Seth]

Caine read the signs
 in the darkening sky,
 but said nothing.

Then came the great Deluge, a great flood that washed over the world.
The City was destroyed,
the children of Seth with it.

Again, Caine fell into great sorrow and went into solitude.
And he left us, his Progeny, to our own ends.

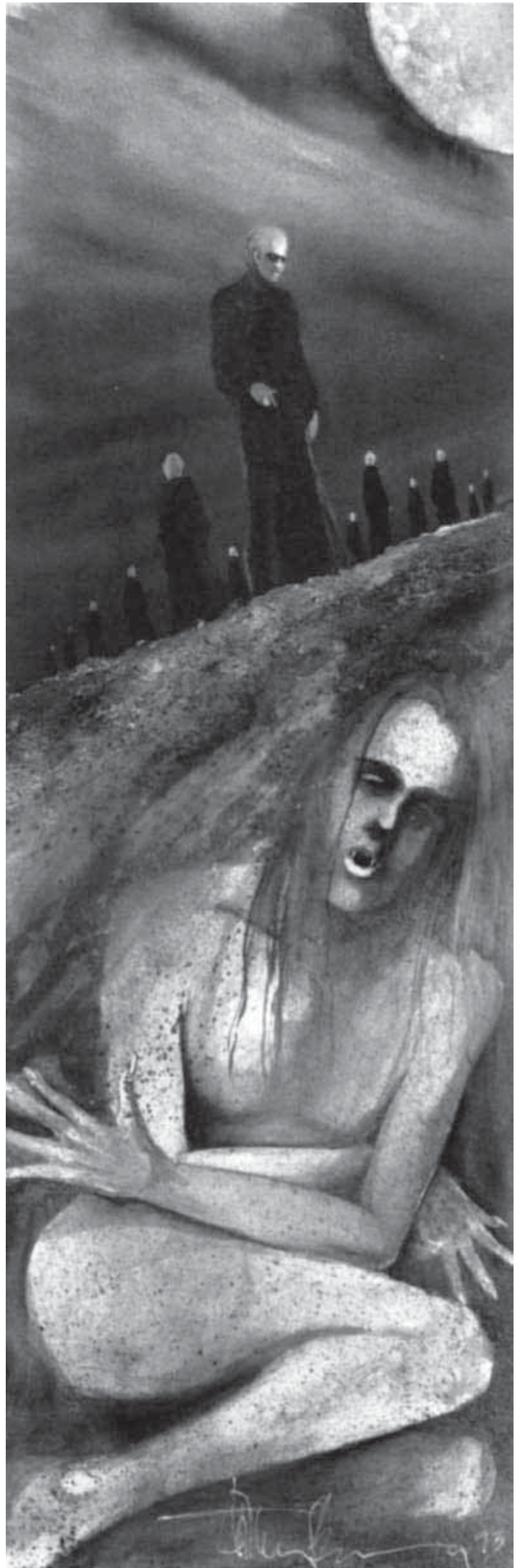


We found him, after much searching,
 deep in the earth,
 and he bade us go, saying
 that the Flood was a punishment,
for his having returned to the world of
 life
 And subverting the true law.
He asked us to go, so that he might
 sleep.

So we returned alone to find the
 children of Noah,
And announced that we were the new
 rulers.
 Each created a Brood
In order to claim the glory of Caine,
 Yet we did not have his wisdom or
 restraint.
A great war was waged, the Elders against
 their Children,
 just as Uriel had said,
And the Children slew their parents.

 They rose up
 Used fire and wood
 Swords and claws
To destroy those who had created them

 The rebels then built a new city.
 Out of the fallen Empire,
 they collected the Thirteen clans
that had been scattered by the Great War,
 and brought them all together,





They brought in the Kingship Clan
[Ventruel],
the Clan of the Beast [Gangrel],
the Moon Clan [Malkavian],
the Clan of the Hidden [Nosferatu],
the Wanderer Clan [Ravnos],
the Clan of the Rose [Toreador],
the Night Clan [Lasombra],
the Clan of Shapers [Tzimisce],
the Snake Clan [Setites],
the Clan of Death [Giovanni],
the Healer's Clan [Saulot],
the Clan of the Hunt [Assamites],
and the Learned Clan [Brujah].

They made a beautiful city,
and the people worshipped them as gods.
They created new Progeny of their own,
the Fourth Generation of Cainites.

But they feared the Jyhad,
the Prophecy of Uriel,
And it was forbidden for those Children
To create others of their kind.
This power their Elders kept for
themselves.

When a Childe was created, it was
hunted down and killed,
and its Sire with it.

Although Caine was away from us,
we did feel his careful eye watching us,
and we knew that he marked our move-
ments
and our ways.

He cursed [Malkav], when that one
defamed his image
and doomed him to insanity, forever .

When [Nosferatu] was found indulging
his tastes
in foul ways with his own Children,
Caine laid his hand on [Nosferatu],
and told him that he would forever
wear his evil
and twisted his visage.
He cursed us all, for killing the first part
of his Children, the Second Generation,
As we had hunted them down one by
one,
Zillah the Beautiful, Irad the Strong, and
Enoch First-Ruler.

And we mourned them all, as we were all
of a kind,
and all of the families of Caine's childer .

Though this city was as great as Caine's,
eventually
It grew old.
As do all living things, it slowly began
to die.
The gods at first did not see the truth,
And when they at last looked about
them it was too late.

For, as Uriel had said,
the seed of Evil planted
blossomed as a blood-red
rose,
and [Troile], the Child of
his Child's Child
rose up, and slew his
Father, Brujah.
And ate of his flesh.
Then war wracked the city
And nothing could ever be
as it was.

The Thirteen saw their city
destroyed and their power
extinguished,
And they were forced to
flee, their Progeny along
with them.
But many were killed in the
flight, for they had
grown weak.
With their authority gone,
all were free to create their
own Broods,



And soon there were many new Kindred,
Who ruled across the face of the Earth.
But this could not last.

Over time, there came to be too many of
the Kindred

And then there was war once again,
The Elders were already deep in hiding,
For they had learned caution,
But their Children had founded their
own cities and Broods,
And it is they who were killed in the
great wave of war.

There was war so total, that there are
none of that Generation
To speak of themselves any longer.
Waves of mortal flesh were sent across
continents

In order to crush and burn the cities of
the Kindred.

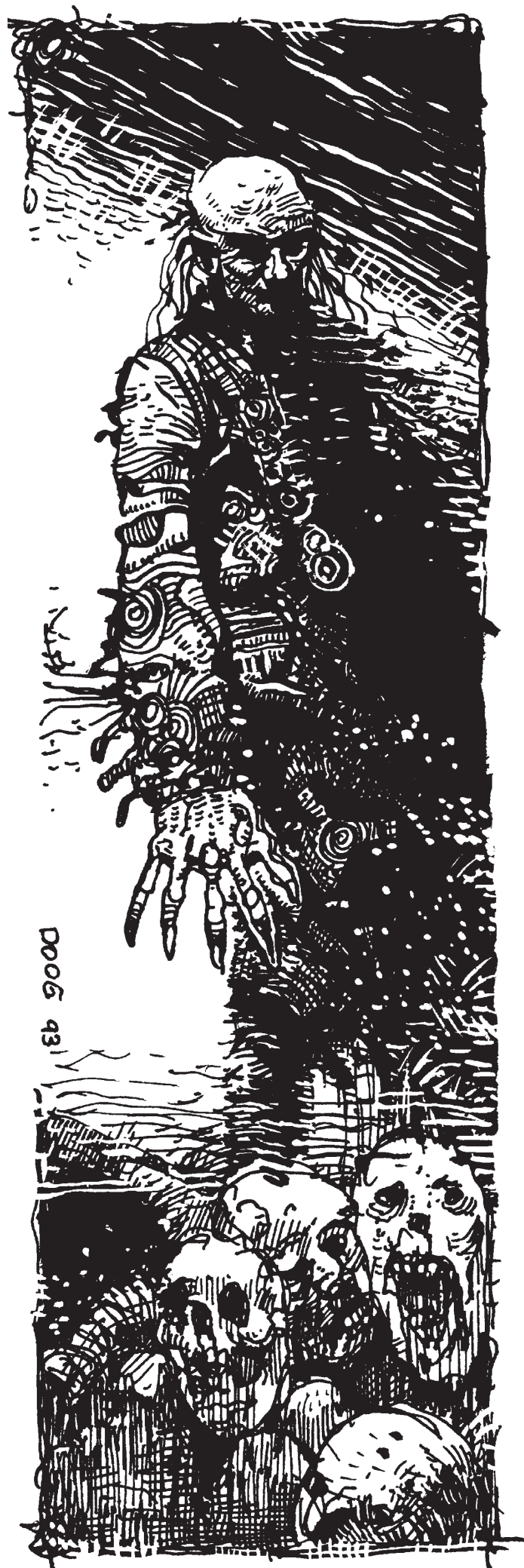
Mortals thought they were fighting their
own wars.

But it is for us that they spilt their
blood.

Once this war was over,
All of the Kindred hid from one another
And from the humans that surrounded
them.

In hiding we remain today,
For the Jyhad continues still.

And none will say when Caine will arise
again,
from his sleep in the earth,
and call for the city Gehenna,
the Last City, the City of Judgment.
The Jyhad continues still.



0006 931

The Awakening of the Dark Father

There will come a time,
when the heads of three Princes
will watch the burning of the dawn
on a pillar of white. ¹⁶

There will come a time
when an ancient hunger will awaken
deep in the northern woods
and consume all her childer

There will come a time
when an Elder Darkness will stir
deep below a city which has forgotten
and will surprise the Elder, its children.

Of these signs, you will know,
the Dark Father, bastard of Caine,
will awaken, and drink deep of blood
sacrificed to it

Of these signs, you will know
that the time has come to lay claim
to your Clan's safety,
to fight the Dark Father.

On these signs, you must know,
that Gehenna waits, even at the door,
as an actor waits in the wings
It is coming! It is near!

Shine black the sun!
Shine blood the moon!
Gehenna is coming soon.



The Kingship Clan, called Ventrue,

The Clan of the Beast, called Gangrel,

The Moon Clan, called Malkavian,

The Clan of the Hidden, called Nosferatu,

The Wanderer Clan, called Ravnos,

The Clan of the Rose, called Toreador,

The Night Clan, called Lasombra,

The Clan of Shapers, called Tzimisce,

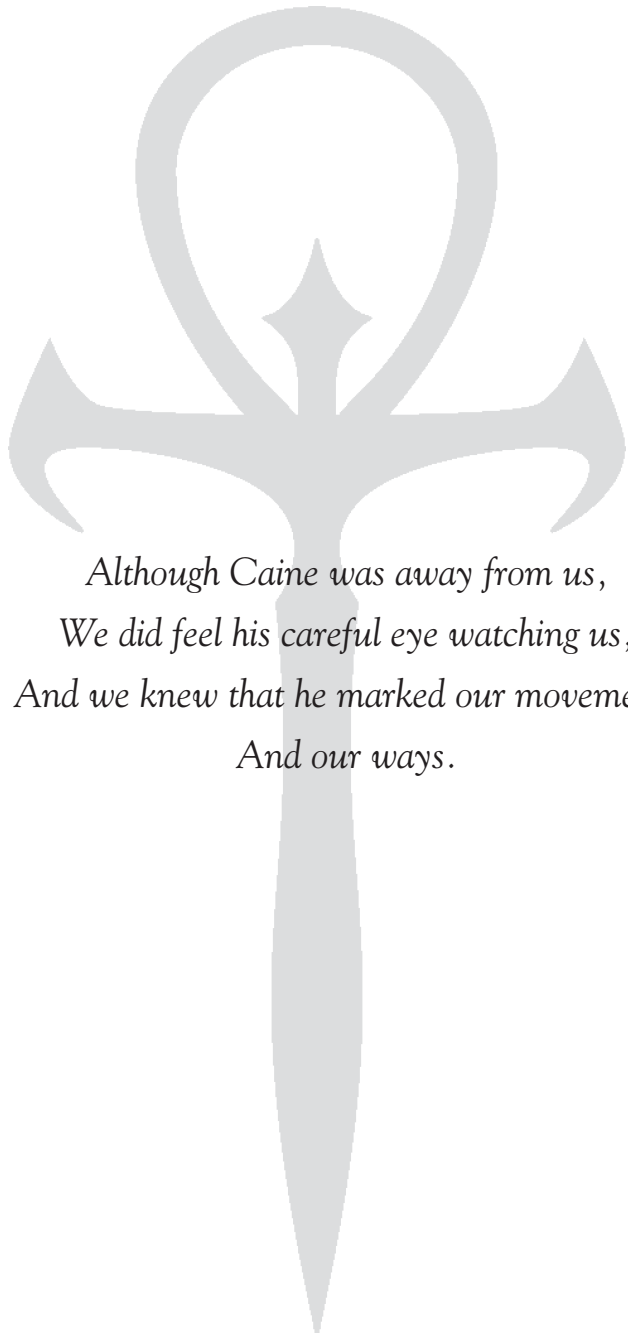
The Snake Clan, called Setites,

The Clan of Death, called Giovanni,

The Healer's Clan, called Salubri,

The Clan of the Hunt, called Assamites,

And the Learned Clan, called Brujah.



*Although Caine was away from us,
We did feel his careful eye watching us,
And we knew that he marked our movements
And our ways.*



A Night During the Reign of Ramses II
Mycerinus's courtyard
Memphis, Egypt

The cowed figure stepped forth from the shadows, seeming to pour out of them like wine from a pitcher. It surveyed the surroundings, sniffing a bit in the humid air.

What a curious scent, the figure thought to itself. Like blood, only... everywhere. Pervasive. As if the air itself...

A peal of thunder rent the night, shaking the Egyptian sands and even the pillars of the palace itself. The pharaoh no doubt slept poorly this evening, probably rousing his concubines with his nervous stirrings. For nights now, an ill spirit had fouled his temper, and no amount of pliant flesh or tender foods could calm him. Ever since the disgraced son had spoken his fateful words, the king's manner was one of discomfiture.

What was that curse again? That blood shall fall like rain? That rain shall follow blood? Something perhaps about a bloody reign? The figure trod silently across the sands from the temple to one of the lesser buildings. *In this time of miracles, almost any oath may carry literal truth. Men and gods—impossible to understand! Where one land swears by the existence of one all-powerful, its neighbors spill blood in the name of numerous divine lords. And even this simple Egypt, with its notions of the king who walks among them—how strange! That a god should stink and rut and befoul the water among his very people! Yes, how does this Egypt stretch as far as any of the nations of man? Here, far from the Father's Garden?*

Away from the palace, carved into another rock wall, a portal stood, guarded only by a small boy. The figure stood before the boy, showing him a scepter and a scarab brooch, clasping each in a thin, bony, cadaverous hand. The boy smiled blankly and ran his fingers over a bas-relief of a skull on the rocky face of the wall; the portal opened.

Dank air crept out, like the exhalation of a sick man. The figure entered, still musing to itself. *Every moment is at once an absurdity and a miracle. The spark of life that sustains the boy, that animates my flock—why does God choose to give them such a precious gift? And why does He spite me, who knows of Him and reveres Him and fears Him as he wishes? Why does He force me to walk as the dead among them, while painting them—ignorant savages!—with the colors of vibrant life? Why should He let them watch His glorious sunrise? Or sate their lusty loins beneath the flawless skies? Do You hear me, God? Are You with me in death, or have Your ears grown deaf to the voices of Your disavowed?*

If God was listening, he gave no indication. A single serpent crawled from one of the steps the figure descended, into a crack in the sandstone wall.

Oh, how very like my angry God. Always punishing the councilor for the sins of the artisan. Or perhaps, always punishing the children for the sins of their father. The figure smirked beneath its hood. *I know Your ways, God. You have turned Your back on me, yet it has allowed me to step nearer to You without your knowledge. You do not see me; You force Yourself not to hear me. And it will be Your undoing. One night, You shall feel my fangs—the very affliction with which You cursed me and my sire and my sire's sire—at Your throat. And then, great God, You will know what fear can breed in a man—even a dead one. My dead*

heart still beats, but it is not with mercy or love. No, my heart beats with the black blood of anger...an anger that Your wisdom has left as a scar. Better to have struck me down than to permit the kiss of—

“Master?”

A child’s voice interrupted the figure from the growing histrionics of its reverie. Taking the last step, the cowed form entered a low, arched room that stank of sweat and youth and the waste of mortal bodies. A single torch guttered against the far wall, bestowing precious little light on the squalid chamber but giving the figure far more luminescence than it needed to see. The cool stone walls bore no marks, other than a few streaks of offal and a haphazard pattern of russet hand-prints. A boy emerged from the far corner, his face obscured by unknown filth, naked as the day he was born.

“Master?” The wretch repeated his question, unaware that his master indeed stood before him. The figure shook its head. Perhaps the boy would never learn—he peered too purposefully into the darkness.

“Yes, Nusrat. It is I.” The figure peeled back its hood, its head emerging, baring a rictus of teeth, like a skull plucked from a lifeless body. Which, in truth, it was....

The boy leapt into the dead man’s cold arms, clambering exuberantly up them to kiss his master’s face. The master turned away, sparing himself the boy’s clumsy affections. He looked about, lifeless eyes leering from pitted sockets, scanning the darkness. “Nusrat, where is your sister? Elisha?” He called out, but received no response.

“She’s sleeping, master. She’s still sick.”

“She’s not sick, my dear boy.” A charnel hand emerged from the robe to pat the boy’s shorn head affectionately. “No, she isn’t sick. She’s tired. I’ve taken so much of her precious blood that she hasn’t the power to walk.” As he spoke, the dead man led his ward hand-in-hand to the corner where Elisha lay. “See? Elisha. Elisha...”

The girl sprawled in a heap on the floor, looking like nothing more than a pile of bones herself. Flies buzzed about her—*How did they find their way in?*—and crawled across her half-open eyes, in and out of her parted lips. “Elisha? Are you not well?” The dead man’s skeleton-head grinned a particularly vicious smile. “Do you need your rest? She does, doesn’t she, Nusrat? She needs her precious sleep.” The dead man nudged Elisha’s head with his foot as Nusrat stared up at him plaintively. “Oh, yes. She’s very tired.

“May I ask something of you, my boy?” The dead man stroked the boy’s hand, his bony fingers leaving brief, bright trails on the boy’s bronzed skin. He looked down, his face a mask of deathlike serenity.

“Yes, master?”

“Take this to Djuran, at the top of the stair.” He handed the boy a small scarab with a human skull in place of its head. It was a magical, alchemical elixir-tablet, fashioned from his own blood, created to augment his servants’ powers and bond them to his will. “I’ll have one for you when you return.”

As the boy’s naked feet flapped away into the darkness, the dead man turned his attention again to Elisha. “My dear, sweet girl. I am sorry to have left you so.”

He lifted her—she weighed little more than a bundle of river reeds—and cradled her in the crook of his arm. Pushing the tattered shift away from her body, he bent one weakened leg away from him, exposing the flesh of her thigh and the delicate pink

pucker that hid above. As a hungry man eyeing a roast and spitted calf, the dead man stared at the enfeebled girl's haunch. Carefully, delicately, he bit into the flesh of her leg and felt the musky skin give way beneath his fangs. A weak trickle of blood coursed into his mouth, at first slowly and then in greater volume. The dead man drank with a detached fervor, indulging himself in the sole passion that animated his cursed frame, lapping up the blood in rivulets. With but a few seconds' draught, the flow ceased completely, just as the boy returned from his errand above.

The robed specter dropped Elisha's body to the floor, where it came to rest with a dull thud. He rubbed one finger coarsely across his lip and motioned to Nusrat to come closer. "And now, would you please get rid of that?"

The boy answered, "Yes, master," but the dead man had already turned to go.

Before he reached the top of the stair, the dead man met the door attendant, whose eyes held a wide look of shock. "Master, you—the skies have—"

"Spit it out, boy. I don't keep idiots in my employ," the dead man snapped, nonetheless worried about the effect whatever lurked outside had had on his attendant. Djuran was not the brightest of slaves, but he was stalwart. Could it be that the pharaoh had finally tired of his cadaverous vizier's ways? Had he sent a royal guard to arrest him and press him beneath stones? Had a sergeant come to arrest him? It would likely be the gravest error of that sergeant's life....

As he ascended the stairs with the stammering Djuran behind him, the dead man saw what had the boy so agitated.

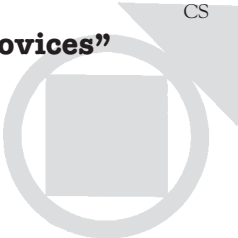
The skies were lit with brief bursts of ruddy lightning and the humid air held the tang of blood. Indeed, as the dead man looked out over the sands and walls of Egypt, they all became stained with a heavy brown-red rain.

The Lord God had caused blood to fall from the sky.

From “A History of the Kindred: An Introduction for Novices”

Prepared by Aisling Sturbridge, Regentia

The Chantry of the Five Burroughs



According to some, the so-called Dark Ages were one of our greatest eras, or at least one of the best times to have been a vampire. In consideration, it was certainly one of the more liberal times. The Masquerade had not yet been formalized; many vampires ruled cities and manors, or held high position in the mortal courts of Church and state, often quite openly. Mortals lived in terror of the supernatural, believing wholeheartedly in witches, lycanthropes, faeries and vampires. The Kindred took great advantage of this, and in a world of long, dark nights, they truly were its masters. The Camarilla and Sabbat as we know them didn't exist—everyone was as independent as they imagined themselves to be.

It was during this time that our clan, the Tremere, joined the vampires. Our records claim we began as a cabal of mortal wizards, and our leaders, the Master and curséd Goratrix, sought immortality to give themselves and the rest of the House the necessary time to work on their magic. To this end, they studied the “life” processes of the Kindred, and then sought to duplicate them. The Master's plan worked perfectly—but, realizing they had put themselves in serious danger, the cabal's leaders set out to make themselves a place in the night's hierarchy before they were destroyed. The culmination of this effort was the elimination of Saulot, an Ancient of the late-lamented Clan Salubri.

Unfortunately, the openness of vampire society started to have some serious consequences. Not everyone was afraid of the vampire ruling as lord from the castle on the hill. The Church, using the weapons of courage and Faith, began to strike back at the night. Some were mortal pawns whose greed or rage finally overcame their fear enough to betray their masters. Some were driven by righteousness and religious fervor, believing that they were cleansing the world of evil. A few actually had good intentions, driven by tales or sights of vampire arrogance and atrocities during the so-called “Long Night.”

Vampires of today might not think this so much—most think that the Inquisition is just an empty threat the elders use to keep the whelps in line, or that it was as tired and toothless as the men who were said to make up its ranks. Neither could be further from the truth. Imagine a world where the Church has its fingers in everything—from medicine, to education, to politics. It has the power to order wars fought in its name, to dethrone kings, and to command obedience from just about everyone in society. And it has started to turn its might on the whole of vampirekind.

Frightened yet? Neither were the vampires of 1200—until the Church started to win.

The Crusades finally ended—badly—for the mortals of Europe. They wanted someone to blame, and the Church turned inward on itself, seeking out the “corrupt.” For the next 200 years, the Inquisition and its allies practiced the scorched-earth policy on Europe, spreading outward from Switzerland and into Germany, France, Hungary, Spain and England. These people took whomever they could find who might be sending Europe and God's people to Hell, whether they were Jews, Muslims, Cathars, women, political enemies, heretics, vampires.... The total list would take up too much space, but you understand.

A number of vampires were found and sent to the fires—some caught off guard in their havens, some betrayed, some even murdered. Yes, “murdered,” and don’t try to change the subject. Some elders, in their rush and struggle to escape, decided to throw the younger Kindred of the age like so much cannon fodder in the path of the oncoming Inquisitors. Not everyone went quietly—the self-preservation instinct doesn’t end with the Embrace. A number of these “throwaways” escaped and began to band together for safety, finding common cause. This was the beginning of the rabble that would call themselves the anarchs. What’s a shame is that, for all the movement was begun for an understandable cause, it’s become a stew of howling younglings, ranting without reason, selling themselves to the highest bidder who can push their cause and meet their price.

At the apex of the turmoil, with the elders struggling to hold onto their reins of power, the anarchs decided they were ready to throw off those reins once and for all. The timing was impeccable—between the Inquisition and the Crusades, the elders’ resources were devastated. There was almost no formal organization, no system of protection against the marauding anarchs beyond simply banding together, and the elders were by and large too independent and paranoid of each other to consider it. Then about two dozen elders from many clans came together and presented a case for the founding of a shadow society that would become the Camarilla. It was well received, according to most accounts, but the elders were still nervous about banding together with centuries-old rivals. Then things escalated—news began to circulate of anarch-developed magics that, some said, could throw off the shackles of the blood bond. The anarchs’ numbers swelled, and rumors claimed that the anarchs had begun to absorb entire clans; some found it suspicious that the ritual for breaking the blood bond seemed to have roots in Eastern Europe (long known as Tzimisce country). In Italy, the Giovanni clan arose from apparently nowhere, and many elders were quite concerned as to how that could have come about (but whatever their suspicions, they kept entirely their own counsel—I’ve yet to find anything on it that doesn’t have the ring of “friend of a friend”). There’s no telling which was the final catalyst, but whatever it was, the elders of Europe’s seven great clans abruptly fell in, and pulled together the first official meeting of the Camarilla in 1450.

Sprenger and Kramer only fed the fires with their *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witches’ Hammer). In fact, after its publishing, we Tremere found ourselves in even greater danger, if that’s possible. Our historical associations with sorcerers and other magicians ensured that we were guilty by association when those groups were being hunted. In spite of our allies and “kin,” we lost inordinate numbers compared to other Kindred during this time.

How the Kindred survived at all, I’m not sure. Some went into torpor, but forgot to tell anyone where they were and thus were never awakened; they might well still be sleeping somewhere in Europe. Some died at the hands of enemies who took advantage of the chaos. Many burned in the witch-fires, their true natures discovered, either as a result of trying to protect their herds or by dint of other associations having nothing to do with their vampirism. Others languished in dungeons or were seared by the power of zealous Faith. In the end, survival became partially a matter of chance and more a matter of strategy. A few survived by barricading themselves behind massive resources—for example, creating childer to put in harm’s way. Some, perhaps possessed of precognition or just smelling trouble on the wind, sought quiet places away from the worst uproar or even out of Europe proper. Lastly, and most importantly, the Masquerade

(long considered to be more of a cautionary measure than a matter of life or death) was adopted and enforced on a wide scale. Never again would the vampire lords ride through the night, frightening peasants and openly ruling manor and abbey. It was the beginning of unlife as most of us know it—walking in the shadow between worlds, never revealing ourselves to the eyes of the masses.

Now let's add in the middle of all this the Anarch Revolt, still going on. Now that the Camarilla had organization, it had a means by which to mass its strength and bring the wrath of Caine down on the offending anarchs. For the Tremere, the war was personal—we had a long-running feud with the thrice-damned Tzimisce, and here they were on the other side of the fence. Naturally we gave no quarter. After some 40 years of nightly battle, the Camarilla finally gained the upper hand. The anarchs, realizing that it would be suicidal to continue, raised the white flag. The first conclave was called in 1493, and the Convention of Thorns treaty ended the war. For most. A number of anarchs refused to surrender, choosing instead to run and regroup. When they reemerged, they had become the abomination known as the Sabbat. One hundred years of bloody fighting to give us two sides, and the guarantee of even more fighting through the years.

That fight continues this very night.



Private Correspondence

From the Very Reverend Madam Sascha Vykos, Priscus of the Sabbat To Sir Renauld, Templar of the Sabbat

Renauld,

You know that I am a being of exquisite discernment; I consider writing for posterity an exercise in ego gratification and unworthy of our species. Therefore, I was somewhat piqued by your request that I annotate a vulgar bit of history for this Sturbridge woman. Oh, fret not—my irritation is well spent by now. You have nothing to fear from me.

How I wish that she had fallen into our hands as well as her work! This uneducated hatchling of this benighted century has clearly eaten her spoonfuls of Tremere propaganda like a good infant! No mention of the noble reputation of the wise and well-traveled Saulot, or that of his inoffensive childer? No reference to the experiments wrought on our kind by Tremere pretenders to Caine's throne? No citations of the wars fought across the Carpathians to scourge this upstart pestilence of a clan from the face of Europe? Clearly history is written by the victor, and it is obvious that the Tremere "elders" (if one can call them that, for I doubt any exist that are older than myself by even a century) fancy themselves victors for the nonce.

Still, apart from the eruption of the aforementioned Tremere boil, the Dark and Middle Ages were a lordly time to be a vampire. We ruled the torchlit cities with none to tell us otherwise, and the peasants dutifully cowered before us, their dread lords. The kine remained deliciously ignorant, while we spent our nights learning the true midnight ways of the world. As enjoyable as the modern age is, I think I would not weep overlong if those distant times had lasted forever. Of course, such things never do.

The Inquisition was a curse on our kind, yes, but it also had something of the air of a blessing. We lost much in those times. Castles fell; libraries went up in flames, and their precious lore is gone forever. Good friends (and noble rivals) died the Final Death in the mortals' fires. But we Cainites lost something else during those times that I would not have back for all the world. We lost our complacency.

As the ignorant and weak were rooted out and put to the stake and torch, the clever among us did what was necessary to survive. In strife came opportunity; many elders, including two whom I need not name here (but ah! what a matchless victory that was!), perished in an ignoble but fitting manner when we childer decided that we would, at last, take control of our own destinies.

I remember the call to sign the Convention of Thorns. I tell you frankly that I would rather have burned in the Inquisition's fires than become a lapdog to the cancerous Tremere and their contemptible allies, and there were many—oh, many, indeed—who felt as I did.

How is it that Donsanto put it?

"If the Camarilla would hunt their own in response to the humans' crusades, then let us show them that these witches will not burn so easily! Come, storm our Sabbath—and see how you fare against victims who will never bow their heads to the headsman's axe!"

Trite, yes. But his sentiment is preserved today.

Still, I would be remiss to omit that I actually gained some enjoyment from this gurgling warlock's regurgitated opinions. It is both vexing and refreshing to watch the pretense to "humanity" that some Camarilla babes practice — vexing because they *still* refuse to admit to what they are, and refreshing in the sense that watching a farce is refreshing.

—Vykos



A Night During the Sixteenth Century
The cargo hold of the *Pride of Roderigo*
Somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean

Once again, despite his wishes, the dead man woke. Trapped within the stifling box, immobilized by the hundred pounds of dirt that occupied the box with him, he nonetheless felt the stirrings of consciousness, followed by the rolling left-right-left of the ship listing at sea.

Above him, the sailors bolted back and forth across the ship's decks like trained monkeys in a carnival. The ship no doubt had a few passengers as well, but for a thirst as great as that of the dead man's, the numbers aboard might dwindle by as many as half—so he had chosen instead to weather the months-long trip under the cold aegis of torpor. But the dead man never quite reached that deathlike state; he had awakened as many as twenty times, each time closer and closer to the perilous act of rising, bursting from his rude berth and drinking his unholy fill of vitae from the oblivious kine with whom he shared the vessel.

How shameful, to be reduced to this, the dead man thought to himself. To flee to the odious and barbaric New World. A New World, indeed! I have watched the rise and fall of a score of new worlds! This is simply another in a long line of rises and falls of mortal insects.

Anger had consumed the dead man for nigh upon decades—while he'd once sat in the courts of kings, he had now been reduced to fleeing from a murderous coterie of usurper-merchants. His once-powerful lineage had crippled itself centuries before in atonement for its hubris, and now it suffered another, similar fate, though this time brought about by the very family that had been Embraced into its ranks.

The ignominy! With but a look, I could crumble any of their number to dust, yet they hunt even potent Cainites like me in packs, worrying us like hounds. Hate boiled in the dead man's lifeless veins, the blood within them cold with the stillness of its stasis, but burning with impotent fury. To once have reached such heights! To have talked with God and His angels! To have held the lives of thousands in my grasp! And now, so basely to flee from a band of incestuous rogues armed with the brutality of ambition. You were vain, old one. You looked too far ahead and allowed these enemies to creep into your ranks. Why didn't they listen? Japheth and Constancia both knew. But of course, the Old One in all his martyred wisdom... We have been fools.

The dead man, though, had not been a fool in planning his escape. Certainly, a few of his get might have fallen. Proud Elodie, her silver hair spattered with her own blood and that of the vulgar Giovanni. Jehovie, Urdra and Abelard, all burnt to ash by Giovanni torches. Even his own blood-siblings, the other childer of Matron Constancia, had met the Final Death here and again. In the filth of the sewers, the Giovanni hid, striking when even the most astute disciple of Ashur had laid his nightly fears aside and planned to sleep away the hours of the day. They streaked themselves with excrement to hide their own mortal smells; the undead among them wore heavy wools and smeared themselves with the unsavory fluids of their relations to mask their own charnel odors. They crawled up from waste tunnels, hid beneath previously unmolested bones in

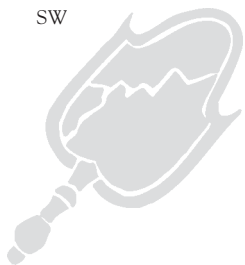
sarcophagi and scuttled out like malicious spiders from cenotaphs and gravestones. Like houndsmen, they rode up to their sires' loggias and sanctums, waving torches, brandishing knives and blackened stakes. They licked their lips as they put the childer of Ashur to the flame or into the recesses of torpor. They did it with a ruthless resolve, catching the fleeing spirits of those who made a desperate bid to escape their bodies and binding them into the glistening bones of freshly dead cadavers, or the fiendishly aborted corpses they ripped from their own sisters' wombs. Steeped with their own blood and the vitae of their elders, the Giovanni devoured the Cainites who had made them from within—and atop it all, they dared to call themselves Kindred, after the wishes of those selfish bastards who convened in England! Of all places to set precedent, why would anyone choose a land where Scots were considered people and men knew their ewes carnally!

Can you hear me now, God? Can you hear me beneath these decks? From under this layer of pine and the shit of worms? Damn them all for not lifting a finger as their precious Kindred drowned in their own vitae before them!

The dead man knew, though, that revenge was a dish best served with the spice of age. Flight was his only choice—flight to stab at the vile Giovanni during some night yet to be seen. With money obtained by selling the fingers of saints almost four centuries before, he booked freight “passage” on the *Pride of Roderigo*. When the ship arrived at its Cuban port, a family of exiled Waldensian descendants would transport the precious cargo to the North American mainland. From there, the wooden vessel would travel by cart to the swamps of the Creoles, who knew better than to ask questions of the dead or those associated with them. If nothing else, the dead man would be dumped in the swamp, rising only when the time was right and the rays of the sun could not scorch him. From there, he would gather around him the stupid denizens of the New World, taking their blood as he wished and sharpening his knife for use against the throats of the Giovanni once they had hunted the rest of his kind to extinction. The plans for travel had no flaws—he had corresponded with the Waldensians for generations through his spirit messengers and knew he could depend utterly on them. The Creoles were French Catholics, or black and Spanish mutts with their own barbaric customs, among whom few would dare to provoke an obvious vessel of the dead. The simple coffin itself had been rubbed with a great quantity of oil and then beeswax, to prevent the salty ocean air or humid New World climes from rotting it away. Yes, all the plans lay in place. Even if disaster befell, provided the dead man could move and speak a few words, he could transfer his own soul into the secret dark of the Underworld, and from there plan how to return to the world of the living kine.

The plan abounded with safety measures and surety. The only thing left to do was weather the remaining nights until his arrival. And from there, the dead man could bring the full weight of his eons of hatred to bear on the jackals who so desperately deserved it. And to a creature who had walked in Adam's shadow, who had kissed the face of God, what cost was a few more nights?

A tiny cost. An infinitesimal cost. A few more nights seemed a minuscule price to pay for the vindication of millennia.



Friday, 8 August 1788, 8:08 PM
Faubourg Saint-Denis
Paris, France

He doesn't thrash as the Confederate prince one day shall, Anatole the Prophet noted.

Tying this and forthcoming loose ends a touch, he saw that this victim, this esteemed victim, this first willing victim, had prompted a revolutionary theme. The one brewing in the lands around him. His potential—nay, now that he dared actually attend the thought of it—his *impending* break from the path God had set before him so many circular miles ago.

The ambrosia that fueled his ecstasy, his pain, and his quest became a part of his very essence. With it came a flood of questions, and regretfully the answers were far less than the eight that seemed to be promised.

A mighty wizard, he saw, had drunk of this ambrosia too. But in that case, Anatole saw three eyes glaring back from an infinity of darkness. The wizard had assumed so much as to think this deliverance, or at least revelation. It was no more so than what Anatole received, for how much greater was the dog than the flea? Or the flea than the dog?

But darkness came to the prophet too, and he sensed in that moment a bookend, though fortunately the inaugural of the ends. Those three eyes stared past the wizard and enveloped Anatole. The dog does not see the flea, and so seeing the prophet saw more than he.

And then the blood brought the Breaking of the Three.

Pedestrian, almost, but for how he might have seen it before without benefit of the insight he now gained. Strange to see the puzzle when all the pieces were not yet at hand. Though regarding puzzles, an easy one was before him, but the track was too difficult for this corpulent king who sniffed his way to prizes in the wood alone.

For the children shall ever stalk their fathers, and such is the third scent this blood distilled.

The fragrance stirred the appetite of a child wracked by hunger pains. Only the food of the baker and the baker's wife will satisfy this craving, and after the famine there shall be feast, but not for those who eat so well now.

Ah, a more intricate trail! Was his pretense to God, Anatole wondered, as unstable as the baker who suffered Him the second estate beneath his peers? Little matter that the child was third beyond that. Or perhaps He was there, but as careless with Anatole's kin as He was with the welfare of His smallest creations. The storm of which will nevertheless wash the lazy monarch away.

Anatole felt his route shifting.

He sensed a resplendent golden beast rising, lifting its head from the crimson sea. Its sinuous movement took it first and stealthily into the land of the newly flying eagle. Was his dismissal too abrupt? Secrets aplenty hid amongst the shifting dunes of cinnamon and cumin, yet it would not be secrets but surprise that would pluck the eagle's feathers some centuries hence. Perhaps, in another lifetime, Anatole would venture there again,

even though it was within the lands of the Compact, his poor martyr foresaw that Anatole's path remained there. *This is too clear*, he concluded. *I doubt my true way shall ever be so clear.*

Anatole slicked back the hair on the blood-wet forehead of the corpse. More blood, more signs, a demon's voice. All yet to come. His willing victim remained still. *Good.* The corpse did not regret its sacrifice. *Good.* Anatole descended for more.

The death of another martyr greeted him in the blood of the one he imbibed. The poor woman, the last of her necromantic ilk, the Eight's so-called "angel" cut down to end her line, though the existence of the merchants of Venice also denied this end.

Had so much time passed already? The angel's death. The wizard's diablerie. The making of the Compact. The War of the Children. The Threefold Breaking. Even the seventh was already sealed if not yet concluded: The Master Mason's web was spun and a great power would threaten his homeland east of here as well as the great island the waning Dutch had paid for first with a pittance of gold, then a wealth of war.

And the last of his eight? Must Anatole devour this vision with the blood? *Dear God, may I reclaim thee?* Surely this was the voice of a demon and not truly a prophetic vision. Aye, there was life in this one still. Perhaps Anatole would feed it all back to him. All and more. All and his own vitae.

"Octavio," Anatole whispered, "shall we reverse our courses?" He saw his own nightmares confirmed. What good was truth if it was to be swallowed in such a landscape? A great storm shall engulf the world.

Liquefied mountains will flood the plains, block the rivers, fill the seas. Should the countless dead concern him? Now that God no longer strode before him, what would bind him to this awful task?

If he was willing to bleed his life away to another at the mere vision of such a future, why should he desire or even contemplate survival in this apocalyptic land?

"Yes, I hear you, demon," he said. "Prattle your mad plans to me as you did to my compatriot, now finally dead. I know more than he does. He sought to save the world from you, but your pathetic plans pale in comparison to the powers I perceive. I fear the toll you will inflict upon my fragile mind, but it's the future that concerns me. You play but a small part."

Would hubris alone motivate him, he wondered. Would his visions tell him so little?

"I am humble."

Would the claim to power motivate him? With the blood of the Eight within him, he had gained considerably, but did the lesson of the wizard and his subsequent fall tell him so little?

"I am weak."

Would a desire to preserve his humanity motivate him? Did the blood of this willing sacrifice tell him so little?

"I am a monster."

And so it remained. Yet if he was already defeated, then what would be lost in his failure?

Forget me, Dragon, he thought. *I am mad.*

Mad.



Wednesday, 15 June 1791, 10:59 PM
Theater auf de Wieden
Vienna, Austria, Holy Roman Empire

Wolfgang paused in the courtyard of the Theater auf de Wieden and listened for the lobby clock to strike. He nodded in time with its eleven strokes. His opera was still a little long, but today's changes had certainly helped the second act. Schikaneder was perfectly happy with a libretto which portrayed the enemies of enlightenment in completely stereotypical terms, and didn't understand why Wolfgang kept casting around for something more interesting to do with the Queen of the Night in the first act. Wolfgang had long since given up explaining about such things to the librettist. As a Masonic brother, as a comrade in the endless struggle to enlighten the world, as a guide to the fine things in Viennese life, Schikaneder had no faults. Never mind, then, that any deep notion of dramatic tension slipped off him like melting snow.

It was a fine summer night, the stars crisp overhead. He knew from long practice that it was fifteen or twenty minutes' direct walk to his apartment in the Rauhensteingasse, within the city itself. Tonight, though, he felt like ambling a little. The tenements around the Theater—from which, indeed, the Theater itself was constructed—filled him with a great sorrow and compassion. In his thirty-five years on the earth so far, Wolfgang had known his share of poverty and disgrace as well as success. But he knew the difference between a downturn in fortune and a life doomed to misery itself. In his mind, the music he'd written for Sarastro, high priest of Wisdom, Reason, and Nature, echoed to his footsteps. Wolfgang dreamed of a time when the sleeping masses around him would rest in peace rather than exhaustion and hunger, when the world would seem their ally and servant rather than enemy and master.

He paused on a low rise, his eye caught by some movement along the rooftops farther from the city center. At first he thought it a cloud scudding along, but he quickly realized that the wind was blowing at right angles to its movement. Then he saw it gather about a human figure, and decided it must be a greatcloak. The figure leapt in pursuit of some blurry target Wolfgang couldn't properly make out. As the pursuer was briefly silhouetted against a still-lit inn window, he realized that the cloaked person was a woman. Truly, he thought, here was a Queen of the Night, no doubt on some errand of brigandage.

Then his breath froze in his throat. Unmistakably, long tendrils of pure darkness extended from the woman's hands and her face, lashing out with amazing speed to whip around the blur. As they pinioned it, Wolfgang could see it resolve into the figure of a struggling man with a long beard that whirled about as he twisted in frantic struggles for freedom. The woman walked along a rooftop and jumped casually to a dormer to stand beside her prey. Absolute darkness spread about them both. Wolfgang would never know for sure whether he heard a cry or merely imagined it. In a few heartbeats, the darkness lifted. Neither figure could be seen anywhere. He waited many minutes in an agony of fear and wonder, but saw nothing more out of the ordinary.

Wolfgang thought about his feeble efforts to capture a lady of darkness in song. This figure he'd seen, this was the true Queen of the Night. Could he evoke the majesty

of her confidence, her terrible command over darkness? What music could match that effortlessly super-human leap? The Masons among whom Wolfgang moved spoke of the emancipation of women, but he suspected that none of them had dreamed of woman as graceful killer any more than he had.

Only a fool could live a life at court and gain no hint of a secret world in the shadows. Wolfgang was not a fool. He knew that behind the appearances shown to the public, there were strange things of many breeds. He had himself *seen* only a few of these, and nothing compared to the dread majesty of this night's vision. The awe he felt unleashed a torrent of counter-balancing emotion: rage, above all, that a human being, given the divine gift of reason, should feel fear at a creature in human guise. He understood Sarastro's deep anger better. A fresh melody for the Queen of the Night came to Wolfgang then, a hymn to the dark arts of deceit and terror, and to human limitations.

As he resumed his walk home, he thought about orchestrations. He would need to foreshadow the main motif in the opening scene. The joys of his craft gradually soothed his still-trembling body. When he arrived home, he would take up his pen and write two new arias and a new chorus. *The Magic Flute* would yet shine as he wanted it to.



April 23, 1890
House of Corraig ap Culain
Malehide, Ireland

“What?!” the Devil cried aloud. “How can this be so? I’ve had no word of it. Surely if the Hag were dead I would be the first to know. Unless... no, surely not.”

The Devil trailed off into a distracted mumbling. Corraig eyed him curiously, suspecting the fever was upon him. Every once in a while, a phrase would leap out of the stream of murmurs: “Don’t care *how* you find out...” or “deal with him myself...” or “cleaning up after Kerberos until Hell freezes over...”

Corraig went off in some haste and returned with the jug. He poured generously, sloppily, and pushed an overfull cup toward his distraught guest to replace the spilt one.

“Come, friend, a drink to the memory of the Wise Woman of Baerne,” Corraig said again, straightening and again adding the prayer, “If it please our Lord, may she be in heaven half an hour before the Devil knows she’s dead.”

The Devil just looked at him, cool-like, the glass untouched at his side. “Corraig,” he said at last, “I thank you for your hospitality, but I have to be going.” He waved aside the man’s protest. “My trip here is all for naught, and I have to away home with all haste. Here now, I’ll have no argument. You’ve been more than generous and I’ll not burden you further.”

His voice pitched lower, “No, not a word. I know how poor a catch the sea yielded today and no fault of your own. There will be little enough to go around these next few days until the storm breaks. I will not have your little ones do without on my account.”

This approach allowed no room for argument. “That’s settled then,” the Devil said. “But I would like to repay your kindness in some way.” He thought for a moment.

“Hard times lie ahead, Corraig. You may rely upon it. Listen well. Else, when the time comes when your children cry out to you in hunger, and your kinsmen’s children, and your neighbors’ children, you will try in vain to remember my words.

“There will be a child come into your life, Corraig. A foundling, may she ever give you as much peace of mind as she’s given me this day. And as long as you can keep her safe, no harm will come to you or yours. But you must keep her well clear of the Plain of Adoration where the Stooped One broods alone over his dark hungers. An ocean between the two might not go amiss, if you take my meaning.”

Corraig looked up at the Devil uncomprehendingly.

“Remember, Corraig. How will you face them if you cannot remember?” The Devil stepped from the doorway, wings unfurling above him. The rain fell away hissing, sputtering.

Corraig looked on, a forgotten ouskey glass dangling from the end of one arm. Somewhere behind him, a baby was crying.

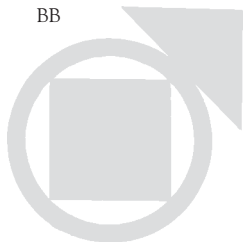
No sooner was that Devil outside than the ringing pain in his horned head returned stronger than ever. Oh yes, a full foul temper was upon the Devil.

“Before the Devil knows you’re dead,” he said aloud and with dripping malice.

Well, blasphemy was never far from his black lips, and with a curse, he turned away from Eire’s fair shores, already plotting mischief. And as he turned, one bead of sweat from his brow fell upon the water.

Up came the fish, boiling to the surface and the waters frothed red and would yield no catch for another season. Many starved and many more went hungry. This was the Spring of the Red Tide.

And then the Devil, Chiefest of Calamities and most even-handed of warriors, was gone.



Friday, 20 August 1915, 7:27 PM
Vinohrady
Prague, Austro-Hungarian Empire

Havel Fedlos realized quite suddenly one day that he wished to separate himself from his sire and all the other members of his clan. He woke up with the realization in the forefront of his thoughts, and hoped that no early rising eavesdropper had overheard his intentions. It was with some trepidation that he rose from his bier and dressed for the night, speaking calmly (he hoped) to the servants and sensing nothing out of the ordinary. He engaged in a respectable minimum of polite conversation with the others at the evening meal, helped his younger brother in the blood dispose of the corpses, and set out for a stroll around the Prague palace.

Original thoughts had come only rarely to Havel in life, and even more rarely after his Embrace into the ranks of the undead. He pondered his motive now, and eventually decided that it was in large measure the fault of the story he'd read the night before. It was by the young living writer Kafka, whom Havel sometimes heard perform impromptu readings at coffee houses they both frequented, but this particular piece was new to Havel. It was about a young man who transformed into a giant insect, and ended with his death as the fitting end to a pointless existence. It made Havel uncomfortable. His own existence was altogether too reminiscent of the fictional torments Gregor suffered after metamorphosis, and seemed no more likely to end happily.

However, Havel could act as Gregor could not. He needed no help to slip out into the surrounding world, nor would he always stand out as a freak, not if he were careful. As long as he avoided alerting his sire or the rest of the Vinohrady brood, he could (he hoped) simply fade into the night and build a new existence for himself. With care, perhaps he might become a patron of the arts, even though the curse had undermined whatever creativity his mortal mind had once housed.

It could be a better existence than the bug's, at least.

Thursday, 10 February 1916, 10:42 PM
The docks
Alexandria, Egypt



Erich Vogel leapt from his taxi before the driver could stop.

"*Effendi!* My fare!"

"In good time, my man—in good time." Vogel snatched his bag off the luggage carrier and fumbled for his wallet. His fingers closed on a thick coin-purse, full of local money. He smiled and drew it out. "For you," he told the cabby, "for your good wives, for your family—" The Setite folded cash and case together into the astonished man's hands. "Take it! Save me the price of changing it. *Bahksheesh!*"

"*Shukran,*" said the Egyptian, staring at the madman.

Erich didn't notice. He had already started running.

The *Ellen Tucker* slept quietly in her berth, hoarding strength for her next voyage. Passengers trickled up her gangplanks, porters and cases in tow, and the stewards greeted them cordially. There were widows among the guests; the wounded were not few. The *Ellen*, her officers and her crew were suitably subdued—no champagne flowed, no band played, no streamers crowded the air. The docks could not help being noisy, and as the convoy prepared to leave the clamor grew—but each sound was businesslike, impersonal, and so the whole seemed hushed.

When Erich hurtled into sight, heads turned. Though strongly built and rather short, the Setite was a spindly and awkward-looking sprinter. His legs wound up and let fly like a child's tin toy might. His arms were trying to do the same, which would at least have balanced the motion below—but his baggage got in the way. The heavy leather grip bogged down his right shoulder, and his left hand, holding a white linen jacket, flailed the cloth about like a flag of shamefully pacifist truce.

Vogel careened toward the ship, and a steward stepped out to help him.

"*Ellen Tucker*, sir?"

"Yes!" Vogel sped by the porters and the waiting queue, past the luggage vans and into the dimmer reaches of the pier. He caught sight of bundled cargo and veered toward it. Out of sight of the British garrison's soldiers, out of earshot of the customs men and the merchants, in the midst of the sailors and the dockworkers, there were two men standing, supervising careful hands to net and hoist a set of small crates.

One, clearly the foreman, was a sunburned, grizzled giant in very cheap American clothes. His eyes flickered over the newcomer, then turned back to the loading.

The second watcher, looking like a dwarf beside his companion, was a black man in Moslem garb. His robes and kaffiyyeh were well made and clean, and the band around his headdress glinted a little with gold. He handed a sheaf of yellowed papers to the foreman. With his chin, he pointed toward the fast-approaching and disheveled European, and said something under his breath—something funny, to judge by the grins that sprouted on the Arabs around him.

Vegel recognized him instantly, and staggered to a halt. His hat flew off at the sudden stop, and his pocket watch tumbled from his vest. Erich stooped to pick them up, conscious of the poor figure he was cutting, just when he had hoped to impress. He gathered his goods together, as well as his wits. Donning his straw panama once again, he looked frankly into the eyes of the man he had come to meet

“*Bismallah*,” said Vegel brightly. “Hesha abn Yusuf?”

“*Bismallah*. I am Hesha.”

“Thank goodness I found you, sir.” Erich smiled disarmingly, continuing, “I took the train from Cairo as soon as I heard you were leaving.”

Hesha pursed his lips and seemed to study his words. “Why?”

The younger Setite glanced around. “I had hoped to speak with you in private, sir.”

The African shrugged. “Speak Latin,” answered Hesha in that language. “These men are not familiar with it.”

“I shall,” Erich replied, feeling proud of himself for finding a short ‘yes’ so quickly. He had been literate in Latin since he was old enough to have a tutor, and literate Latin handicapped short speech.

“Well?” Hesha’s abrupt tone cut off the schoolboy mood. “Who are you?”

“Vegel.” He heard the disappointment in his own voice. He hadn’t expected Hesha to forget. The ‘Prophet’ had such a reputation for memory—for excruciating detail—among people who ought to know. That famed talent for scholarship was one of the prime reasons he, Vegel, had asked his sire for leave—had packed in an hour, while the others of his nest looked on in disbelief—had jumped on the express to get here before the tide turned—

“My name is Erich Vegel,” he explained formally. “I must apologize for not having introduced myself immediately.” Feeling very Austrian, he bowed and clicked his heels. “We have met before now, sir, although it was quite a long time ago. I suppose that I had hoped you might remember me... at the time, you see...” he ran down, felt a fool for hesitating, and carried on:

“I was given to understand that I was chosen to serve by your specific recommendation, sir.”

Hesha made no reply; he scrutinized his visitor coolly. The water lapped hollowly against the hull of the *Ellen Tucker*, and it seemed to Vegel that the waves washed his confidence away.

“What do you want, Erich Vegel?”

The Prophet’s voice and expression were intimidating, unwelcoming. Erich had thought his die was cast—his Rubicon crossed, in fact, for he tended to think in quotations—when he bought his rail ticket in Cairo. It seemed he was wrong—surely going on with this *here* was the real risk. Nonetheless, he summoned his courage and answered, “I want to go with you, sir.”

“Go where?”

“Aren’t you sailing for Baltimore tonight?”

“I am. But what takes you to Baltimore?” Hesha paused. “Erich Vegel—” he rolled the sounds across his tongue—“Vegel. In Damascus.”

“Yes,” cried the younger man, relieved.

“But Damascus wasn’t so very long ago—have you completed your education?”

Erich nodded eagerly. “Yes, sir. I’ve been finished for some years now, and I was granted—” he smiled, but there was no better way he could think of to put it—“I was granted an end to my apprenticeship and the beginnings of my journeywork last night. So you see, I can go where I like and choose my own duties.

“And I want to work with you.”

“For me,” said Hesha slowly.

Erich hesitated. “For you,” he replied shortly.

The elder Setite frowned. “You give in very easily.”

Erich paled.

“Obviously, you cannot offer strength of character.” Hesha up-ended a crate and sat on it, studying his petitioner. “What do you offer?”

“I am an archaeologist.”

“As am I.”

“I speak and write more than twenty languages.”

“That is useful,” said Hesha, “but only if you understand some that I do not.”

Shorn of his professions, Erich began to inventory his hobbies. “I can draw, and I am a photographer. I have kept up-to-date on the wireless, and I know how to drive an automobile.”

“I might have a use for those abilities,” said Hesha doubtfully. “Now tell me why you want this.”

“I want to learn from you.”

“You have not learned from your teachers?”

“Yes. Of course I have. But they can’t tell me what one needs to know outside—” Vegel fumbled for expression, and found a solid cliché to fall back on— “the ivory tower. I understand that fieldwork can’t be taught in the classroom. What I need to know now can’t be had in an elder’s havens, or from my brethren in the nest.”

Hesha said nothing, but seemed to invite further explanation.

“I shouldn’t simply observe, however. I would help. I want to accomplish things.”

“And the temple here does nothing?”

“No, it does—but it doesn’t do what you do—”

“What do I do?” interrupted the older creature.

Erich opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut. This argument was leading nowhere. If he mentioned the man’s scholarship, he could feel it leading back to the teachers at the temple. If he touched on Hesha’s famous expeditions, he would probably be told to go find his own—and Egypt was far better ground for that than America. He thought back to his sire’s words the night they’d heard that the so-called Prophet was returning to Cairo.

Son of a bitch. Hesha’s come home—what? Oh, yes, you met him, didn’t you, boy—playing with the Turks, wasn’t he? Subversive old sod. Brought down two houses that year. Still Cainites around who can’t hold their heads up ’cause of that little affair. Watch him wreck us here. Imagine he’ll put his fingers in Surich’s pies.

And Surich won’t do a damn thing about it! Neither will his precious pet priests! Hesha fought them over the chapel in the Valley of the Kings, right on their turf, and

won, boy. He won. Wouldn't tell any of us how he knew the shrine was trapped, but there it was, sure enough, and his way in was the only safe one that kept the body from being destroyed. Son of a bitch has vision. Shame he won't take a temple, but if his intuition won't let him, it won't, and after Bombay no one cares to wrestle with him over that.

Never you mind about Bombay, boy. Enough for you to know the man has a calling. What do you mean, is it a true calling? Don't ask such stupid questions. How the hell would I know if it's true? If he won't say who's talking to him or what name of Set he serves, the rest of us can hardly prove he's listening to an impostor! Now shut up and finish your sketches. They're good enough. I think we can work them into place before dawn.

Erich struggled for words. What he really wanted to know was what Hesha thought he himself was doing. He was notorious for being right without reason. He was revered for his faith, though what he believed was anyone's guess. Somehow, he was subversive among the crooked, and Erich longed to follow that.

But the younger man would have felt ridiculous asking to be a disciple, even had he known he wanted that. He came close when he answered: "You do what needs to be done."

"But you don't know what that is." Hesha laughed. "Your foresight and your will are well matched, apparently."

Erich let the insult go—if he could get away without losing any more face, he would.

"However, I like your temper," said Hesha. He drew breath as though preparing to speak at length. "Suppose I let you travel with me, Vogel. Do you really want to be a Hun in America just now?"

Erich's confidence soared. He could prove himself on this point, at least; disguises were one of his strengths. "Who are you calling a dirty Hun?" he snapped, in a magnificent Brooklyn accent.

Hesha raised an eyebrow. "What school?"

"P.S. 106."

"Very good."

"I made it up."

"I know." Hesha folded his hands together. "What parish?"

A pause. "I—"

"You used an accent common among the Irish immigrants. If you were playing your part well enough, you would have known the name of your church faster than you knew your school."

"You're not ready."

"How could I find that out here?" retorted Erich.

Wearily, Hesha stood and began walking back to his cargo. "You could," he began, "have used a milder accent—one less subject to identification. You might have invented a persona without easily traceable features. You could have modeled your fiction on a real identity." He stopped and fixed his gaze on Vogel. "Or might have decided not to show off."

"It is not easy being a Hun here among the British," said Hesha, mimicking Vogel's scholastic Latin. "Or perhaps, 'I have practiced disguising my accent.' You might have dealt with the race issue, and asked, 'Do you really want to be a black in America just now?'"

“Simpler still,” he finished, “I don’t mind the ill-feeling the war has created against my countrymen.”

Erich stood stunned and speechless. His pride stung him. He felt himself staring stupidly; he wrenched his eyes away from Hesha’s and watched the stevedores wrangling their burdens into the hold.

“Work with me,” said Hesha, “and you would be known.” If the words held the faintest hope, the slightest opening for debate, the tone destroyed it. “You would be marked among our own by my reputation. The Camarilla and the Sabbat would brand you Setite, and you would never again have a real chance to work in secrecy or safety. Do you honestly think you could survive that?”

Erich scratched his brows, considering. He had lost his chance; he might as well keep talking. “My sire asked me the same question last night. I didn’t know what to say. I boarded the train anyway.”

“So you did,” admitted Hesha, speculatively. He pulled something brown and square from beneath his gallahbeyah, inspected it a moment, and then held it out to Vogel. “Tickets,” he explained. “First-class passage through New York.”

Erich goggled.

“American passport belonging to Eric Wells. Captain, United States Army. You have shellshock, Captain, and become extremely agitated if asked about your service.” Hesha smiled. “And now that I have heard your accent, I think you may need to have had your throat gassed out as well.” He placed the brown leather folder in his junior’s unresisting hand.

“Whisper, Captain,” he instructed. Whispering himself, he said, “If I weren’t going to take you on, I never would have let you find me.”

Erich Vogel stumbled happily toward the gangplank, and the *Ellen Tucker* blew her horn—ready to sail at last.



Thursday, 9 May 1957, 9:25 PM
The Drake Hotel
Chicago, Illinois

"I can't say your tryst with Prince Lodin was anything more than tawdry, my dear," Sharon said.

Victoria Ash smiled at the jab. She and Sharon Payne were sitting across a glass-topped table overlooking Lake Michigan from the top floor of the Drake Hotel. The Moon reflected in the dark water, three-quarters of its disk bobbing with the ripples on the surface. To the club waiter who had wandered through the dimly lit room a quarter hour previous, the two of them must have seemed like an alien pair. Victoria, dressed in a strapless gown and with her fiery red hair pinned up in a style reminiscent of Ava Gardner, could have walked off the cover of a Hollywood glamour sheet. Sharon was a stunning beauty, but of a harder sort. Waifishly thin, she had her raven hair in a short bob, and her dress was of the shapeless style so popular during the city's Jazz Age. Thirty years of unlife had yet to teach this former flapper the benefits of draping oneself in the styles of the time. Victoria was quite certain that Sharon was even proud that she stood out in this era of either Marilyn-Monroe curves or Doris-Day propriety. Someday, dear Sharon would learn a harsh lesson about the value of the masquerade. Not that it was Victoria's duty to point that out.

"I would hardly call accepting a dance at the Spring Ball a tryst," Victoria said, once she'd turned her attention away from the moonlight outside the window.

"What you call it is hardly what matters. Annabelle's opinion is what counts in the end."

Victoria allowed herself a careful sigh. "I suppose your sire's endless tirades against the boorish nature of the prince should have alerted me to her obsession with him. Still, Annabelle need not worry that I have eyes for Lodin. The dance was a courtesy, nothing more."

That was a lie, but then most of what Kindred said to one another was dissimulation and subterfuge. Victoria had been engaged in these games for nearly ten times as long as Sharon, and the flapper-cum-vampire's reaction was so predictable as to be boring. Victoria had hoped her dance with the prince before the assembled Kindred worthies of Chicago would cause some interesting reactions, perhaps reveal some hidden channels of power. Sharon's petulance only confirmed that she was one of many parasitic harpies among the local Toreador.

"Annabelle is your elder, Victoria. I wouldn't suggest projecting your own affection for blue-blooded men onto her. That is not a way to make her happy." Sharon gave a cold smile that was apparently intended to be chilling.

Victoria was tempted to indulge herself in an actual yawn, but being rude wasn't a wise strategy here. She was also fairly certain she was significantly older than Annabelle Treabelle, Sharon's sire and the Toreador primogen of the city, but pointing that out would surrender more information than she wished to provide. Instead, she simply nodded and fired a riposte. "I suppose my intent must not have been clear, Sharon, and for that I must apologize. Your dear husband scolded me for the very same lack of tact last night."

To her credit, Sharon's expression remained rigidly still. Other cues, however—the set of her shoulders, a sudden acceleration of blood flow, an unnecessary exhalation through rigid nostrils—spoke to a flare of rage.

“Michael was quite adamant that I hadn't shown proper respect to Annabelle's feelings. Quite touching, really.”

“Yes, well,” Sharon said, “Michael plays as many games as you do. I'm not surprised you two get along so well.”

“Please, my dear Sharon, I'm only granting you the point. I obviously overstepped the bounds of propriety as it is understood here. My faux pas was unintentional, I assure you. I sincerely apologize for it to you, just as I did to Michael last night.”

Sharon stood up, tension strumming through her lithe frame. “Michael's opinion is less than meaningless, my dear. You are a newcomer, a *guest* of Annabelle's in this city. To flaunt her feelings in such a gross manner is pathetically gauche. I'd hoped to help you though all this, but it seems you refuse to learn your place. I'll leave you to it, then.”

The dark-haired Kindred strode toward the door, her gloved fist clenched tightly. Victoria was happy to see such a blatant confirmation of Sharon's rift with her mortal husband and vampiric childe, Michael. It should be easy enough to set them completely at one another's throats. Once the inevitable occurred, there would be an enviable position to take up among the Toreador of Chicago.

Sharon turned on her heels when she reached the door to the hotel's hallway and the waiting elevators. She spoke in an icy tone. “Oh, yes. Maria asked me to let you know your presence won't be necessary at the Solstice Ball.”

Victoria's fingernails dug grooves into the leather of her chair's armrest before she clamped down on her own boiling rage. It was too late, though: Sharon had seen it. The black-haired harpy left with a victorious grin on her face.

What happened? Victoria wondered. Maria was Annabelle's sire and the oldest Toreador in Chicago. She eschewed the formalities of Kindred politics, leaving those matters to her childe. Instead, she occupied her nights with endless social gatherings, discreet salons, and a cavalcade of grand balls. The Solstice Ball, held on the shortest night of the year, was the grandest event on her calendar. To be stricken from the guest list put Victoria in the company of anarchs, Nosferatu and other undesirables.

But why? Maria carefully cultivated an image of being above the petty jealousies and rivalries of her progeny. Prince Lodin was a regular guest and Maria favored him with many compliments, over Annabelle's objections. Kindred played political games too complex for the living, and Maria and Annabelle's differences could easily be an act. But if so, why drop it now over such a trivial matter as a dance with the prince?

I've done something else to anger Maria, Victoria realized. *But what?*



Wednesday, 2 July 1958, 4:45 AM
Room 7, Riverview Motor Lodge
Outside Elkhart, Indiana

Victoria hoped to a God she no longer believed in that the closet would be enough. She could feel the lethargy of day coming already and although the Riverview Lodge's view of the St. Joseph River was less than scenic, she feared the coming of the first rays of the sun any minute now. She'd pulled into this dilapidated inn less than thirty minutes ago, deciding at the last minute that it was preferable to locking herself in the trunk of the Buick she'd liberated in Chicago. For all she knew, there was a small seam in the trunk, and that would be the end of her. So, the Riverview Lodge it was.

She'd paid and cowed the night clerk, then put the faded DO NOT DISTURB sign on the knob, before locking and barring the door.. Heavy drapes covered the windows. She'd pushed the bed against the inside of the door. It would slow her escape if she needed to run, but better that than some local trying to check up on the pretty city girl in Room 7 in the middle of the day.

Now she was sitting on the floor at the back of the cramped closet, stuffing linens around the seams of the door and hoping they would keep the sunlight out. She'd hoped to use the bathroom, but it had a small frosted glass window. Once the seam was as covered as she could make it, she draped the blanket over herself and huddled as far back as possible.

How, she wondered, did it come to this? Eighteen months ago, she'd been positioning herself as a player in Chicago's Kindred scene. Lodin was interested and Annabelle and her sycophants were well on their way to destroying one another. *I should have known it was too easy.*

From the moment Sharon had left Victoria's suite at the Drake that night in May of last year, everything had gone downhill. Rescinding her invitation to the Solstice Ball was the elder Maria's only overt action, but it had had consequences. Acquaintances and associations vanished. Victoria found the cold shoulder whenever she visited the gathering points of the undead. The prince pointedly ignored her. By fall social isolation had made her vulnerable and her resources faltered. A sudden probe by an overzealous agent of the Internal Revenue Service into the practices of a bank in Savannah, Georgia froze assets she thought safe. The manager of the Drake Hotel made noises about unpaid bills. Her ghoul Raymond inexplicably found himself stumbling through a rail yard at the right time to be struck by a midday freight train full of cattle bound for slaughter. Her mortal ornament, Terrence Flynn, developed a conscience when his cousin's ill health called him back to Ireland. By the time of this year's Solstice Ball, Victoria was licking her wounds in a small hotel in Aurora, readying her comeback. By June, that hotel had burned to the ground in an electrical fire. And forty-eight hours ago, her last ghoul in the city—dear Anna—had used a police revolver she had no business owning to splatter her brains all over the small apartment she and Victoria had shared for three weeks.

Victoria had seen this sort of thing before, of course. It all reeked of a calculated assault by an aged and entrenched vampire, and Maria was the prime suspect. She and

her brood had enough contacts, lovers, slaves and allies hidden in Chicago's social fabric that they could arrange fires, suicides, fiscal scandals and all sorts of other shenanigans. Usually, the prince and other power brokers would counter such a blatant use of influence, but this time Victoria had been left to suffer the full force of an angered elder. She was lucky to have gotten out of Chicago in one piece. *But why is Maria so angry?*

Daylight sleep was creeping in on the edges of her worries and she welcomed it. She could feel herself falling into slumber when a thrill of panic shot through her alongside the sound of the closet door opening.

Blood rushed into her system faster than humanly possible. Her senses sharpened and she pushed the blanket away from herself with a movement so rapid it was a blur. The bestial part of her roared, urging her to destroy whatever threat had just presented itself. Questions of how it had entered the room, how it had found her, or even what it was could wait.

Instead of striking out she stopped cold.

Kneeling before her was a thin man with long blond hair, matted into snarls by caked on blood and dirt. He wore stained dungarees and an olive drab undershirt. He was barefoot. His ice-blue eyes bored into her and held her in place.

"Anatole," she whispered. *Anatole*. The so-called Prophet of Gehenna. The ultimate wild card in all Kindred affairs. She'd only crossed paths with him a few times, most notably in Paris some seventy years before. It had not been an experience that made her anxious to see the madman again.

"Yes," he said, although he seemed not to be responding to her so much as continuing some internal dialogue. "Yes, she will play a part."

Victoria tried to speak again, but her tongue refused to move. She was frozen by those eyes.

"See," he said to her, and she did.



Wednesday, 2 July 1958, 8:59 PM
Room 7, Riverview Motor Lodge
Outside Elkhart, Indiana

Victoria woke in the darkness of the closet, certain that she was about to face her final death. Instead, she found the closet and the room beyond it undisturbed. No sign of the Malkavian demagogue she'd seen just before slumber. No sign anyone at all had even tried to enter the room.

Of course, that meant very little. Still she'd almost convinced herself it had all been a delusion brought on by day-fatigue and a certain amount of panic, when the first memory hit her.

"See," he'd said, and she had seen: Herself, tied by puppet strings looped around every limb. Around her, every other vampire of Chicago, equally wound by threads and chains. Above them, two hidden faces, one male and one female, pulling on all the strings.

Was Maria the female puppet master? No, there was the Toreador elder, just as bound as all the others. Victoria watched herself be pulled by one string into a dance with the puppet-prince. The same string that pulled her was bound to another, Lodin's enforcer, Balthazar. Yes, she remembered, he'd made some comment that had sparked her decision to seek out the prince's company. There, the female puppet master was yanking out the threads that bound Victoria to her, tying them into a noose.

There are hidden elders in Chicago, she realized. Two of them, warring with us all as pawns. Then she saw more.

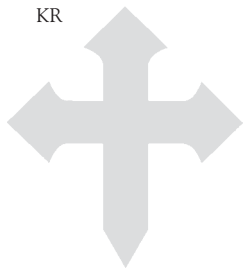
Behind the puppet masters were others, even higher up (or was it deeper?). Their hands wielded thousands of strings and these wound around the two Chicago rivals. The puppet masters were themselves just puppets of others. A word not shared in polite company bubbled into Victoria's mind: *Antediluvian. The ancients of the Third Generation. The terrible progenitors who will feed on us all during the apocalyptic time called Gehenna. They are playing with us. Playing their food.*

Gripped by a sudden fear, Victoria pushed the bed aside and ran from the motel room. She bolted for her car, got behind the wheel but froze before turning the key in the ignition. How could she escape these puppet masters? How could she run when even her running was surely part of their plans? How could any plan she made be free of the hidden subterfuges of these monstrous ancients?

She stared at the horizon for several long minutes. The door to another room at the lodge opened and a middle-aged man emerged, carrying a beat-up leather suitcase and heading into the parking lot. There were only two other cars, a Ford and an Oldsmobile, neither in any remarkable state. One had been pulled straight into the parking space so that it faced roughly south, while the other had been backed in so that it faced roughly north. A random factor, that. Surely such small decisions of ordinary living men and women were beyond even the ancient puppet masters' interest or reach.

She watched the man drag his suitcase across the unpaved surface as if he were a holy man who had appeared to her. He stopped behind the south-facing Ford and opened the trunk.

“South it is, then,” Victoria said to herself. She started the engine and allowed herself a smile. In this one decision at least, she was free of the puppet strings.



Sunday, 4 October 1987, 9:31 PM
Amid the nightlife
Calcutta, India

“Thief!”

European and other Anglophile monsters would call Khalil Ravana a vampire, undead, Ravnos, or even possibly Kindred—the latter while holding their noses, most probably. Khalil sometimes called himself a *shilmulo*, in the language of his own tradition, or that of his brood-mates. Mostly, he called himself trouble-prone and so scuttled nervously into the shadows as the cry went up. He felt the alarm spread through the crowd.

“Help! Police!”

The euros drew closer to each other. The rich Hindus—the ones who only played in this district—put a hand on their money and craned their necks to watch. Doors on balconies swung cautiously open, and brightly colored, silken ladies leaned out of the upper rooms. The dull eyes of the police on the corner flashed into unlikely alertness.

Khalil’s gaze flickered ahead of the cops and found the chaos in the crowd. He breathed a sigh of relief. Not him, not this time.

“Stop her!”

She was just a girl, a scrawny, bony little thing who moved like a monkey—gracelessly, but without the slightest regard for gravity. She scrambled up, through, and over a street-hawker’s stall. She vaulted onto the back of a nervous donkey behind it and danced away, using the heads of angry citizens as stepping-stones to the main street. Khalil cheered silently. The boulevard would be loud, busy, and bizarrely lit this time of night, perfect for a run. On the other side, there were at least fifty dark alleys—fifty for a man his size. For a slip of a girl like that, there might be a hundred.

He turned and looked toward the café his marks had been drinking in. Gone, of course. The kid had stirred up a hell of a hornet’s nest. Probably wouldn’t be any loose wallets worth having, not for hours... better to go over to—

A throaty scream tore through his thoughts. He looked up, and it seemed as though everyone looked up with him, just as startled. A *man... no, a horn...* Tires squealed into the deeper note—and just as the listeners braced for it, the crash came. The mob surged toward the boulevard to get a better view, and Khalil let them carry him along. He slithered through to the sidewalk and found a wall to stand against.

His little urchin was down, sprawling in the mud beside the wrecked cars. Wild luck had kept her from being caught between them, but she’d been hit. He could see it in her face and in the way her bare, brown legs kicked the air. She rolled and brought her feet under her, pulled herself upright on a fender and started off again.

The cops were too fast for her now that her breath had been knocked away. Khalil muttered a curse and stood on tiptoe to see past the crowd.

A corpulent tourist shoved past the bystanders and snatched a bulging camera bag off the girl’s shoulders. He squawked out his grievances to the world at large. One cop listened, making neat notes in his book. The other man half-dragged, half-carried the

child to the sidewalk and wrestled the little thing—half his weight—into her shiny, new, steel bracelets. Khalil heard (or more likely imagined) the terrible click as the first cuff caught in its ratchet. The girl's head flew up. She howled obscenities at the law, and Khalil jumped.

Cousin! he thought. He very nearly shouted it. He hadn't heard such words out of anyone (living) in ages... gutter-harsh Rom vileness no decent gypsy family would let their daughter speak, but sweet to his ears. The girl happened to turn his way. She seemed to look right at him, despite the shadows and the throng. Her baby face contorted with defiance and she bucked her head into the cop's chin. Khalil stepped forward, entirely on impulse. He couldn't hope to fight two policemen in a crowd like this (*And who needs to?* he sneered) and he hadn't much skill (*At this*, he reassured himself, *just yet*). So it would have to be, he decided, looking up, a *very* small change....

Red—green.

Stop—go. Simple.

A truck, small but heavily loaded, plowed through two compact cars as they crept into the intersection. The horrified workman at the wheel slammed on his brakes heavily—too heavily—and began to skid. His cab clipped a sports car on the nose and shattered its plastic moldings. His trailer fishtailed into a bus, tearing it in half and throwing passengers onto the raw, wet pavement. The back half of the bus sped on over the bodies and sparked its raw metal edge along the curb for twelve more yards. The front half careened into a first-floor restaurant and began billowing thick, oily smoke.

Khalil chuckled. *That ought to do it*, he thought. The crowd, yelling (and crying) at the top of its lungs, was pushing to see the accident better (and to get away). The cops had to struggle against the tide. The *shilmulo* crossed his fingers and started toward the thief, the tourist, and the policemen—

One of the cops raised a fist to strike. Khalil leapt forward, trying to get through what was fast becoming a riot. Smoke drifted across his eyes (*Only smoke!* he told his tingling nerves), and he caught mere glimpses of the scene: The gypsy dodging the blow—the look on the tourist's face as the girl twisted her arm out of the law's ham-handed grip—the other officer leaving to deal with the accident—the kick the gypsy got in on the remaining cop's shorts. The tourist brushed by, trying to follow the officer through the crowd, shouting about the attack, shouting threats, shouting nothing as he lost his footing in the crush and fell beneath trampling feet. At last, Khalil gained the sidewalk and a clear view, expecting to see no one but the cop, crumpled over his tender parts.

The little thief had more trouble than he thought.

The cops had snapped the other cuff around a stair rail, and that rail wasn't flimsy, ornamental aluminum set with cheap screws into sandy cement. It was heavy iron pipe welded on itself, sunk deep into municipal concrete. Rusty, yes, but not nearly enough. The policeman was already back on his feet. The lucky bastard had fallen too far away for the girl to kick again, and the pain in his gut hadn't improved his temper.

Khalil sprinted through the crowd without stopping to think. He barged straight into the small, calm clearing which the uniform, and the fight, had managed to make around the cop. Bloodshot, angry mortal eyes locked with his own clear, startled, lifeless ones, and Khalil, not usually gifted with foresight, saw his own future quite clearly. The officer, six feet tall, built like a bulldozer, protected by a helmet, gloves, and huge boots,

wielding a nightstick—and possibly carrying a gun—was about to thrash him within an inch of his proverbial life. Too late, he wished he had thought before he ran, minded his own business, lain low, let bad enough alone—wished for a plan, a cheat, a buddy, a weapon, a trick:

The *shilmulo* bared his teeth and claws and prayed the human wasn't too mad to notice.

Khalil gained a half second's astonishment with the maneuver. He used all of it to snatch the nightstick away and sap the big bruiser between the helmet and the nape of the neck. The cop sagged. Feeling surprised at himself and unusually chivalrous, Khalil kept the weapon ready with his right hand and fumbled for the railing with the other.

"What the fuck are you doing, you little moron?" he demanded. "Tagging a tourist here! Idiot! Who taught you? Blind, deaf, dumb dung beetles? Go home until you learn better. As soon as I get you out of these, you disappear, but good, and you don't show your scrawny ass this side of the—" His fingers snagged the cuff and gave it a tug. It came sliding into view—easily and quickly—attached to nothing and no one but the pipe. Khalil stared at it stupidly.

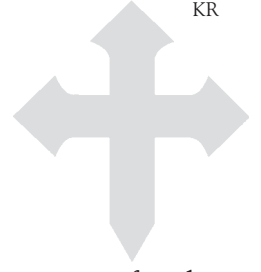
A pebble dropped on his bare left toe.

He looked up. He could see only her face, smirking down sweetly from the roof's edge. For a moment, she seemed to smile for real—with just a touch of gratitude—and then she was gone.

"Bitch!" Khalil yelled, throwing down the nightstick. He stamped a foot helplessly. "See if I ever help another—"

The man at his feet moaned slightly. Khalil kicked him in the ribs and stalked away.

Monday, October 1, 1990, 5:15 AM
Away from the crowds
Calcutta, India



Khalil stood in the doorway of a cheap bar he'd had business in, waiting for the opportunity to leave without being noticed. When his little urchin came into sight, he recognized her immediately. She wasn't so little, nor so young as he'd thought. *No—of course, she's mortal, it's been what? A year? Three? She is older....* Without looking at him, she passed by, picking her way carefully among the trash and sewage in the street. Khalil leaned out to watch her go. She turned the corner, swaying gracefully....

"Damn her." She was out at night again, even deeper into this filthy district than the first time they'd met. There were no tourists here—deadbeats, yes—crooks, whores, and sharpers, certainly—Khalil and his kin, often. The *shilmulo* beat his hand on brick, spun on his heels and dove inside. He hopped across broken bottles and bodies, sprang out the back just four feet from her, and stood there, glaring.

She stopped short. She blinked bright brown eyes, and then started to walk around him.

"I thought I told you to stay out of here," he barked.

"It's none of your business, freak," she retorted, but her glance dropped to the ground, and he could feel her fear.

Damn. Tough mouth on her, anyway. He tried to reach her with his voice. "Come on, little sister," he said softly. "We'll go someplace safer, all right?" Khalil put a hand on her shoulder. His fingers left ruddy brown marks on her sky-blue shirt, and he could feel the warmth of her body straight through the thin material. "This ain't the kind of place a pretty baby like you ought to hang out in." He took her wrist, and she didn't pull away or holler.

Got her! The *shilmulo* felt a touch of pride. This was a *good* thing he was doing. He wished someone had steered him away when he was her age. *I might still be alive today*, he thought briefly—moving on before any of the impossibilities involved could occur to him.

On the other hand, was he going to be able to reach the camps and get back before sunup? *Shit*. Virtue was going to cramp his style. Annoyance all but snuffed the spark of altruism, and Khalil tightened his grip.

"You're going home," he told her sharply, irritated by the time lost here and the time he'd lose escorting her out. He half-turned to close the back door of the bar behind him.

There was no warning, only one sharp breath at his ear. Her wrist twisted half out of his grasp before he knew it.

Khalil was faster than the cop had been. He might even have been expecting it, half-consciously. He whirled around and locked both hands on the girl's bony arm. She bared her teeth angrily, doubled up her other hand in a tiny, ridiculous fist, and hit him square and hard beneath the breastbone—

But she was the one who gasped, not him. His chest and shirt were dry and cold in the middle of squalid summer.

She gaped at him, realizing there was something wrong—not comprehending what it was. Khalil, watching her, felt a little lost. The gulf between them was huge, and it

was all in her eyes. He remembered one of the reasons he didn't roam the camps anymore. He had grown sick, long ago, of seeing *that* look on faces like his mother's.

And then—what was so much worse—the girl's expression changed. Now it was one of understanding. She knew precisely what she was standing next to. He swore at himself. She was real, full-blood Rom, all right. She could have smelled a curse in a pigsty.

Khalil took a quick look to either side. No one was watching them yet. He pushed the child down the alley beside the bar, clapping a hand over her mouth to keep her quiet. He twisted her arm behind her shoulder blade, near the point of breaking—what would that matter now, after all? She fought, a little, and managed to open her jaws far enough to bite his index finger. Khalil pulled free, but lost the tip of the nail to her sharp teeth. He moved behind her for more control—the saliva made a tricky grip—and kept shoving.

His bare foot fumbled over a slippery patch. Khalil realized, too late, that with her in front he couldn't see where they were going. He stumbled. Tripping, he lost hold on her face. She didn't bother to scream, but did a back flip, instead—over and around her own arm. The *shilmulo* landed on his chin, enraged and disgusted. He'd lost control of the wrist, of the situation, of the girl....

He heard her feet pounding away, faintly, through the trash. *Good*. Running home, where a girl like that ought to be. Hell, maybe he'd scared her enough. Khalil wiped the muck off his beard and got to his feet. It would be worth it if she learned to keep out.

Khalil slunk down the alley and looked in on the bar. No change there.

The image of his own grandmother, telling stories by the fire, rose in front of him. All the women used to come to listen to her. And girls, as well, just like this one. He smiled. This baby would probably spin a good yarn tonight to her own grandmother—

Who would believe her—

Who might, maybe, know what to do about it—

Khalil bolted the door and did a little running away of his own.

Monday, 10 August 1992, 8:11 PM
The Home of Stephen Walinsky
Santa Barbara, California



Stephen Walinsky's damnation—and his redemption—began with a phone call.

Stephen was one of those people who were pretty good in both the humanities and the sciences. C.P. Snow's "Two Cultures" problem was never a big deal for him: He could work with techies and academicians alike. Since he'd always had the impulse to know as much as he could about pretty much everything, he ended up settling into library science as a field. He figured that, although he wouldn't get to do much of his own research, he'd have the fun of knowing about all the work going on around him, and get to help others in theirs. And in some ways he really preferred to dabble rather than to settle down and do just one thing all the time.

When Stephen got his Master's, the University of California, Santa Barbara made him a very juicy offer to oversee the technical reference department there. He'd just graduated from the University of Toronto, and he was ready for some warmer winters. Six years went by in very comfortable fashion. To his surprise, he did get to do original work, too; he even made the cover of *Discover* for his papers on adaptive user interfaces (a little inset picture, but still). Southern California was a weird place in some ways, and Santa Barbara weirder than some parts of SoCal, but he had a good time by and large. His staff was good, and the professors liked the extent to which Stephen made their lives easier.

So he gradually came to think of himself as settled. He finally managed to get a good apartment a little bit out of downtown Santa Barbara, away from the noisy slum zone that is student housing for UCSB. Roommates came and went for a while. Then he started doing freelance consulting about database problems on the side and didn't need the extra income. His cats, lizards and he went through the cycle of years pretty calmly, enjoying the brief rainy season and enduring the long hot summer with the help of an especially efficient experimental air-conditioning system one of his clients at the College of Engineering rigged up.

The Pacific coast north of the LA sprawl was a fairly narrow strip of useful land between the sea and the mountains. The mountains weren't all that high—just a few thousand feet, with a few exceptions—but they were rugged and covered in dense scrub. You could go from beach to gully-cut foothills in just a few miles, or even less. This was part of what had made Santa Barbara so attractive to rich folks all century: great upslope views were easy to come by.

Santa Barbara's city fathers being what they were, the city had done its best to keep the boring old working classes well out of sight. Cheaper housing tended to nestle out of sight from the swells, whether just back from the shore behind low coastal hills or tucked into out-of-the-way canyons. Stephen was very lucky indeed to have found a place just before the neighborhood right upslope started going from rundown apartments to condos. He somehow managed to avoid a couple of buyout efforts, and kept on living relatively frugally (by local standards).

Despite what some might think, the coast did not run exclusively north-south. There was a big promontory between Los Angeles and San Jose, and Santa Barbara was on it. The beach was actually due south of any place anyone was likely to be standing; it gradually curved to run southeast as one headed toward LA, but all through Santa Barbara County, one went east or west to run parallel to the shore.

Stephen's little canyon faced southwest, so that he had a marvelous view of sunset over the Channel Islands if he walked up to the end of his cul-de-sac and scrambled partway up the steep slope toward the low end of the condo development. A pair of eucalyptus trees, more than a century old, that framed the view past where the cul-de-sac met the boulevard, down slopes stripped to mud by a landslide each rainy season, past a couple of rundown old oil-storage tanks, and then suddenly into beauty. There was a swath of marshland that had never been developed, so it had a very complex mix of water grasses and bog-loving plants where the herons came to nest after the rains. The westernmost Channel Islands lay almost in a straight line with the line of the cul-de-sac, and their rocky summits shone in the sunset glow reflected off the sea.

At least that's how Stephen would remember it, looking back years later.

He was watching the sunset from his porch. The view wasn't as good there, but Stephen had been out bicycling in the hills with friends on the weekend, and he was sore. Even with part of the view clipped by the neighbors' houses and a rise on his side of the street, it was gorgeous. The sea was stirred up, agitated by the distaff end of a storm somewhere toward Hawaii. Sunlight glittered on countless wave crests far out from the shore as well as on the big breakers cast up onto sand and rocks. The last rays of twilight shone through the breakers' crests, a sight that he almost never saw. Stephen wished he had his camera handy.

A few minutes later, the telephone in his apartment rang. He strolled in, checked caller ID, and didn't recognize the name: RANULFSON ENG. Engineering, presumably, which meant that it was probably a would-be client. Stephen tried never to pass up a good opportunity for money, so he cleared his throat and answered.

The voice on the other end was deep bass and heavily accented—something Scandinavian, but his ear for such things wasn't fine enough to distinguish between the possibilities. "Mr. Walinsky, I was referred to you by associates in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. I represent an international conglomerate interested in centralizing certain data-management functions in that area. We wish to contract out some elements of our data systems design and implementation. Would you wish to discuss this further?"

Stephen did wish, of course. He soon established that he was speaking to Mr. Ranulfson himself, though he got the impression that the firm was itself a front for operations elsewhere. That sort of thing didn't make Stephen happy, but after a few projects for businesses relocating from Hong Kong, he'd gotten used to directorates not just interlocking but layered like so many crazed weasels dipped in slow-acting superglue. They arranged to meet at a temporary office in LA on the following weekend. Ranulfson asked if it would be inconvenient to meet at 9:00 PM, so that he could keep on schedule with European operations. Stephen liked a late start anyway, so that suited him just fine.

Saturday, 15 August 1992, 8:57 PM
Hilvaquez Transitional Offices
Santa Monica, California



Before heading down the coast, Stephen Walinsky had naturally did some research into Ranulfson at the library. Things looked pretty straightforward on the surface: firm founded in the aftermath of World War II by a bunch of demobilized Swedish and Norwegian soldiers in conjunction with some distant American cousins they'd met during the occupation of Germany; held privately ever since; senior staff recruited from the founders' families. Isaac Ranulfson had run the firm since 1982, keeping it profitable and growing slightly. Behind that straightforward facade there was a nightmarish mess of possible connections, traded directorships, hints of family ties, and so on. Stephen knew that old European money could take some very devious routes to avoid attention from modern governments—as in anything this side of Napoleon. Still, as long as the checks cleared and the work itself was worthwhile, that would be the IRS's problem, not his. Stephen was glad to leave them to it.

The only person in the office when he arrived was Ranulfson. There were two desks in the entrance lobby, both piled high with file folders and six-line telephones. A short hall led to three glass-fronted offices, two of which had desks also piled with files. The third was empty of everything except taken-up swaths of carpet. At the end of the hall there was a conference room, offering a third-floor view of generic LA cityscape. Ranulfson let Stephen in and escorted him to the conference room.

Ranulfson was tall and very blond. Something like six-foot-six, with very long hair drawn back into a ponytail. His eyelashes and goatee were almost white, and his eyes were a very pale, watery blue. He wore a plain gray suit, whose severe lines emphasized his lean and angular build. His shoes were gray, too; nothing about him glinted or reflected, it was all matte surfaces. The deep bass voice was startling against that backdrop. "Come in, Mr. Walinsky. I apologize for this temporary state of affairs."

"No problem, I assure you, Mr. Ranulfson. I've worked in living rooms as well as board rooms."

So they sat down and discussed things. It appeared gradually that what Ranulfson planned for LA was a series of rapacious acquisitions on behalf of firms associated with his own. Ranulfson had a particular interest in architectural and transportation firms based on criteria that Stephen wasn't at all clear on, but which seemed obvious to Ranulfson. He wanted to gather up available information on the target firms and their personnel so as to help plan a campaign of recruitment and takeover.

That sounded unpleasant, Stephen thought. But there were interesting technical challenges in the work. Ranulfson made it clear that he wanted an especially accessible interface, since some of the senior managers who'd be involved were largely computer illiterate. Interface design was a special pleasure of Stephen's, and taken with the money Ranulfson offered, it was just too good to pass up.

In retrospect, he would wish that damnation smelled a bit more obvious, or something. He might have chosen it anyway, but he'd have liked to know, to have had the chance.



Wednesday, 17 March 1993, 9:03 PM
Ranulfson-Yngve Development Associates
Stockholm, Sweden

Simply figuring out the structure of the system Stephen Walinsky would be creating took seven months, including two required trips to Stockholm to meet with Isaac Ranulfson's partners. They paid everything, but Stephen used up both vacation and sick time from UCSB to get it done. Ranulfson paid him enough to make it all right, but Stephen made it clear that they couldn't count on this as a regular matter. They smiled and made perfunctory apologies in their flawless slow English.

Something happened to Stephen on the second trip. He wouldn't know just what for years afterward.

He was actually ready to quit when he got onto the plane for the first leg of the trip. He was tired and stressed and not altogether happy with the way work was going. He wanted to wrap up dealing with the elegant but creepy Ranulfson, not to mention his uncomfortable associates. They stared a bit too long. Their offices, located in a manor outside town, were filled with paintings and sculptures from all over Europe in the last seven hundred years, and every so often one of the associates would go into a trance while looking at a piece. They were almost too immaculately groomed, as if they never did anything except wait in their offices for visitors like Stephen. It reminded him of trapdoor spiders and burrowing lizards back in Santa Barbara.

As they'd done before, Stephen and Ranulfson's associates met shortly after local sunset. Stephen gave an hour's worth of presentation, then they all took a break for dinner. Many of the Scandinavians ate sparingly or not at all, and Stephen wondered if they might have some wasting disease they glossed over with the perfect appearances. He'd known colleagues in the library who had AIDS, and one of them went through a similar stage of life-losing elegance on his way to hospitalization. That wasn't it, but Ranulfson's partners were more like that than anything else Stephen could think of.

After dinner, they brought out a thick wine to serve with dessert. For a moment it almost looked like blood pouring into the glass. Stephen looked up, startled, but found Ranulfson smiling slightly at him, and felt dizzy for a moment. When he looked back down, it was clearly wine after all, simply with more sediment than usual. Stephen felt a peculiar confidence in the back of my mind, a sharp sureness that all was well despite his reservations. So he drank.

As he continued his presentation, Stephen felt a tectonic shift in his attitude. His complaints all remained, but now they were balanced out by a sudden sympathy for these gaunt engineers and managers. He wanted to find out what would happen next, and decided to stick with it.

Wednesday, 22 June 1993, 9:15 PM
Ranulfson Engineering
Century City, California



Stephen Walinsky only had to make one more trip down to Los Angeles before the phase's conclusion. By then there was a small but permanent Ranulfson office in Century City, with a nice view over downtown. Mostly, Stephen worked in his own apartment, poking at a variety of arrangements and sending off demo discs by airmail. On that one visit, however, he did get to meet some more associates of Ranulfson's.

"They are the Haqims," Ranulfson had told him in a phone call before he headed down. "They are not part of our alliance, but they sometimes assist us in particular tasks. In this case they are doing surveillance of some of our prospective targets for acquisition. Please assist them by reviewing your currently available profile data and supplying them with a copy of your current compilation. It may be that they will acquire a copy of the finished work, but if so we will negotiate separate payment for you from them."

Stephen had expected Middle Easterners from the name. It sounded Arabic, at least, although he knew that there can be some surprising phonemes among Baltic and Scandinavian names as well. Sure enough, the Haqims who visited him proved to be as blond as Ranulfson and his crew. They spoke much better English, and moved with a remarkable grace. Not many business people do, all that yuppie emphasis on fitness notwithstanding. These three men and two women didn't just look fit, they looked *elegant*, in complete control of themselves. Stephen never saw any of them stumble or drop anything. One of them even caught him on the edge of a stumble, hoisting him back upright with one strong hand.

Only one of the men and one of the women ever spoke to Stephen. The rest watched the proceedings and took part in the tutorial, but silently. None of them ever gave him first names, either. They were apparently all Mr. or Ms. Haqim. Stephen suspected that they might belong to some weird cult, but that was Ranulfson's concern, not his. He showed them what his employer wanted him to, and they made ready to fade off into the night in their tan limousines.

The last Ms. Haqim to leave touched Stephen on the shoulder on her way out. Nobody else in the office reacted, but he distinctly heard her say, "Outside, one hour from now." Stephen looked up. She nodded on her way on out. Ranulfson was looking right at them, but didn't seem to actually see their little exchange. Certainly nothing he said then or later suggested he was aware of it.

An hour later, Stephen told Ranulfson that he needed to go get some papers from his car. The Scandinavian nodded distractedly, engrossed in some phone call, and waved him on out. Stephen felt an urge to go down to the sidewalk, making at least that much of his story true. When he got outside, he found two of the Ms. Haqims there. One was talking into a payphone. The little snippets of sound Stephen caught didn't match the motions her lips made. He wondered if he was hallucinating.

The second Ms. Haqim motioned Stephen to a bus bench and sat down beside him. "Let me look at you," she said. For a long time she stared at him, absolutely motionless, not even breathing. "Your soul becomes dark," she said at last.

Now he really did feel he was hallucinating “Um, it does? But...”

“Do you not see the circle of your life contract?”

“What? No, I don’t. I see opportunity here. I’m making good money, doing work I like. I’m learning a lot about business.”

She made a short choppy sound that might have been a laugh. “Allah told Muhammad, ‘Do you not see that Allah created the heavens and the earth with truth?’ I occupy a lie, most of the time, but every once in a while I try to honor the words as well as what I tell myself the spirit is. So let me tell you true things.”

Much of the next half-hour would always be a mystery for Stephen. A fog seemed to swirl around them, muffling the sounds of traffic and the city’s nightlife. Ms. Haqim’s voice proceeded at a constant alto pitch. It seemed a thing separate from her, a fountain of meaning and warning for Stephen. It spoke of assassins and leeches and parasites on the soul of humanity and of a mountain full of those waiting for truth and of the last night of the world. It told him of cabals older than his country and of a war between ancient powers.

In the end, he said no. No to whatever it was she offered. He didn’t want it. The fog swirled into his mind, blotting out details and leaving him with only the knowledge that he’d been offered a choice he rejected.

Once he returned to the office, Ranulfson finished his phone call. Business resumed.

Friday, 24 December 1993, 6:58 PM
Sheraton Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California



It was just before Christmas, and Stephen Walinsky was finally finished with everything Isaac Ranulfson had contracted for. He came up to Santa Barbara for the final review, taking a suite in the Sheraton on the waterfront and inviting Stephen to dinner. "I have requested that my associates send the ingredients you so much enjoyed on your last trip to Stockholm," he said, "and contracted a local chef to prepare a meal for us."

It was as good as last time, Stephen thought, and as they sipped an after-dinner glass of that remarkable wine, he found himself filled with enthusiasm for the venture. He saw Ranulfson smile for the first time while he gushed about how much he'd enjoyed it all and wanted to work for Ranulfson again.

"Perhaps you shall," Ranulfson said.

He pronounced himself very pleased with the work. Final payment was in cash, rather to Stephen's surprise. Ranulfson drew out a thick wad of hundred-dollar bills and counted them out. He also supplied one of those armored cases to keep them in until Stephen could deposit the money. Stephen felt skeptical, but that sense of admiration swirled up again and he decided to enjoy the unexpected treat. They spoke of inconsequential matters and of Ranulfson Engineering's prospects for the new year, until sometime well after midnight. Finally Ranulfson noticed Stephen's increasingly frequent yawns, and sent him home in a cab. He picked up the tab for that, too.

The new year started quietly. Stephen began having some problems at his day job. Nothing major, but increasingly he found myself no longer satisfied by the challenges it offered. He wanted to do more work on the Ranulfson project, to see those interesting and exotic people again, to be around Ranulfson. This was not some repressed sexual yearning coming out. It was a different sort of fascination. Ranulfson's presence, the suggestion of old, complex thoughts behind the quiet blue eyes, the glamour of wealth used in subtle ways, all attracted Stephen.

His spring performance review was the most disappointing since Stephen started at UCSB. The university still needed him, and he still did good work for them, but the department and he both knew that the creative edge was gone. He was going through the motions too much of the time, fobbing more work off on my assistants. Now, they flourished. It was clear by the end of the spring quarter that, if he wanted to resign, Stephen would be able to recommend a first-rate replacement from within the ranks. Nobody outright suggested that he do this, but talk of what might happen *if* he resigned became more frequent. The campus newspaper mocked him in an editorial, along with other "dragging" staff members, and his assistants didn't really rush to his defense.

Stephen decided to arrange a sabbatical for the next academic year. The ostensible justification was further work on interface-related papers for the journals. Not many of the directors were fooled by his rationales, but they went along for the sake of avoiding a scandal or nuisance. Stephen's workload got parceled out across the rest of the technical

reference section, and at the end of the spring quarter he cleared out his office so that the department could use it as overflow meeting space. In his heart, Stephen knew he wouldn't be back.

The UCSB library was, at nine stories, one of the tallest buildings on campus. The middle six floors of the south side featured big curving windows, tinted against the glare, with thick, low chairs and couches so that patrons could sit and look out to sea. Most of the library, like most of the campus, was ugly concrete modernist junk, but around these windows some artistic soul had managed to arrange tiles in patterns reminiscent of Aztec or Mayan designs. Oil derricks dominated the eastern half of the view—which may have had something to do with the ease of local fundraising for environmentalist causes—but even so it was a constantly remarkable spectacle. The campus sat on a bluff; a little creek trickled down through marshland to a cut in the sea cliffs, offering a glimpse of the beaches beyond.

In recent years, various student art projects had gone up in the marsh and channel, and Stephen was very fond of the pastel whirligigs and the driftwood mobiles hung from nearly invisible brushed metal frameworks. On this, the last day of his work, a stiff offshore breeze made the mobiles dance, suggesting to him the skeleton puppets on show at Cinco de Mayo. He felt like bones or logs tugged by rhythms he couldn't see or understand. The thought came sharply and suddenly. Stephen didn't normally think of himself in such metaphorical terms, let alone self-pitying ones, but he contrasted his wandering-lost sense to Ranulfson's demeanor and even more to the polished self-containment of the Haqims, and felt adrift.

Stephen turned away, ambled to his car, and drove away with the sense that some door in his mind had closed without him ever seeing it.

The summer passed in a haze. As it was wont to do, wet ocean air met dry interior air, and the water drew together just offshore and inland. It was a wet summer that year, with the irregularities in the offshore current, and most mornings were foggy. Some evenings the fog would pile up not long after sunset.

Stephen felt like that all the time inside. He got no useful work done beyond two quick articles and a couple of outlines. His mind wandered, circling back again and again to the Ranulfson work. His friends wondered if he was hooked on sedatives, but no, it was all in his head.

At least he thought then that it was.

Monday, 4 July 1994, 11:58 PM
The Home of Stephen Walinsky
Santa Barbara, California



Stephen Walinsky's phone rang just before midnight. He was sitting in his living room doing nothing in particular. He picked it up on the first ring, not even noticing the caller-ID information until after he heard that wonderful deep voice again: "Mr. Walinsky. Do I intrude?"

"No, no, not at all, Mr. Ranulfson. I was just thinking about your project, and wondering how it's going."

"I'm sure you were. Such is the nature of things. As it happens, we have encountered a few setbacks, and I wonder if I could see you at our office again this weekend? Perhaps if you were prepared for a stay of not more than two nights, so as to allow an extended working period?"

Stephen's heart beat faster. "Certainly. In fact, since it's a holiday for the university, I could be down tomorrow, if that would be any help."

"No, thank you for your enthusiasm. The weekend, please. The receptionist will be looking for you." Ranulfson hung up. Stephen sat there some more, watching the phone, thinking that perhaps he might begin to come to life again.

He must have done something in the intervening days, but not a scrap of it was memorable. It was only when he was on the freeway, singing along with the radio as he drove, that he felt purpose return to him anew. He mocked the traffic jams of weekend vacationers; they were all heading out of the city, while he joined a select few (relatively speaking) heading in.

The firm had made reservations for Stephen in a hotel a block away from the office. He checked in, showered, and changed to good slacks and a comfortable shirt. Ranulfson had never insisted on much formality, but Stephen wanted to make a good impression. He packed a couple of spare shirts and a basic grooming kit in his shoulder bag; he knew what long-haul coding could be like.

There was indeed a receptionist on duty. He was a dour, dark man, who reminded Stephen of some nameless character actor from mafia movies. He didn't speak when Stephen came in, just motioned him to the third office. It now had a nameplate for Ranulfson and elegant furnishings in ebony and redwood. (That, he realized, was a bit of flash for the knowledgeable crowd. Redwood was brittle as anything, and must be worked very, very carefully to get anything larger than a shingle out of it without major cracking and splintering.) Ranulfson himself stood by the door and ushered Stephen in. The programmer scarcely heard the lock click behind him.

There were *Los Angeles Times* front pages framed and hung on the wall opposite the door. "Take a look at them," Ranulfson said, "and tell me what is the significance of them." Stephen stepped up and peered. It took him quite a few minutes to figure out that each page contained a small story about violence, generally murder, associated with one of the businesses in his database. In one, a music club in Santa Monica was the

scene of the crime, in another an accounting firm and chiropractic clinic that shared a building in Hollywood, and then a high-end custom tool shop over in San Bernardino. Nobody who hadn't studied the files as Stephen had would recognize the pattern, but to him it was clear. They were using his information to orchestrate some sort of mob war.

Stephen turned around to find Ranulfson standing directly behind him. He hadn't heard the Scandinavian approach. Ranulfson held a crystal goblet in his right hand, and a razor blade in his left. Stephen saw that a cut ran along the man's right forearm. The distinctive reek told him the goblet was full of blood. He stared at Ranulfson, wondering what he'd fallen into.

"Drink, Mr. Walinsky."

Stephen wanted to refuse. He really did. But his body acted on its own imperatives. There was no hesitation in his arm as it took the goblet and raised it to his lips, nor in his throat as it drained it down. Something in him could not deny Ranulfson's instruction despite fear and revulsion. Stephen suspected that if Ranulfson ordered him to swallow the razor blade, he'd do that just as readily.

The blood poured into him. It was vile: dark and clotted, as though it had been stagnating inside Ranulfson's arm. But as it poured into him, Stephen felt a peculiar warmth. He felt stronger, as though muscles that had been asleep now woke up. Above all, he felt an ineffable devotion to Ranulfson. He'd been in love, and he'd seen children bonded to loving parents, and none of that began to compare. He felt that he couldn't bear to be apart from Ranulfson, that nothing the man could ask of him would be wrong.

All the while, Stephen knew that this man had ordered him to drink his blood and somehow made him want to do it. He *knew* that this was an abhorrent situation and that he was the prey of some sort of monster such as he'd never dreamed existed. And yet none of that mattered. This was the monster he adored and wanted to serve. The monster watched traces of conflicting emotions pass across Stephen's face, studying him with the sort of detached curiosity Stephen might apply to a rare manuscript or a bug. There was nothing in that gaze to suggest that Stephen had any human value to him; this was a craftsman evaluating a tool with no moral significance beyond its utility. That knowledge both horrified Stephen and drove him into a deeper frenzy of yearning to prove useful.

That precise mix of horror, self-loathing and yearning to please became Stephen Walinsky's constant companion. Still, few who saw him on the streets of Los Angeles ever guessed that he was a slave. He dressed well. He was better groomed than he'd ever been, thanks to Ranulfson's taking him to upscale salons. He stayed at the hotel, but moved to a long-term suite with all the trimmings. Outwardly, his life became the stuff of near-celebrity status, with immense wealth bent to the task of keeping him comfortable.

Inside his mind, the dark blood coiled like a serpent. Any thought he had of acting in a way that might conceivably displease Ranulfson perished immediately under the crush of countering desires. It was literally impossible for him to entertain a thought of insubordination for longer than it took him to realize that that was what the thought was. Did his master need him to work at night and sleep during the day? Then he would, and he'd use all the pharmacopoeia necessary to make it happen. Did his master need him to acquire information by abusing connections established on previous consultation work? Then he would. He would do it all.

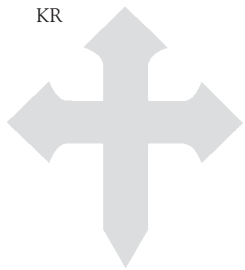
Ranulfson's eyes seemed to glint when, soon thereafter, he told Stephen he should resign from the university, and then there was blur, as if Stephen was writing through tears. Whatever he wrote, it worked. The university's confirmation came back almost immediately and in very stiff terms. They shipped Stephen's remaining papers to the hotel. The "receptionist" Ranulfson had selected might have stored or disposed of them, but Stephen never bothered to find out.

The months passed, and Stephen learned the truth of what Ranulfson was up to. He was a vampire, and part of some ancient society of vampires. They were engaged in a conflict of sorts with the vampires of Los Angeles, who rejected the society. (*Good for the locals*, he thought, until the blood-serpent stung that thought dead.) Each of the businesses he helped Ranulfson target was controlled or used in some way by the anarchistic locals, and Ranulfson's coterie was out to sweep them up and turn the city into a fief and pasture for their own use. Apparently Ranulfson and his associates belonged to a group better known for being artists, and they were executing this commercial assault partly to show the principle of art in economics. That's what they told Stephen, and of course when his master said it, he believed it.

Soon, Stephen wasn't just laboring all night, every night, to help gather data for his master. During the day, he performed chores of other sorts with the receptionist. It was ghoulish work. They sometimes kidnapped derelicts or children for their master to suck the blood out of. Sometimes they escorted their master to fancy clubs so that he could choose his own victims. Sometimes they disposed of bodies by dumping them in out-of-the-way corners of the city. Whenever a note of revulsion rose in Stephen's mind, that dark blood crushed it again.

Stephen never learned who the receptionist was nor wished to. He was always just "the other one" in the master's instructions. Maybe the receptionist had once been a decent enough fellow, and the blood had taken all that away from him. Maybe he was born to a life of crime and this was nothing unusual for him. Stephen didn't know. The other man worked as diligently as Stephen did, and when allowed his liberty went places that Stephen didn't. Then they'd both feel the compulsion to report to Ranulfson, and the cycle of chores would begin again.

Stephen met the Haqims again. The same five, or at least ones who looked just the same. (Stephen knew by then that some vampires could change their appearance, and for all he knew their entire bodies were like suits or masks put on for the occasion.) One of the women looked into Stephen's eyes for a long time one evening while they waited for Ranulfson to return from a detour created by brush fires along the coastal highway. She spoke a word or two in what sounded like Arabic, though for all Stephen knew it was Enochian or the language of Atlantis. Then Ranulfson came, they stood silently together for a moment, and the Haqims left. The next evening's papers held stories of "gang violence" around more targets, with unusually violent deaths and no signs of robbery.



Monday, 1 May 1995, 12:01 AM
Sonagachi red-light district
Calcutta, India

When Khalil saw her the third time, she was older still—shockingly older—walking quite slowly down a very wrong street. He marveled. The body on her... the brass of her... the sheer, flaming *idiocy*... every courtesan in this ghetto should have her pimp, her owner's bodyguard, a john—at the very least, a wicked old woman full of knives—as an escort.

The more he watched her, the angrier he got. *Her protector*, he fumed, *ought to be more careful*. He glanced toward the gaping door of the nearest building: a brothel. She was dressed too well to belong to that fat bastard who ran the place, but...

Khalil stepped out of the shadows. His girl—this woman—stopped. Khalil's eyes narrowed. He approached her, she let him, and he scowled. Whoever it was, they hadn't trained her well. *She ought to run. She ought to bolt for her keeper's door. She should never, ever, let a man just walk up to her in the street, staring at her like I am...*

He was within arm's reach now. "Moron," he snarled. "Run home before something happens to you." He tried to put the demon in his eyes, and found her challenging him with hers—bold, dark, daring, dead eyes, dead enough for an ancient, street-bred, drugged-out whore or a—

His hand, fast as fire, reached out to her jaw. He felt for her artery. He couldn't find it by pulse.

Khalil recoiled in disgust. This called for serious consideration. It might take a while. He took another look at her face, more surprised by his own shock than at her condition. *Of course*. A creature like this girl, out for trouble in a witchy, rotten neighborhood like this, was sure to find it. And he'd warned her. He'd damn well told her so... perhaps not in so many words... but she had obviously come back to the ghetto and found an even bigger bastard than himself.

All the while, she simply stood there, waiting, while he readjusted. When he stepped up toward her again, she watched him coolly. As he paced around her, wary, she turned with him and didn't try to break his mood. Finally, minutes later, Khalil was ready to speak, ready to find a quiet corner with her somewhere and ask all the usual questions. She seemed to sense that, too. Her hands relaxed and dropped to her sides.

Footsteps began behind Khalil and came steadily and rapidly up to them. The *shilmulo*, still not sure whether he was the only one on this block, turned to face the interloper. It was an oily man wearing green, the proprietor of the sex shop across the way. The look on his face wasn't that of an angry owner come to reclaim his property (and thrash the wayward buyer). His expression was more... acquisitive. Khalil hesitated. Should he stay to help her fight or leave her to it? He had just chosen the better part of valor (and had a nasty barb ready on his tongue as a parting shot to her) when the panderer spoke.

"How much?" he rasped.

Khalil hardly blinked. There was good silk in the bastard's clothes and gold on his grimy fingers. "By the night or the hour?"

The woman opened her mouth to speak. The *shilmulo* got a hand across it and clamped it shut. "I'm older than you, little girl," he said in Rom, "and if you cross me I can make sure you never see another night." To his shock, she stopped resisting. He took his hand away, very slowly, remembering his torn nail and watching for the bite.

"I take sixty percent," she whispered back. *Now* Khalil blinked. He was thoroughly puzzled—and paralyzed with admiration.

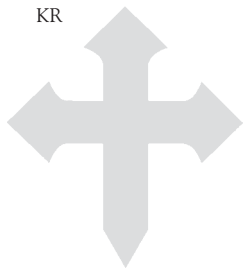
The green man jabbed at the girl's thin veil. He checked her pupils for narcotics, felt for padding... and other things... beneath her dress. She endured the humiliations without another word.

"Drugged?" demanded the broker suspiciously.

Khalil shook his head no.

"I don't rent girls. I buy. What do you want for her?"

Khalil named a shockingly high sum, the pimp a shockingly low one. Gradually the numbers drew together. In half an hour's time, the green man snapped his fingers. Khalil held her until they came—six of them—grinned at his customer, and strutted away like a sated tiger. The inner door of the bordello opened, and the men carried his girl away into its rot-scented darkness.



Monday, 1 May 1995, 4:12 AM

**An alley
Calcutta, India**

Khalil crouched uneasily in a junk heap. Not as a tiger—that act had lasted exactly so long as he was still in sight of the flesh peddlers—no, he crouched more like a fretful dog, restlessly watching the stained walls of the whorehouse.

He wasn't sure what he should do. She was inside and had been for hours. Probably she was tied up in there, somewhere. She might even have had visitors already. Imagining that, he leered... but hollowly. She might have been beaten. She might be locked in a room with a window. He shook his head. If there were windows, the mortal girls would claw their way out of their cells. But under a skylight, or a cheap plastic roof with cracks in it... any leech would be just as fried.

It was going on for dawn already.

Of course, *he* had the money. He had counted it seven times already. The temptation to leave was strong, yet he stayed. It was neither honor nor chivalry that kept him there—or at any rate, not much of either. And he felt that any girl who was willing to go in *there* and do *that* must be trash, anyway... unless that was how she fed. Khalil leered again at that image.

It was really his curiosity that kept him waiting. How was she going to get out? How and when was she going to come and get her share of the money? If she didn't see him here, tonight, then how (and this was worrisome to a *shilmulo* who counted on his privacy to keep the prince's ill-humored goons from the door) did she expect to find him afterwards?

Khalil felt, however, that he was waiting out of noble intentions—casing the joint for a breakout, if the girl seemed to need it. A rescue. *That window, up there... dry rotted, maybe...* supposing he were going to risk it, could he get from here to the side wall without the look-out man catching sight of him? If he managed that, he could be up the side and onto a flattish section of the roof. From there, he might be able to—

A man—not one of the customers—unmistakably an enforcer—stomped out of the front door. Khalil abandoned his vaguely brave plans and hid. He told himself he was merely scoping the bastard out, waiting for an opportunity. To his surprise, he found one. The doorman accosted a passerby and began speaking in sharp and emphatic tones. When the unlucky stranger began to back away, the thug followed him.

Khalil crept around his trash heap and up to the wall he liked. He hopped onto a rickety crate, gained his balance, and felt for a handhold in the crumbling mortar. *There... and there...* now the feet, on that row of bricks, and then both hands in the gutter...

He heard a slight rustling above him, to his right. A bare and slender leg swung over the side of the broken roof-tiles. In another moment, she was hanging next to him. "Drop lightly, or they'll hear you inside," she mouthed. Khalil eased himself down and bent to let her land on his back instead of on the crate's hollow, noisy boards. She pointed out an alley between two wrecked shops. They slunk off together through the maze of back streets.

The instant they stopped, she held her hand out.

Khalil did a double take, came to his senses, and dug up the cash. Over an oil drum, he counted it out. His quick fingers made a mistake, not in her favor, and on purpose. She said nothing, and shortly a second note went astray, and a third. By the finish, his share was the closer to sixty. He put a hand out to push her pile across the makeshift table, hesitated, and drew back. Without meeting her eyes, he fished the errant bills from his stack and added them to hers.

When he looked up, expecting angry accusations, she grinned and asked, “What’s your name?” with genuine interest.

“Khalil Ravana.”

“Ravana?” The girl chuckled. “Sure, you’re Ravana.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She still seemed amused, but he couldn’t see the joke. “Mind if I just call you Khalil?”

“Fine,” he snapped, affronted. “And who the hell are you?”

“Daini.” She added proudly, “Of one name only.” She picked up her money and tucked it into a fold of her dress. Khalil couldn’t make out where it went, though not for lack of looking. “Thanks for haggling. Makes a difference; I’ve never gotten this much before.” Daini put her fist down on the oil drum and something clanked on the rusty steel. “His ring. Your cut of the inside haul.”

Khalil picked it up. “You do this often?”

“Yes—and no.” She shrugged, and looked east. “Mostly I just pick them up and roll them, or get kidnapped and clean out their rooms. Never been sold into slavery before.” Her mouth twitched. “More money in it,” she added speculatively. “Meet me in the silversmith’s street tonight, about an hour after sunset?”

“I’ll be there,” answered Khalil, and they split up to deal with dawn alone.

[PRODUCTION: BLANK LINE]

Within a month, they would be friends, the way only the *shilmulo* can be. She would trick him into kissing a bandicoot—twice. He would cut a slit up the back of her dress in the middle of a mosque. They would root out undead scandals together, and cause quite a few themselves, just for fun.

Within two months, they would be partners. Daini had her looks and could act, beautifully, no matter what the part. She could play seductress, victim, blackmailer, and the innocent backwoods girl to perfection. Khalil had less range, but boasted more experience. He was convincing as the heavy in the classic cons, the husband in the badger game, and the seller in the slave dodge that would become their favorite scheme.

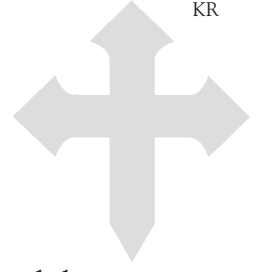
Within four months, they would lure a prancing social club of Camarilla vampires into the scaly depths of the river, and frame a pack of Sabbat for doing it. Khalil would then suggest they spend the days bunked down together—just for a while, just for safety.

Within seven months, Khalil would no longer bother to rationalize the arrangement. It would simply be right to wake up next to her every evening. He would find that she liked the theatre and start taking her to shows. Daini would buy him a new shirt and a pair of real shoes. They would play with bright crowds of actors and dancers almost as often as they would cut purses and pick pockets. They would make monkeys of the

slavers every two weeks or so, and when the opportunity arose, they would free whole houses full of prostitutes—just to annoy the bosses, Khalil would say, and confuse them as to which woman was escaping so often....

Within ten months, Khalil would be planning for the future.

Sunday, 10 March 1996, 4:15 AM
Among the red lights
Calcutta, India



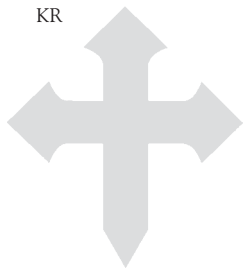
Khalil sat atop a pile of old tires and threw stones at the rats. Around the corner, a boom box blared out the latest movie soundtrack, all twanging strings and ululating voices. The song was an old one, a stage classic redone. He'd heard it live less than a month ago, over in the theatre district. He'd taken her there for a bit of fun, and after they'd dealt with the *artiste* fop they'd come to play with, they'd lounged on the rooftops and talked. They could hear the shows drifting up from the stage doors. After hours, more strident, drunken acts followed, and stranger cries had reached them from the boarding house on the corner. Forty or fifty years ago, its "furnished rooms" had been a cover for less legal activities—a very rich, upscale version of the places he and Daini were knocking over already. He wondered, vaguely, if it were still in business, and how much his partner would bring in on the high-class market.

Khalil brained an enormous, mangy bandicoot and tried to decide whether the rodent was too vile to feed from. He picked up another rock and tried for more rats. *Hell, if she'll drink one, I'll drink one.* It would be kind of nice to have dinner waiting for her when she came out. *Honey.* A love theme swirled out of the cheap speakers. Khalil grinned and snuck a peek at the door she was supposed to leave the 'massage parlor' by. *Should be out any minute...*

The radio station announced itself and told the city the time. Khalil pursed his lips. *Should have been out an hour ago.* They'd be pushing dawn soon. The apartment on this side of the bridge wasn't as easy to get to, unseen, as their main digs, but there wouldn't be time to reach the other if she was inside too much longer—

The door opened suddenly. Daini lurched out of it and landed, hard, on her knees. Two bottles and a knife flew out after her, smashed and clinked on the opposite wall. She rushed past his hiding place at top speed, snatching at his arm, pulling him after her down the alley. They ran all the way home.

She fell asleep before he could get an explanation.



Sunday, 10 march 1996, 7:52 PM
The apartment by the river
Calcutta, India

Khalil woke from black, dreamless death and was happy. Hair like silken feathers spilled across his pillow—her hair—and her small, cold hands were holding his, just as when they had tumbled down to rest. Then—as every morning—he had waited until her eyes closed before he slept. Now he watched those same eyes open, stare—as every evening, she stared—into space, somewhere beyond him—and slowly focus, softly, on his own.

Daini reached out and touched his cheek. Her expression was serious—almost grim. She stroked his hair gently... thoughtfully. She seemed to Khalil to be looking for something in his face, and so he kept quiet. His questions about the night before went unasked. The new idea, about the cathouse in the theatre district, died on his lips. *Time for that later. Time for anything later...*

There was a little tug at his temple. He looked across his nose—she'd coiled her fingers around a lock of his hair, and her long nails were tangling in the strands. He laughed out loud, and Daini made an irritated grimace at him. A claw slid out—hers. Before he could say a word, she sliced the hair away, took it to her lips, and kissed it.

"For luck," she said, and started braiding.

"Why do you need luck? What happened last night?"

"Nothing."

"Like hell."

"Nothing," she insisted. Her fingers worked busily on the braid. After a pause—long and empty—she went on: "I went to the boss bitch's office and snatched her jewelry. Only the door to the hall was barred and padlocked, so I had to cut through one of the bedrooms to get out.

"Must have been fifty candles in there. Around the table where they... well, these two must have had a thing about candles. I lost it. And I don't remember a goddamn thing until I ran out the back and saw you."

"Shit," Khalil remarked.

"Yeah." Daini wound the finished braid into a knot and tucked it into her blouse. "Lost the gold along the way somewhere."

"Candles."

"Yeah."

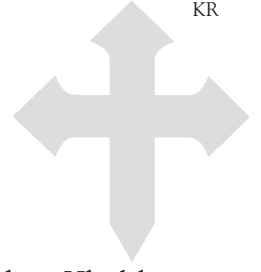
"Coincidence, right? They couldn't have known—guessed about you?"

"Of course not."

"You just be careful, girl." Khalil sat up and reached for his shoes. "Anyone see you?"

"Hell yes. Said it was a bedroom, didn't I? Even if he was too busy, she must have noticed. Probably the most interesting thing that's happened in there in years."

Monday, 1 April 1996, 4:43 AM
On a street of run-down theatres
Calcutta, India



It was less than an hour till sunrise, maybe three quarters of one, when Khalil put a palm on the cracked facade of the old rooming house. *God, let me be right!* There had been a door here... forty, fifty years ago... if he could trust his memory, it was right about—here. Under pressure, the stucco caved in. *Only paint and plaster. Cheap job. Stroke of luck. Time we had one.*

He'd sold Daini at about eleven the night before, and the money had been more than twice what they'd ever managed in the slums. She'd gone off, struggling artistically (though not well enough to arouse alarm) and hurling oaths at him. Khalil had waited, chatting with the madam in the front parlor, for as long as he dared. He asked casual questions about the kinds of wares the old whore might like him to bring next time, and listened for his partner's swearing. The madam suggested a few traits: eye color, native language, height, and Khalil heard, coded in Daini's curses, details of the layout, the exits, the guards. The madam brought the interview to a close and showed the *shilmulo* the door, and Khalil lost Daini's stream of words on the way out.

He couldn't hear her from the street. He hadn't expected to; if every woman held in that vile pit could be heard on the outside, more questions might (*only* might) be asked. But the hours (more of them than usual, more than ever before) had passed by without a sign of or from Daini, and Khalil—still nervous from the candle incident—had decided he wasn't going to wait any more.

Khalil flaked the plaster away and tore at the boards beneath. Someone, years ago, had decided to block up these stairs—probably when the neighborhood first went bad, when they needed to keep the 'guests' from coming and going as they chose, and began funneling the customers through the lobby. He poked a hole in the inner wall and peeked inside. He saw lightless black and smelled mildew; at a guess, he decided, the owners had shut the stairs in from both ends. Khalil rammed out an opening big enough to climb through, and raced up the creaky steps.

An old door at the top opened easily. The plaster wall beyond was even more fragile than the one at the bottom. Khalil broke it down in half a minute. The balcony the stairs gave onto was empty, which was lucky—and had no other exits, which was not. The *shilmulo* racked his brain. Four more doors *had* led off of this patio, but he couldn't remember exactly where they'd been. Time was slipping by...

Khalil cursed and stepped forward. He vaulted onto the balcony rail and looked at the floor above. There was a window, barred but open, in jumping distance. He could grab at it and swing along to the next ledge or go up to the roof. He ran catlike along the balustrade—leapt for the bars—felt them give, sickeningly, as his weight strained the powdery masonry—fought for handholds on the window ledge itself—

And caught a glimpse of what lay on the other side.

One enormous thug sat on a folding chair by the door. His attention was riveted to an old iron bed that took up half the room. It was an ugly, ancient, iron thing, rusting

through its flaky white paint, and Daini was cuffed through it to rings set in the wall. She was twisting her hands in her fetters, blood on her wrists from the tight steel. Khalil shook his head, confused. She'd never had trouble with shackles, rope, steel cuffs, plastic cuffs—damned if he knew how, but she could *always* slip through the tightest of them. If these were really that bad, she could pull free by main force. It would hurt, she would lose a lot of skin, probably, but blood would take care of that. What in hell was she waiting for?

The guard moved slightly, warningly, and Khalil saw the gun. He didn't recognize the make, but the end of the barrel was very large and the whole thing was built like an elephant gun. It was pointed directly at Daini's head.

Unless the thing shot flames, it wouldn't destroy her in one go, but she would be blind, possibly deaf, with no skin on her hands. The guard might get his second round in while she wrestled with the ankle cuffs. Others could come up from the floors below and bring more firepower with them....

Khalil kicked his feet against the wall, and the bars wiggled in their moorings. *One good shock*, he thought, and looked down—three and a half floors down—to broken, unforgiving cement. *Damn*. He jammed his left elbow half through the bars, let go the ledge with the right hand and *very* carefully pulled a knife from his belt. *Damn, damn, damn*. Steel met mortar—*tink, tink*—the guard would have to notice—chipping away at the sand and lime—*tink, tink, tink*—Khalil hoped Daini would hear it, too—*tink, tink*—

Khalil pulled himself up and peeked over the top. The guard wasn't even looking. *Damn!* He dropped, wrenching his left shoulder, and started again—*tink, tink*—louder this time, and checked again. The guard started, jumped, locked eyes with him. The gun barrel swung up, not covering Daini anymore—covering him. *Shit!* Khalil cursed success this time, and tried to let go of the bars.

He knew his hands were wrecked before he remembered hearing the blast. He was falling as the echoes rang through the alley... or the second shot went off. He couldn't tell; he was hit from behind before the noise stopped. *Roof*, he realized dully. Khalil lay a moment, floating on pain. He started to open his eyes, and heard:

THUNG—khhhgg—clankgkkgk.

Suddenly his chest hurt more than his back. He was being attacked—how the hell? Another blow landed. Someone knew how to hit... like steel... no, of course: The bars had just fallen on him. Iron bars dropped from a height of fifty feet on his ribs. He forced an eye open and discovered that the other wouldn't budge at all. His right hand (where was it?) could move, and he explored the ground for a moment. The roof's edge met his groping fingers. Khalil rolled cautiously in the other direction and didn't fall off the side.

THUD—shsss—unnhhh.

Someone was on the roof with him. The *shilmulo* curled into a defensive little huddle. Daini wouldn't, couldn't be free yet. He waited for the gun to go off.

"It's me."

Too soon. Impossible. Or perhaps he had blacked out. It didn't matter; she was there. Wet fingers touched his face, and Khalil smelled blood. His wounds made him hungry; he licked at the smell. Cooling human blood filled his mouth, and there was a taste of another *shilmulo*, as well. Daini's blood.

She pulled her hand away. "Damn it! Don't do that. Stop!"

Khalil tried to use what he'd drunk to open both eyes and focus. The flesh knitted slowly; he felt hungrier than ever. It seemed to take a year, but finally he could see.

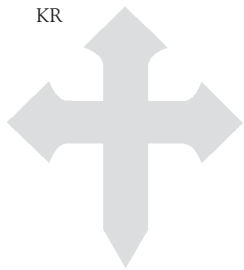
Daini had no skin on her hands. Her face was scorched. She'd been shot and her face was scorched. There were gashes and bloodless tunnels in her skin—trails left by shot or shrapnel.

"It's all right. I already—" he hesitated over the words—"I don't feel any different." He was surprised to find himself telling the truth. He tried to grin and reassure her. "It's only one, not binding. It ain't the end of the world, sweetheart."

Daini shook her head. "It's not the same thing." She picked up his hands, examined them carefully, and rubbed her thumb across a lump. With a careful claw, she sliced his palm open and cut out the piece of rock buried in it. After a moment, she put her mouth to the wound and drank. "There," she told him, "now we're..." Unexpectedly, she ran down.

"Now we're even," finished Khalil. He pulled himself up by her shoulder, and Daini smiled bleakly.

Harsh voices, screams, and gun barrels popped out the unbarred window, and the two *shilmulo* helped each other scramble through the raining lead, off the roof, and out into the streets. They found a filthy but windowless hotel room and a clean, but unlucky, hotel guest, and hid with them from the sun.



Thursday, 4 April 1996, 5:59 PM
In a small apartment
Calcutta, India

Daini said it as soon as she woke up. “They’re on to us.” She turned over to face Khalil, who shrugged.

“Yeah. I know. That was always in the cards.”

“What do we do now?”

Khalil rolled his eyes at her. Wasn’t it obvious? “We do what I always do. We pack up and move on.”

“Cut and run?” Her voice was skeptical, scornful. “Through the wilderness? I like my skin more than that.”

“There are ways to get through.” He considered a few, and added, “I invented most of them.”

“Huh.” Daini knew him well enough to winnow out his lies without throwing away the facts. “But you’ve been gathering moss here since I was so high. What makes you think any of your tricks still work? Things change.”

“Nothing changes that much.”

“Cocky son of a bitch, aren’t you? Besides, how many years have you been doing that for? You find a place, you burn through it, and you go... but you don’t ever have anything,” she touched the necklace at her throat, “or a safe place, like this, to rest. Or anyone... allies, or friends, or...” Her hand crept out to his. “Or someone close.”

Khalil frowned. “Bullshit. I take whatever I want with me. I make *new* safe places—I’d have to, anyway. There’s a reason we’ve had three apartments here, sweetheart.”

“Yeah. You’re a thumb-fingered clod who can’t pick a politician’s pocket.” Daini laughed, then looked out of the sides of her eyes at the pillow. “I can’t leave, Khalil.”

He smirked. *Sure. The reluctant maiden act, from this one! Fuckin’ amazing...* “You can do anything you damn well feel like, you lovely lying harlot, and don’t you dare go all shy on me. I’ve been behind the scenes of *that* performance.”

Khalil winked and rolled off the mattress, reaching for her bag.

“Seriously, what do you want to take?” He pulled open the wardrobe and rummaged through the saris clipped inside. “This blue one? You’ll take just one or two to get yourself started with. The style will probably be different wherever we go, so we’ll buy a whole new lot when we set ourselves up.” He paused, absorbed in the selection. He considered a dark pink thing and a gold-tone blouse to go with it, “I’ve got a friend in New Delhi, runs a smuggler’s rest—and there’s this scam I’ve had planned for years—pay him back for a trick he pulled in the early seventies—he’d know me a mile off so I never tried it, but he won’t know you—” he turned around, grinning from ear to ear.

Daini sat on the edge of the bed, looking up at him through trembling eyelashes. Khalil stared, stammered, and began snatching up the discarded scarves and baubles.

"No. Hey... we can bring all of this along if that's what you want. I'm used to traveling light, alone, but—" he tried to brush the dust off a bright green dress and tore it on the door hinge instead.

Her gaze lowered, came up again slowly, ruefully. Khalil felt a hot, embarrassed flush creep up his face. Whatever his mistake was, it was bigger than pawing through her clothes....

"We—" Khalil stammered— "we don't have to go to Delhi. We could do Bombay. It's a good town... there's ex-Soviet mobsters running around... but more money, you know, to make up for the extra danger." He stopped himself. "Bhopal. Let's just go see Bhopal. No tricks—no work, anyway. If the game is sca—if the game is boring you.

"Daini?"

She twitched her shoulders and looked straight at him. "I'm not going anywhere, Khalil." Continuing sadly, determinedly, apologetically, she said, "I never will."

Khalil's brow creased in stubborn lines. He opened his mouth to speak, but she rushed her next words, loudly, hotly, over his:

"I'm not free."

Khalil, numb, froze. He said nothing, showed nothing, felt nothing—

The saris fell to the floor. Jewelry clattered on silk.

"Not free," he murmured stupidly.

His face broke. He grabbed her by the shoulders, shook her—"I *told* you to stay out. I *told* you to go *home*." Wordless sounds of rage escaped him—and of despair. "You *had* to keep coming to that goddamn rat's nest!" His nails sank into her arms, and she winced. "Bitch! Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded, and sobbed as he spoke. "Daini!"

Khalil scooped her up as if to steal her and fell on the bed. "Daini, why?" His arms wound round her, and he rocked her back and forth. "Who is it? What can we do?" he whispered frantically.

Just as suddenly, he stopped.

"No," he decided. "No. Tell me—tell me when, first." Khalil didn't know why he asked, but it seemed the question that would bring the least pain. "When did this happen?"

"Before I met you." She sounded as if she were crying. "Good advice, love, but years too late."

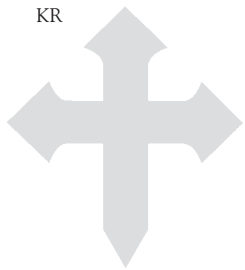
He let it sink in, cursing the world for cruelty.

"Now. Tell me how." He paused a moment, and a horrible suspicion crawled through him. "You're not *bound*, are you?"

"No." He thought he heard a catch in her voice, and he felt sure when she said it again: "No."

"Gods. That's it, isn't it?"

She shook her head. Khalil pushed Daini out of his arms, stood up, and turned his back on her.



Thursday, 4 April 1996, 7:03 PM
In a small apartment
Calcutta, India

Khalil stood at the window, staring into the boards as though they were glass, as though he could see the night through them. He could smell blood—hers—and didn't care, wasn't hungry, didn't wonder why blood wasn't (for this moment only) so important.

A real Rom doesn't get caught, he fumed, ignoring facts freely. A real Rom goes wherever and whenever the hell they want.

A shilmulo would cut her own throat, stake herself, stare at the sun rather than knuckle under to some cheap-ass tyrant. Khalil clenched a shaky fist. Tyrants stack decks. Daini had never had a chance. His gaze flickered toward her.

She had been crying. The red smell was her bloody tears, soaking into the blanket.

The *shilmulo*—the real, free *shilmulo*—sat down on the windowsill. *Fuck it*, he thought, and snapped out: "What can we do?"

"Nothing," Daini raised her eyes. "*We're* not going to do a goddamn thing. I got myself into it, I'll get myself out."

Khalil saw hope and jumped on it. "Then there is a way out."

She shook her head. "Fuck off. You wanted to help, you could have said it an hour ago."

"Daini—"

"Damn it, I don't want you in this. Understand?" She sat up and leaned forward. After a moment, she added softly, "Don't want you risking—" She bit her lip. "I can't ask you to—"

He was angry again. "You're not asking! Let me help. I'll do anything. I swear I'll do anything. I—I love you."

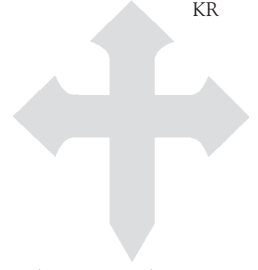
Daini jumped up. "No!" She backed away. "Don't love me. Stay away from me." Her hand reached the doorknob; she twisted out, shaking her head. "Don't," she said again, and ran away.

Khalil waited. She was just scrapping. They had had little fights. She had always come back, he had always come back, *she* would come back now. If she thought for a second that *he* would stoop to chasing her—apologizing to her—worrying about her—

Well, then she was right, wasn't she?

Feeling surly, whipped, vengeful, and protective all at once, Khalil wrenched the legs off a chair and went out to shadow his ladylove to her master's lair, whittling all the way.

Thursday, 4 April 1996, 11:55 PM
In a pit without a name
Calcutta, India



Khalil followed warily down a half-lit, airless tunnel. He put each of his feet down, carefully, into Daini's tracks, and tested the ground before trusting his weight on it. His heart was still in the rescue, but his mind rang with fear.

When she had fled into a condemned building, he had felt confident. When the trail led down into basement and sewer, he had doubts. When he found the open grating and the ruins—ruins he had never heard of in years of swapping tales about this city—his ideas of wresting his girl from her captor began to fade.

What hopes he'd had had sprung from the admission that she *could* be released. Khalil had imagined a sire his own age—a little older—a crooked, angry son of a bitch keeping an innocent girl under his thumb with lies and blood.

This place looked more like the haunt of an elder.

Khalil rounded a corner and slowed. Daini wasn't running anymore; she stood, holding her side, gazing at the stones before her. She set her lamp down and stepped forward. As she passed through the light he saw her face, twisted in fear and hope, studying a reddish lump high in the wall. She jumped at it once—twice—it was clearly out of her reach—but he was a foot taller. Khalil darted forward, leapt for the red spot on the wall, and plucked down the prize.

It was a fist-sized lump of rust-colored clay, and it fell apart in his fingers. Long, dark strands—hair?—stuck out of the broken edges.

"I'm sorry," Khalil whispered. "I didn't mean to break it," he explained, turning to Daini.

"No—no—that was what you were supposed to do. You freed me."

Khalil shrugged, proud and embarrassed. He felt uncomfortable as the conquering hero; he felt crowded; he felt as though they were being watched.

"Pity," she muttered.

He couldn't have heard her right. His ears seemed to be buzzing. "What?"

"I'm sorry for you—really I am." Daini turned and began to walk away. He leapt forward and pulled her to a halt.

"What?" Khalil was stung. "You're sorry for *me*?"

She laughed. "Terribly. You've kissed your third bandicoot, boy."

"What?"

"Learn a new word, darling, you're wearing that one out. Oh—don't look at me like that. I apologize. You're not ready for sarcasm yet, I know, but... the play is over. You said you'd been behind the scenes for my act—you hadn't been. But now you are."

Khalil's skin crawled. Someone was coming up behind him. He turned on the intruder, stake ready—and found empty air. "What's happening?" he demanded.

"In plain words, I'm free and you're not. You can feel him already, I think, but I'm afraid it's going to get worse, darling. Try not to hurt yourself while you get used to—it. To him. He'll start explaining it soon enough, I'm sure."

Khalil tried to rush her and found his feet unwilling tools. He grabbed at a wall to steady himself. Gritty powder came away in his hand. He let go and fell. Recovering, he dusted what he thought was mortar from his hands—and took a second look at the masonry. It wasn't mortar—it was stone coming to pieces. The rock had crumbled, was so *old* that it could crumble.

Oh, my god. “Who are you?”

She shrugged. “You know me. A beggar girl, a thief, a harlot...” Her eyes seemed to see past him again, as they had every night on waking, and she went on: “Queen. Demoness. One-time consort to the prince of all Rakshasa...” Her gaze hardened, returned to him. “Just Daini. That's still my name. It's the only name I've ever had. Once upon a time, it would have meant something to any *shilmulo* I met... to *every* *shilmulo* I met—and you don't even know who Ravana is.” She spoke all this grandly, triumphantly, poised like the monarch she claimed to be.

Khalil's jaw dropped.

Daini laughed at him in the tones of the beggar girl he loved. He seized on that.

“You were a child. I saw you living.”

Her lips twitched contemptuously. “Do you always believe what you see?”

“I loved you,” he accused.

Daini looked away. “Yes, I know. And I am grateful. So try not to be angry, sweetheart. I've been a servant for a very long time, and I am tired—” she paused a moment— “and I saw a way out, and I took it. You'll do the same thing when your time comes.”

“The hell I will!”

“In hell you will, dear. In hell you will.” She studied him, and nodded. “May I go?”

“No!” He caught her arm.

“I wasn't speaking to you.” Daini turned her head as though listening. “Well then. Thank you—” her words dripped venom—“for nothing, and may Ravana eat your heart if you're wrong.

“As for you,” she said, smiling sweetly up at the *shilmulo*'s face, “Khalil. I want to say goodbye,” she licked her lips and frowned thoughtfully, “but I've never been good at saying it, so I won't. I don't expect you'll remember if I do, anyway. Let go, please.” He hardly heard her, and did nothing. “Of my dress, sweetheart. Let go.”

“But—”

The silk seemed to slip from his grasp. “Best to let me go before I fade away,” she advised. “Think how silly you'll look holding empty air.”

Her illusion faded farther. “When you forget me,” she began, walking toward him—walking through him, so that her ghostly mouth spoke from inside his head— “When you forget me, remember this. It's all I'll be able to give you unless I wake:

“From one dead, collect blood, hair, a nail, and a promise. Make a seal of them, bring it and the victim here, and have him break the token I made for you.”

What is she saying? The voice was dark, and for Khalil it filled the room; there was nothing else.

“I can say what I like now, Hazimel. I'm free, you son of a bitch.”

Daini's ticklish presence vanished, and Khalil knew that she was gone. He slumped to the dirt floor and buried his head in his hands.

Well, rat, what did she tell you? Did she offer up my weakness? Did she claim to want to help? Did she give you hidden knowledge to bargain for your life? Did she give you the secret to breaking free?

Did she say she cared?

It will not matter. I will make it go away.

You will think me vindictive. If you knew more, you might suspect jealousy. Yes. My bride in your arms for a year. I assure you, I am beyond that. I merely want to keep her safe. I gave her up to preserve her; I will not let the loose mind of a whelp like you reveal her to the King.

Of course, you will forget that, too... I might as well explain this to the walls.

Quiet, now. I am going to begin.



Friday, 7 June 1996, 11:02 PM
Ranulfson Engineering
Century City, California

Things changed again for Stephen Walinsky almost two years after his enslavement to Isaac Ranulfson. It was a hot summer night and the nameless receptionist and he were sitting on the roof of the office building in the wee hours of the morning. There had been fires in the San Gabriel Mountains earlier in the week; smoke still lingered along with the smog, and there was a dusting of ash in sheltered corners. The receptionist and Stephen didn't talk. They just idly wiped bloodstains off the leather smocks they'd worn for that night's chores.

The stairwell door banged open. Ranulfson staggered out, onto the roof. Stephen had never seen his master stagger at any time. On the rare occasions he saw him fight, Ranulfson moved with superhuman speed and savage determination, and even when wounded, merely slowed his pace some until he could force that dark blood into the wound and heal it up again. When tired, likewise, he slowed but never became ungraceful. This was unprecedented. Scary. Stephen's master weakened, and any threat to the master had to be dealt with at once.

"You, down. Guard." The vampire gestured to the receptionist. "You. Stay." That was to Stephen. Ranulfson drew up into a crouch against the low wall at the edge of the roof. Once the receptionist had gone, the vampire spoke again. "Bad times, Walinsky. Something destroyed the other three." He'd been out on a hunt with three other members of the coterie that night, Stephen knew. "I do not know what it was, except that it was fast and fanged and reeked of blood. It drew blood out of me at a distance, and that is a trick I've only heard about the wizards doing."

"What can we do, then?"

"You would do anything at all to protect me, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would."

"Of course you would. Very well. It is time for you to die."

"You're going to use my body as a barricade?" This time the blood serpent didn't quite sting down all the thought. I knew that I would do it if he commanded it, but I was aware for the first time in half a year of a sustained frisson of fear at what might come next.

"In a sense. I am going to make you undead. You must take up the work that the lost three can no longer perform. We need another in the coterie who understands the situation and the city."

"Then do whatever it is."

"I will. Be still."

Ranulfson lurched toward Stephen, and without conscious thought he sat down cross-legged, so that his master wouldn't have to reach up so far. The vampire paused just for a moment, murmured something that Stephen thought was "a good tool," and crawled alongside. Stephen couldn't see him, but he felt the vampire's fangs rest lightly on his neck, then pierce the skin.

For a moment, hot agony flared in him. Then a bliss unlike anything he'd ever known. This wasn't the weird compulsion laid on him by the blood so far: this joy ran through all of him, breaking down the barriers between loathing and delight, flooding them together in an emotion for which there were no mortal words.

Then Stephen Walinsky died.

He felt myself grow weak. The beat of his heart faded. Warmth withdrew from his limbs, from his head, from his skin, into a little kindling in the heart, and then ceased. There was deep, dark calm within him for an endless moment. Stephen felt his brain cool as the last of his voluntary muscles slipped into quiescence. He was at peace.

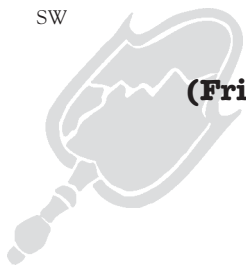
Then he became undead.

Wet fire poured between Stephen's lips. He knew the taste—Ranulfson's blood—but it seemed stronger now. It carried a power no longer masked by Stephen's own vitality. He could taste the dust of ages, the eternal hunger that drove Ranulfson as it had driven the vampire who did this to him, on back into history. Stephen sensed himself as part of a dark procession across the emptiness of night, marching from unknown damnation at the beginning to awaiting eternal punishment for this abomination. He felt that blood serpent within move again, now whispering with his own voice. He felt his blood stir again with a semblance of life, forcing itself into places where living blood had never gone, turning his whole body into one vast chamber filled with the thing that was more than blood.

Stephen opened my eyes to find Ranulfson now sitting in front of him, watching him carefully. "Yes," he said. "This is what it is. This is what we are." In Stephen's ears, the blood that was more than blood hummed quietly, like a dynamo ready to unleash unsuspected power. He stood, and felt himself possessed of that grace he'd seen in the others.

How simple, when there is no vitality to interfere with the will, he thought. How simple, when there is nothing of the grace that is humanity, only the polished perfection of cursed hunger and pride. He recalled snippets of verse from across the centuries about hubris and the balance of flesh and soul. No more, for him. No balance, only darkness and drive.

And thus another trip downward began. Stephen and Ranulfson found the thing in the night—one of the local vampires swollen with poorly controlled sorcery—and destroyed it. Ranulfson trained Stephen in the benefits of undeath—the speed, the sight, the presence, the uses of the blood. He learned quickly. Others in the elder vampire's coterie were impressed, though they always spoke of the newcomer as a child in the blood.



Saturday, 28 June 1997, 1:33 AM
(Friday, 27 June 1997, 7:33 PM Eastern Daylight Time)

Along the banks of the Miljacka River
Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina

The interplay of light and shadow was wearisome. The quick-moving clouds blotted the sun and then allowed it to beat upon Anatole. But it had not been overcast that day he been here before. Not here, though the connection was seductive and carried crystal-clearly in the songs of the murderers reverberating in the skulls of those they had cut down, some of whom were weighed down at the bottom of the river.

He could see them now, caught on debris or the rough bottom of the channel, with flesh slowly peeled by the water's touch or stripped by the predators' caresses. He briefly saw the bloated, amorphous shape of a deep-sea serpent blossoming with tentacles and less discernible protrusions possible only because drag was of little concern in the icy depths.

Anatole forgot this serpent immediately. He had to. But then he wondered if that was a serpent at all⁹ or something more. He'd forgotten it, or been forced to forget it. Already the memory was a diminishing pinpoint of light.

And of course it wasn't really daylight at all. The battle now unfolding had deposited the bloodied troops about Anatole's knees on the plain. A river ran through there for thousands of years before any of the men who would be gods, sun gods, the children of the gods, or the anointed of God, had imagined a hierarchy greater than what existed among the primates whom one must suppose to be lesser beasts.

So hundreds of miles—or years—distant the troops charged down the slope behind Anatole. Equally met that day, but the tide of the sequined horde would be relentless and eventually erode the forces of the prince who would die that day, his cross ground to grit beneath the shadow of the mosque. And so began the song with bridges of the echoes of gunshots among the trenches networking between brothers and resounding in the valley of the land around Anatole. Around him now.

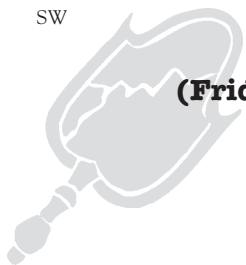
The battle raged for days and still the minutes ticked by with individual exactness. Between each was a charged nanosecond of thunderous hooves galloping double-four-time to a cacophonous chorus of agony. How could time still seem so slow after he had endured centuries of its passing?

The coagulating blood pooled about Anatole's feet offered light, but he was unsure why that would be so as blood had never delivered truth before, though it was for a glimpse of that that he persisted. Before the break of dawn, greater illumination would be had. Anatole flinched alongside the dying and mutilated men but moved no more than that. If the hooves of the blood-crazed horses were to crush him, then so be it. But that confidence was hollow. Anatole knew he had survived that day. He was but a vulture drawn to these lands by the scent of blood-truth, which now smelled sweet like never before. And why? Was the trail of the wounded so fresh?

The beating of horses' hooves and the din of the desperate and dying managed to grow in intensity. The steady rumble of the river that was no longer there became such that it was not even here, and the cavalry hurtled past him again—this time without fading. The hearts beating in their chests drew and pumped the blood in which Anatole bathed.

Suddenly, the sweep of a shattered spear shaft sent him hurtling backwards and he knew that time had matched his perception. Another circle had been made. The blood was swallowed and replaced and dwarfed by primordial ooze that seeped across the plain. That serpent vaguely thrashing in the blood's awesome depth refused to be touched as Anatole stabbed a hand downward into the river and grasped not it but only a handful of fetid mud.

As the mud melted away, Anatole found a handful of bullets upon his palm. Whatever was going to happen had happened and he was close again. Perhaps closer than ever before.



Saturday, 28 June 1997, 4:41 AM
(Friday, 27 June 1997, 10:41 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
Along the banks of the Miljacka River
Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Why they returned to Sarajevo, the companion frankly could not recall, but it was not his place to dwell on the future; such was the province of his companion, Anatole, the so-called Prophet of Gehenna. In his mind's eye, the companion could plainly see the woe-begotten landscape as it was when they had been there last. Such was his duty. He was to remind Anatole of times when the past might yet bear on the future the prophet sought to comprehend, which happened frequently. Therefore, the companion was an important companion, and an observant one as well.

Anatole was revisiting a small terrace overlooking the Miljacka River. A wasteland when they had been there before, the terrace had since been repaired. New plants were taking root, a cracked wall appeared freshly repaired, and most noticeably, there were no corpses. Not that the companion expected any as the result of Anatole's hunger, for the prophet fed on little but the occasional vampire, usually one with blood of such strength that he would then endure for years on its power. Instead, there had been bodies blasted by the bullets of Belgrade-sponsored snipers.

But that was all a past that probably only the companion and a few others would recall. The same applied to the significance of the date. Others would endure it again and again and never learn. And not only mortals, who possessed memories as fleeting and homogenous as a rabbit's impulse to breed. Some Kindred—yes, even the undying Kindred—were forgetful too. Those weak-minded Cainites were recognizable as the ones who finally found death, and did not persist for centuries as Anatole and some others had managed.

The Miljacka was dark, much deeper than the softening sky. Anatole had been standing here for hours, under a flickering streetlight that sometimes illuminated a head bowed and peering into the depths of the fast-flowing water. The river sloshed hoarsely across the rough walls of the waterway and the flat, metallic odor of city water carried beyond the terrace and to the street above and behind them. In the midst of this stood Anatole: filthy, with now barely blonde hair hanging in long, accidental dreadlocks that completely obscured his face. The tattered rags he wore had once been a robe—the punishments of the mortal world that could not wear at his immortal flesh had still found ample means to corrode wool. Amidst this ancient stonework, clad in such robes, and with darkness hiding the few modern buildings to survive severe shelling, Anatole could be mistaken for a medieval monk. Except for his Birkenstocks—a fine pair he had purchased in the dead of winter the previous year in Germany—though even they might pass as the simple footwear of a former time.

Anatole had not asked the companion about the past, so he presumed the prophet was pondering the future. Surely their trip to Sarajevo did not concern the past at all, for he had sought only memory of this terrace from the companion. And some recollection of the terrified mortals who scurried nearby, muttering their charms and prayers so that

the inevitable bullet would shatter not their bones but instead the concrete under their feet or at least the bones of the scavenger who would come next.

The companion feared that in Sarajevo, or perhaps Yugoslavia as a whole, but especially Bosnia, Anatole found a reflection of himself. Both constantly seeking to unite the disparate as one—as Bosnia collected four religions and at least three major cultural identities, and as Anatole tried to reconcile his visions with his plentiful experiences and the Christian beliefs he had once held more dearly than he did now. But both, meanwhile, harbored great distrust, or paranoia, or even evil that might at any moment rise up to consume them.

Bosnia had been devoured and Sarajevo spat back out. The years of Anatole's unlife were marked more by his feasting on others, both kine and Kindred alike, than by any fear that he might be made such a victim. Yet the forces at play in his mind constantly threatened to seep out and annihilate him. He only desired the truth before Final Death claimed him. Whether the truth was for himself only, or for all Kindred, or for all those who walked the earth, the companion honestly did not know. Perhaps Anatole did not know either. Perhaps Anatole would only know what he wanted when he found it, which would be a ghastly cross to bear.

A few cars hurtled in breakneck European fashion along the street behind them. They distracted the companion but not Anatole, who slowly kneeled at the water's edge of the cracked terrace. He looked like the Christian penitent he had been two centuries ago, before he gave up his religious fervor shortly after the French Revolution. That was approximately when the companion had become known to Anatole. He had, of course, traveled with the prophet ever since.

That was also the time when the workings of the Jyhad came to fascinate Anatole above all other pursuits. He had once believed it was God who had directed his hand to kill other Kindred and consume their blood, knowledge and power. Anatole now knew too many secrets, the companion thought, for a belief in God to persist, or at least for a belief that he was an agent of God to do so. Princes across Europe had breathed a sigh of relief, for the risk had thereby been lessened that they would be the one forced to kill the prophet were he caught committing diablerie in their city.

Anatole now sought to unveil Gehenna, the supposed end of all things, of which the Jyhad was a product. Or perhaps the Jyhad, that endless battle among the Kindred, is what would unleash Gehenna.

Strangely, though, the great powers for which Anatole was known, the ones thought to be divinely inspired, had not faded as the Malkavian's faith had.

Yes, Anatole was a part of that misunderstood bloodline. Mad, they said. Wise, said others. The companion tended to believe those honest enough to appraise others above themselves.

Anatole suddenly staggered and fell to one knee. The companion looked about for sign of a foe, as the prophet did have some that would dare to attack and attempt to destroy him. But he could see none. A moment later, the Malkavian was standing again as before. But, as he bowed at the edge of the Miljacka, Anatole's intention soon became clear. To the companion, at least, for the vampire began a ritual he'd seen a handful of times; most recently before the assassination in this same city that had launched what

mortals called World War I. The companion supposed it should be no surprise that he saw it again when actually in the city of Sarajevo.

The Malkavian withdrew a razor-sharp knife from the folds of his dirty robe and placed it ceremonially to his right. Then he slipped from his robe, revealing a naked torso and a lithe, muscular figure. He flipped the sandals from his feet, pulled a long leather wallet from the front of his pants, and dropped it beside the sandals. Then he quickly rolled forward into the water, his soiled denim pants his only clothing. And, while holding onto an outcropping of mortar, Anatole slithered from even those and made a perfunctory effort of washing them before slapping them hard onto the stones of the terrace above his head. The wet crack was like the early morning thunder of a hangover.

Anatole then relinquished his hold and dove down into the water.

Moments passed.

When he resurfaced, Anatole was some distance downstream, the current of the river having pulled at him even when deep in the water. Powerful strokes brought him back toward shore and to his prior handhold. With a mighty heave, he threw himself out of the water and onto shore, water cascading from his body and draining into the cracks and ultimately back into the river.

He raised both hands to his face and pushed his now obviously blonde hair away from his eyes and behind his ears. The brilliant orbs so revealed were deep, like a mystic's. He had what his French kinsmen still call *je ne sais quoi*, a certain calm, a definite magnetism, an aura of confidence... an indescribable something.

All this was heightened because Anatole was a handsome man, at least when he was clean and one could see something of his vaguely aristocratic features: fine nose, high cheekbones, strong jaw. He stooped to pick up his pants. Knotting them, he wrung the water from them. Then, straining a bit, he nearly ripped the pants as he pressed virtually every drop from the denim.

He pulled them on and sat in the same spot as moments before. Grasping his hair thickly with his left hand, Anatole retrieved the sharp knife with his right and sheared a blonde tangle from his head. Working methodically, eyes mainly downcast into the river again where he flung each handful of hair, Anatole roughly cut his locks very short.

Something was about to happen, the companion knew. The Malkavian only prepared himself thusly when he felt a new stage was at hand. It could be the prophet was near a conceptual breakthrough, or that his visions told him to prepare for something unknown. It could be that he had definite knowledge of some event near or far unfolding. Most likely, no one but Anatole would know the nature of the event, or at least its true nature, for many years to come—if ever.

Anatole's discarded knife cut into the current with a slight plop, and he tossed the soiled robe in as well. His gaze traveled right as he watched the current drag the robe away. Then he gracefully scooped the large leather wallet from the stones, tucked it into the front of his trousers as he spun about, offered an enigmatic smile to the heavens, and leaped from the terrace to the street, where he hailed a cab.

The companion was at his side, of course.

Saturday, 28 June 1997, 5:15 AM
(Friday, 27 June 1997, 11:15 PM Eastern Daylight Time)

Princip Bridge
Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina



Time, Anatole knew, was a terrain like any other. It could be hostile, or inviting, or indifferent.

When he was a predator pursuing prey across the landscape of time, he expected his quarry, once cornered, to be one of those three. If hostile, his foe would meet him; if inviting, it would greet him. It is the indifferent foe Anatole shunned, and regrettably the one he most often hounded. How belittling and indeed terrifying to have a target who, on the one hand, did not care if he was glimpsed, yet on the other, knew he would not be.

The path of the Dragon wound eerily through the broken streets. Anatole found its hand in the bombs of the century's unfolding, as he had earlier found them in its waning. Oh, he had glimpsed it then, before the world had been plunged into the twentieth century's early episode of brutality and ignorance, but the path had been so cold already. It had taken so much time to find it warm.

Yet the time was not truly great or even of any great consequence except for the fact that even a great portion of the finite is less than any sliver of the infinite. But Anatole would have both, and so he too would be both cold and warm in the place of time.

But how did he know these things? And how did it affect his pursuit? Able only to justify the end by the means, he proceeded.

Just as the folly of men proceeded unchecked. Oh, but there was folly among the undead as well. But for them there was no excuse of ignorance, merely unwillingness. And of the mortals it was wasted words, for too much could be said about too little when over-examining the state and content of such minds.

It was folly that brought the eaglet there on that day. The wolves were six and the eaglet's wings doomed to be clipped. Four wolves were timid, a fifth unsuccessful... but the sixth... he was a wolfling of not greater breeding or worth than the others, but it was his pounce that did not falter or stray.

Anatole stepped from the car near the spot where the heir's blood had been spilled. It puddled at his feet, finding slope where there was none between the cobbles now paved over. The liquid tension held the crimson pool in place for a moment, but the aftershock of the gunfire sent ripples across its surface and then it flowed freely.

Anatole followed.

It sought the sewers, but the Dragon would not allow it so close. Instead, it found the wolfling's feet. Other pedestrians were restraining him, though he had done his deed—his shots would be mortal wounds for both passengers. His eyes met Anatole's in a moment of crystalline intensity. The vapor from his gun formed icicles suspended in mid-air, so cold was his gaze.

But that was then, when the wolfling's gaze revealed nothing but idealism and empty philosophy. Now, the gaze was warmer, and the gun was indeed smoking. There had been too many new bombs seeking to hide this trifling noise to allow it to be obscured.

They dragged the wolfling away and Anatole watched as he was stretched beside the eaglet heir. The latter's blood now turned to liquid bronze and its path remained the same: a rivulet running twixt the Malkavian's feet to the now upended soles of the wolfling. The rivulet became a tide that, once it touched those feet, swelled across the body with an eruption of steam that staggered the still-swarming pedestrians. The wolfling transformed into a thick sheet of hot, malleable bronze and the eaglet into a roughly shaped sculpture that yet retained the likeness of the heir.

So Anatole pounded and shaped the bronze with a blacksmith's hammer he found tightly gripped in his hand. With each stroke, he reduced its size, and with each stroke the air resounded and vibrated a little faster. Successive blows stirred such motion in the air that soon the air seemed to grow razors, and when it spread, the milling pedestrians were ripped to shreds and sent shrieking and streaking to the periphery of Anatole's vision and then beyond.

Meanwhile, the sculpture of the heir trembled and fell into a pit that a blow of his hammer seemed to open beneath it. Instead of disappearing, though, it was immediately replaced by another form that cascaded through some hole above Anatole—as if the whole world was built on levels that dominoed downward.

The new corpse was a sculpture too, but a hideous one—more rat than noble eagle. Yet it was a transformation in its own life mimicked by the disappearance of the heir. Despite the gruesome visage twisted into the stone, Anatole knelt beside the corpse and dipped his finger into its motionless heart. Blood resided there in a pool, and he withdrew it on the tip of his digit.

Painstakingly, the Malkavian prophet etched a history in the bronze plaque beside him. He knew those words had been overwritten before.

Saturday, 28 June 1997, 5:18 AM
(Friday, 27 June 1997, 11:18 PM Eastern Daylight Time)

Princip Bridge
Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina



The driver dared not look back. In the cracked rearview mirror the companion saw the sweat on his brow quiver and refract a dim streetlight. His hands trembled slightly as he pulled to the curb on the river side of the street. The mistiming engine caused the car to shudder in a slight circular motion. It danced thusly a few meters shy of a cross street that allowed access to the other side of the Miljacka by means of Princip Bridge.

Anatole pulled a crisp American twenty-dollar bill from the large leather wallet tucked under the front lip of his stained, if freshly washed, jeans. The contrast was startling: the wallet so pitted, worn and blotched by various odious stains, and the currency white and green like a freshly laid egg on tender grass. He whipped the edge of the bill edgewise across his tongue, and a narrow canal of blood formed in its wake. He then flattened the bill on his tongue until the red soaked through and then pulled it away, a stubborn ribbon of fluid stretching from Anatole's mouth, even as he slapped the bill blood-side to the broken plastic shield that normally separated passenger from driver.

The companion briefly registered the driver's shudder before they were out, ranging athletically across the paved and dirty avenue. The dim streetlight on the opposite side of the street cast an elongated shadow that danced through the darkness of the street with a macabre life of its own. Anatole landed crouched on the sidewalk opposite the cab and the river, his arms weaving shadows with such haste that he seemed a huge spider, a man-sized obscenity from another era, a time as ancient now as when Anatole had himself been born mortal some thousand years ago.

The driver was hasty and a brief squeal of tires marked his departure. They were suddenly alone on the street and Anatole bolted upright. In that instant the monster was gone and the philosopher was exposed. But the prophet was apparent in both, for no matter his demeanor, his dress, his demands, Anatole was suffused with the aura of a fallen angel, a figure about whom the future swarms. The companion imagined the roiling shadows, which now calmed to motionlessness, to be muses who called upon Anatole and received his advice for the future they revealed.

Ah, if only it were so simple. If only those who assaulted the prophet for hints of the future were as silent and respectful as the shadows. If only they could be so easily dispersed.

Anatole took three solemn steps forward and then shuffled his feet slightly. The companion saw that the prophet now stood in the imprinted footprints of the man who gave the nearby bridge its name, though Anatole was turned 180 degrees from the assassin's vantage.

Anatole was facing a plaque on the wall of a building standing at the intersection he had named. He stretched a finger toward it and let his dexterous digit slowly run through the grooves of the words inscribed thereon. As he neared the end, he looked up and away as if to examine the height of the mortal structure before him, yet his finger

did not falter. Only when it reached the numbers at the end of the inscription—as Anatole methodically and loosely followed the path of the “1” then the “9”—did the companion realize that the prophet’s eyes were sightless.

They were open, yet sightless, a bewildering thing to behold and an encompassing perception for Anatole. He was like an antenna, collecting the signals of the gods and communicating them to the killer’s ground upon which he stood. When Anatole’s eyes went wide like this, he seemed to see nothing and understand it, and see everything and spurn its secrets. He also became aware of the companion. On some level Anatole was probably always aware of his presence, but at such moments he swallowed the companion—with all his senses and knowledge—and madly attempted to put together pieces that not only did not fit but which were meant never to be perceived at all.

So as Anatole’s finger moved to the third number, another “1,” the inscription was instead rewritten and another “9” formed instead. There was so little physical evidence of this obvious change that the companion was encouraged to dismiss it. No heat or steam. No effort or pressure. No swooning or blurring of vision.

Then on to the last digit, a “4” that slowly folded up into a “7.” Only then did the companion see that the names on the plaque were rewritten as well. One was unknown to him, but the other—! He saw that a justicar’s name had replaced the archduke’s and he could only assume that, as of this day, his fate was the same.

“Ferdinand’s death began a war,” the companion cooed into Anatole’s ear.

The prophet nodded, but the companion could not tell whether in response to him or in acknowledgement of some other inner thought.

Likewise, he was sighted once again, but could not see the companion, and muttered under his breath, “The parallels are ominous. That I should be near this spot is ominous indeed.”

The companion wanted to suggest that merely being in Sarajevo on this day, the most sacred and mystical day in the calendar of the Serb people, was inviting foreboding of one kind or other. Such was what filled the eternal nights of the Prophet of Gehenna, and no matter the night and no matter where they might find themselves, similar metaphorical patterns encircled and ensnared them. If the Prophet of Gehenna did not invite the *verboden*, then what insight could he ever hope to achieve? Anatole had been in Kosovo in 1489 and witnessed the destruction of the Serb nobility, so this was a sweep of history in which he was already enmeshed. The companion was not with him then, so he could not understand the fixation or importance, only the event itself.

Then Anatole whispered to the evening sky, his words seeming to take shape and soar, leaving the dull streaks of dawn’s first lights streaming behind like contrails. The companion knew Anatole was speaking to him, for it was his place to remember this, and remind him some time hence. He says, “The Dragon has been urged to awaken, and his tendrils shall seek to drag the thirteen stars from the heavens.”

Saturday, 28 June 1997, 1:40 AM
(2:40 AM Eastern Daylight Time)
Harmony High-Rise
Chicago, Illinois



Benito Giovanni watched from the shadows as “art happened.” He didn’t want to distract the artist, oh-so-talented Pennington. But neither could he stay away. Thoughts of the favors that the artist’s subject would owe made Benito practically giddy. What was the worth of bilking some viscount, or expediting the shipment of stolen art to aging Nazi refugees in Argentina, when compared to the indebtedness of a justicar? Amidst the dust of dark clay and marble, something sweet was in the air, like the smell of money, or of blood.

The apartment studio was sparsely furnished, completely utilitarian, every possible space given over to the calling of the artist. *How very bohemian*, Benito thought.

The justicar, in all his splendorous bulk and foulness, sat perfectly content. The work was progressing more smoothly now that Benito had given the photograph to Pennington. The first few attempts had been maddening. Each time, the sculptor had worked for several nights—until Petrodon had balked at some detail that was not to his liking: the nose was too big, the eyes were uneven.... Never mind that, if anything, Pennington was doing the Nosferatu a kindness. But Petrodon would not be placated, and they were forced to begin the work anew. Time after time after time.

Then Benito’s mysterious partner had quietly stepped in. *Nickolai*. The name was all Benito knew for sure. He suspected the man to be a warlock, but it made little difference; he’d suggested this scheme to Benito and charged a steep finder’s fee, but not beyond reason. Several nights ago, Nickolai had provided the photograph—a picture of Petrodon *before* his change. It depicted a handsome and vainglorious man. One of those two qualities had accompanied him into unlife.

And suddenly Justicar Petrodon had been completely satisfied, heaping effusive praise upon Pennington. Never mind that the evolving bust bore a more striking resemblance to the photograph propped by the sculptor’s table than to the hulking monstrosity a dozen feet away. Petrodon could not have been more pleased. *And the customer is always right*, Benito thought. Let the justicar believe whatever he wanted to believe, as long as he paid up when the price came due.

“It seems to be going well,” came the quiet voice behind Benito’s shoulder. He started, and was relieved to see it was Nickolai, come unexpectedly. “I’m glad you are here tonight, Benito,” Nickolai murmured. The words were innocent enough, but Benito did not care for the mocking, slightly ominous tone.

And then horror and chaos erupted. Within just a few minutes, the smell of blood truly was in the air.



Wednesday, 18 March 1998, 3:07 AM
A private home
Santa Barbara, California

Eighteen months after Stephen Walinsky's death and transformation, his master's whole scheme fell apart. Vampires from Asia arrived with plans of their own and far better execution than any of their rivals. In short order Stephen and the others were fleeing for their own sakes, abandoning property and wealth as distractions behind them. The survivors gathered in Santa Barbara, in a mansion owned by a successful novelist to whom Ranulfson fed blood just as he had to Stephen while he still lived. The author could no more betray the coterie than Stephen could have. They settled in and began plotting revenge.

It was a stupid notion, of course. They were a handful. Their opponents were more numerous, well organized, driven by shared beliefs, and vastly more effective than their little lot. In short order the Asians had established something like a shadow government for the region, what they called a mandarinat, and they brought the anarchists together and gave them instruction in more effective behavior. Ranulfson and his brethren had dreamed of presenting Los Angeles under their control to their sect, their Camarilla. Now it wouldn't happen. Instead, the coterie would need to destroy what signs of their activities they could to avoid the embarrassment that comes to overconfident fools once exposed.

Stephen thought little about this. For him, the years were a long night of revulsion. He would have liked to walk into sunlight or fire and end it all, but Ranulfson made sure that the blood serpent within wouldn't let him. Instead, he preyed on others as a human leech, doing his little part to take what he once admired and return only desolation. It seemed to him no great consolation that his victims wouldn't remember. Losing one's past is itself a violation, no matter how others may rationalize it. It is not for anyone to take away the right of memory, even the memory of pain, and yet that was the essence of Stephen's existence. He did not wish to prey, but prey he did.

In due season Stephen killed. It was inevitable. Ranulfson and the other older survivors of the coterie sank into a quagmire of self-indulgent resentments. They created new vampires like Stephen, and commanded both him and them to seek out and slay people (living and undead) they imagined had helped in the great defeat. Stephen could not say who was guilty and who wasn't—powers of mind control made all testimony suspect, and in any event the young ones had no authority to spare, only to destroy. So Stephen watched ambitious mortal men and women join centuries-old creatures of the night in a final death. His heart shriveled, night by night.

When he was a child, Stephen's parents had brought him to the La Brea tar pits. It scared him. The statues of mastodons and saber-toothed tigers sinking into the tar were all too vivid for his fantasy-prone mind, and he saw himself in nightmares for a long time thereafter, sinking along with those magnificent creatures. Now he felt his heart sink into an abyss that made the tar seem light and comforting. He understood now how Ranulfson could use him and others as he did. They simply weren't anything to him. And, night by night, people were becoming less to Stephen. They had to if he was to survive and he didn't have the option of rebelling to destroy himself.

Sunday, 21 June 1998, 10:00 PM
The Stone Garden
New York City, New York



The moon was the merest sliver as Ernst Lohm hopped the wall of the Stone Garden. The razor-fine crescent lay on its back, supine—a witch’s moon. Lohm picked himself up, brushing grass and mud from his hands onto the torn knees of faded and paint-speckled blue jeans. Reorienting himself, he raised one thumb critically at arm’s length and sighted along it. Twenty-three degrees, the fickle moon’s elevation above the horizon. Perfect.

Immediately he set to work rearranging the carefully ordered tombstones.

His preparations had been painstaking. He worked quickly and expertly. Lohm was a craftsman of the old school, a master of arrangement, balance, composition. He was acutely aware that, should his efforts fall one degree shy of perfection, he might fail utterly to coax forth one of his reluctant dark angels this night. Or worse still, he thought, he might fail to convince it to abandon the multifarious wonders of moonlight on marble and return again to the darkling plain from whence it came.

A cruel wind sliced past, drawing a low, shivering groan from his very bones—a bow drawn across cello strings. Lohm glanced distractedly at the shard of moon as if checking his watch. Yes, he thought, time enough.



Tuesday, 23 June 1998, 11:12 PM
The Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

Nigel stood at the threshold of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs. Before him, a mere footlength ahead, lay the Grand Foyer. But he could not bring himself to let that foot fall.

He was immaculately, if eclectically, dressed. His costume seemed to cut a bold swath across the ambiguous ground between silk pajamas and a military uniform. Upon closer inspection, the oversized golden buttons were revealed to be coins of ancient minting—of Rome, Carthage, Byzantium. His elaborate, drooping mustaches were more cavalryman than cavalier.

He hesitated on the threshold, caught involuntarily at the crux between the outside world—New York City and its unending progression of night and hunger, mystery and manipulation (all the familiar comforts that the Toreador had learned to call “home”)—and this alien inner world, the *sanctum sanctorum*, the lair of the Tremere.

A Tremere chantry. Words a Toreador sire might conjure up to frighten his whelp. Nigel knew that few outsiders had ever been granted the double-edged honor of setting foot within this particular domain of the warlocks. Fewer still could be persuaded to recount what they had found lying in wait for them there.

Nigel prided himself on being rather persuasive, but the mysteries that lay beyond the veil that masked the Chantry of Five Boroughs from prying eyes remained impenetrable to him. He pictured the chantry as a dark, undiscovered continent, rife with intrigues and incantations. Nigel had no doubt that a Tremere chantry was a place where all the familiar terrors—of night and hunger, mystery and manipulation—were distilled down to their purest, most alluring and most lethal forms. The prospect of being invited to partake of this potent liqueur tantalized him at some primal level. This temptation neatly evaded the defenses of judgment and intellect and went directly to work upon gullet, gut and groin.

Or perhaps the allure was something even more primeval. Yes, there was a hierarchy of desire at work here. That was certainly the message implicit in the Tremere’s siren song—the never-ending chant of the chantry.

Between the desire and the spasm falls the shadow.

Nigel was discovering that there was some seat of desire that was deeper than the intellectual longing—the cravings to know, to understand, to master, to order, to arrange, to compose. Deeper even than the buried layer of the physical desires—the cravings for food, warmth, sex, blood, youth.

There was, beyond all these, a preeminent desire, an impulse of raw spirit. The revelation broke upon him like a wave. It retreated a brief moment only to crash over him again with redoubled force.

What a strange gift to place before strangers.

The proximity of his own desire lay bare and raw before him. It was an aching to be whole once more. An undeniable urge to return home. An instinctive plunge toward unity, a longing toward belonging. Nigel was overwhelmed by the seduction of the

Tremere chantry. Not the expected call to power, but a summons to oneness, an abandonment of self, a simultaneous annihilation and a fulfillment.

Before him, the entry hall soared to dizzying heights. Its spires, galleries and sweeping stairways seemed to be rendered entirely in moonlight through stained glass. The delicate construct seemed wholly ephemeral. Nigel had the distinct and irrational conviction that if he were to blink the entire scene would dissolve and vanish from view.

The paths of the moonbeams streaming in through the colored glass seemed to have more substance than the walls and balustraded galleries of the Grand Foyer itself. Nigel could picture himself ascending the sharply sloping paths of light, climbing the treacherous slope to the very pinnacle of desire.

But some distant part of his mind held him back from abandoning himself to this alien communion of power and desire. As through a dense fog, a voice reached his soaring consciousness. It was the voice of the Gatekeeper, or whatever they called this enigmatic little watchman at the threshold. Talbott.

Talbott waited expectantly to usher Nigel forward to his audience with the Tremere regent. They were expecting him. Talbott's words reached Nigel as if from a great distance: "Your lordship has not previously honored us with a visit?" It was more an explanation than a question.

For a moment Nigel merely stared at him. He had heard each word distinctly, but the syllables found no purchase upon his thoughts. Nigel blinked his eyes experimentally. He clenched and unclenched his fists, manually pumping the vitae to his body's extremities. He felt as one awakening from long sleep or trying to shake off the grip of torpor.

If Talbott noticed Nigel's discomfort, he pointedly ignored it. "She is beautiful, is she not? Captivating."

It was not the words, but something about the tone of Talbott's voice that struck the jarring note—finally breaking in upon Nigel's musings. The words spoke of beauty, but all Nigel heard was danger. With a pang of disappointment and perhaps even betrayal, Nigel realized he was once more on familiar ground. It was a post he had grown accustomed to over the passing of long lifetimes. He was positioned squarely behind his own eyelids, within the comforting walls of his own skull.

Quickly and covertly, he lowered his eyes, glancing sideways and back, scanning for concealed threats in the periphery. He was immediately sorry that he had done so. A wave of vertigo swept over and staggered him. For a moment, he had the distinct impression that the Grand Foyer lay not before him, but behind. He wheeled suddenly back toward his only avenue of escape and found himself, once again, facing the vast moonlit hall.

Talbott smiled back at him from beneath his leonine mane. The smile had all the predatory patience of a great cat. Nigel began to turn again and then thought better of it. He struck what he hoped was a nonchalant stance and forced himself to remain calm. He closed his eyes until little more than a faint impression of light and shadow reached him through the slit of his eyelids.

When he opened his eyes again, Talbott was regarding him curiously. "Are you feeling unwell, sir? There is refreshment within. If you will follow me..."

Again the hint of danger, and perhaps something else... mockery? A realization was slowly dawning upon Nigel—a realization that grew in proportion to his escalating suspicion of this gatekeeper. Cautiously, with tentative, shuffling steps, he tested his

new conviction. It was as he feared. Neither forward nor back, neither advance nor retreat was open to him. It was as if he were caught fast in the complex web of desires that the chantry wove about him.

“You may inform your mistress that I will await her convenience... here.”

It was an admission of defeat. Nigel was aware that, at this moment, he was totally at the mercy of the warlocks. It was not a comforting revelation.

Time stretched uncomfortably. Nigel expected at any moment that his resignation would give way to the cold rush of panic. He was puzzled that, instead, his utter powerlessness brought with it a rather cool clarity of thought.

It is most likely that I am about to die. That was his first thought. Nigel regarded the idea without fear, but with a certain curiosity, almost anticipation. He rolled it around on his tongue, finding it cool, firm, sweet. *It is most likely that I am about to die.*

Again. That was his second thought. It brought with it a rush of unsteady and poorly suppressed memories. It was not the circumstances of that first death that were most vivid in his mind. If pressed, of course, he could reconstruct every detail of the last view from the cathedral’s spire. He could even count the number of stitches in the collar of his sire’s intricately embroidered chemise. But the impression that was most real to him, vivid to the point of drowning out all other memories of the event, was the deafening roar of his own heart: spurting, slowing, spurting, slowing... slowing.

That last instant had been infinite. Nigel now found himself outside the ravages of time. Immortal and about to die. Again.

He sized up the Gatekeeper without antipathy. He could pick out the faint telltale flutter of life peeking from Talbott’s collar. Desire seized him, mastered him. He reached out one hand to pluck the forbidden fruit, to draw it toward him.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

The voice of lady of the house broke in upon him, and Nigel shook his head to clear it. Sturbridge’s presence recalled him to his purpose. He seamlessly shifted obsessions.

“But here is the mistress of the house herself. It would seem that both my liberation and my heart’s desire are assured. Aisling, dearest, it is such a delicious cruelty to keep me waiting upon your threshold.” Nigel’s features composed themselves into a mask of abject contrition. His eyes took on a faraway look as he began to recite:

*She cheats her lover of his due
And still contrives to keep him tied
By first deciding to refuse
And then refusing to decide.*

“Hello, Nigel. Ignore him, Talbott. You’ll only encourage him. To what do I owe this... unexpected pleasure?”

“You will forgive me, my lady. As usual, you seem to have me at something of a disadvantage.” The Toreador held out both hands before him, wrists pressed together as if bound.

Sturbridge sighed and made an elaborate sign with her right hand. A peasant superstition. A warding against the evil eye. The tracery of her fingers seemed to linger

a few moments too long in the air before her, blazing as if with their own light. Her guest experimentally took one cautious step forward and, finding no obvious harm resulted from it, recovered gracefully and swept into the room with a flourish of cape. He took her by the arm and began ushering her toward the central fountain.

"You would not believe it," he leaned in confidently. "The most extraordinary thing has happened. Ernst Lohm is dead."

Sturbridge was keenly aware of the Toreador's trying to remain nonchalant as he watched her shrewdly from the corner of his eye. "The name is familiar," she began guardedly. "He is an artist, is he not? From the Village."

"You know precisely who he is, dear," Nigel countered. "I want to know if you know *where* he is."

"My, you have grown abrupt," Sturbridge deftly extricated her arm from his and continued walking alone. "A severe young German, was he not? I seem to recall seeing some of his scribblings exhibited somewhere or another. He was a pet of yours?"

Instead of rushing to catch up to her, Nigel threw back his head and laughed aloud. He dabbed at his eyes with an immaculately pressed handkerchief that had appeared from a breast pocket. "Oh, that is precious. Ernst? Of mine? Certainly not. You know that, if anything, my failing lies in being far too... possessive. My playthings do not escape so easily."

"Then I do not pretend to understand your obvious interest in the boy. Nor, to be perfectly frank, the purpose for your visit."

"It is a great curse to love a woman with a barbed tongue."

"I seem to recall that they do have a word for those who profess to love dead women, but I do not believe it is 'cursed.' Why have you come, Nigel? And why are you haranguing me with stories about dead artists?"

"Why, my dear, everyone in town—everyone who is someone—knows you have an absolutely morbid fascination with death. It's that Irish blood of yours, I suspect. Death comes naturally to you. It's almost a national obsession, a birthright, a legacy. Did you say you had seen Lohm's work?"

Sturbridge shook her head at his persistence. Her gaze flickered deprecatingly down over her own sparse frame. She spread her arms almost apologetically. "The original model had Irish blood. But that was many years ago. The blood that currently worms its way through these old veins hasn't run to the Irish in over a... but that's not really to the point, is it? Who's Ernst Lohm, and why should I care?"

"Like a mastiff with her teeth in your throat," he muttered just loudly enough to be sure she heard. "Aisling, dearest, surely you recall his work. You always have such a keen mind for details. Lohm's paintings have that delightfully distressing geometry about them. Angles that grate upon your bones. Conic sections that hint at the profane. Intersections of planes that border on the obscene."

"Hmm, yes. I think I recall something of what you mean. Go on."

"Of course you do, dear. Now listen. Someone very close to me, one of my circle of intimates, had set his sights on young Ernst. He decided to bring him home to meet the family, if you understand me."

She rolled her eyes. "Really, Nigel, there is no need to air your clan's dirty laundry for my benefit. This sounds like a skeleton that would be perfectly content to remain in your closet."

“Don’t be catty, dear. You know very well that my friend was not the only one who was taken with young Ernst. The word in the back parlor has it that someone else had set his sights on our austere German. Someone who admired his work more for its unorthodox forays into certain disused and forbidden Hermetic *diagramma* than for any inherent aesthetic merit.”

Nigel took her arm and pulled her closer, confidingly. “Do you know who that might have been?” he whispered intently.

Sturbridge felt the words instinctively rise up within her in answer to the intensity of his demand, his desire, his need. With an effort of will she choked off the reply before it could pass her lips, but it was already too late. She was flustered. He had learned what he needed to know. He smiled warmly, squeezed her hand, and withdrew a half pace.

She could feel the compelling weight of his attentions lift from her. It rolled back like dark clouds parting. The air between them hung heavy, humid, oppressive. There was the slightest of stillnesses—a calm, pregnant with the first faint crackling of energy. Then lightning flashed in answer to his presumption.

“You will leave now.”

A look of perplexity crossed his features. It was quickly replaced with his more familiar stage manner. He was crestfallen. He was desolated. He managed to stammer out, “Forgive me, my lady! I have trespassed upon your hospitality, your kindness. It is unpardonable.”

He soon warmed to the subject, dropping to one knee, the nape of his neck bared as to the axe of judgment. “To allow myself to imagine, for even a moment, that your civility toward a wretch such as myself might be interpreted as... but it is altogether too much to hope for. I am unworthy even to be seen, much less to stand, in your presence.”

“Get up, Nigel.”

He was jerked to his feet before the words had the opportunity to traverse the intermediary of his ear and volition. He recovered seamlessly by transforming the motion into an impromptu leap. “Oh, my lady, with a word you render me the happiest of men. I—”

“Shut up, Nigel.”

He shut up. But his response was more measured this time, more natural. There was no compulsion behind the command. Sturbridge had made her point. He was unlikely to try to get away with anything so clumsy and forthright as that again.

They were silent for a time. He crossed to the fountain and leaned heavily, straight-armed, upon its lip. The aroma of the rich blood was distracting, almost dizzying, as it trickled over the severe Aztec faces. It spilled from upturned mouth to upturned mouth, tumbling down the seven jagged steps of the carved pyramid. The path of its descent was worn smooth by the passing of uncounted lives.

Without turning, he said, “I have to know if he is lost to us, Aisling. If he is here, if he is already among you, I will accept that. But if he is not...”

He was lying, and poorly at that. But he seemed to be authentically at a loss as to the young artist’s whereabouts. That would mean that the Toreador had not simply beaten them to the punch. Nigel had not come here to gloat. “But if he is not?” she echoed.

He turned angrily. “Damn it. Is the boy here or isn’t he?”

She smiled coolly and benignly like an icon, knowing she had gained the upper hand. “I can’t tell you that, Nigel. Try another tack. You were saying that if he were not here...”

He scowled, considered a pout and then thought better of it. "All right. If he's not here then he's dead. Just plain dead. And I will know why."

There was fire in his glare, but she stood aloof from it. "I wish you good hunting then, Nigel. You must return to me when you have discovered the truth. I should be disconsolate were I never to know the ending of your peculiar tale."

He took her extended hand and pressed it to his lips. He started toward the door, but then turned as if struck with a sudden afterthought. "If the artist is not here... well, it pains me to think that anyone has stolen a march on the both of us."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just that, as embarrassing as it might be to think that this young man had slipped the silken bonds of my associates, how much more of a humiliation for it to be discovered that he was snatched from the iron grip of the Tremere hierarchy...."

"I don't see how that follows, Nigel. The boy is dead. They die all the time, these mortals. It is the single defining act of their existence. Even if one of my brethren had developed an ill-advised interest in this artist of yours—which, I hasten to remind you, has not been established—it does not follow that the designs of this chantry were thwarted in any way."

"As you say," he nodded slowly, deliberately. "No one could possibly take so small an incident for a sign of weakness. Why, simply because someone who had been singled out for the special favor of this august house has disappeared, without any repercussions falling upon the guilty party or parties... well, who could possibly blame you for such shortcomings of justice?"

"Go home, Nigel."

"Then you will look into this matter for me? I shall account it a personal favor. You may rely upon it, my lady: I will not forget your kindness and discretion. It gives my heart cause to hope that I might one day find some small favor in your sight. That I might—"

"Do not come again, Nigel. If I have news for you, I will send my man, Talbott, to you. He is as stubborn as any old half-blind hound of Ulster and I think you will find him more than a match for even the persuasions of your parlor."

"I will look forward to your gift. Have no fear, I will be thinking only of you while I entice him to reconsider his choice of devotions. Good night, my lady."



Wednesday, 24 June 1998, 12:54 AM
The Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

"You wished to see me, Regentia?" Johanus was obviously uneasy about the sudden summons. The adept wavered uncertainly just inside the threshold of Sturbridge's sanctum, one hand trailing along the doorjamb. This hesitation was not characteristic of her newly appointed Master of Novices—the one his brethren referred to as the Pillar of Fire. He had come by this epithet less for any pyromantic prowess or fiery temper than for the shock of red hair that was usually seen bobbing along just ahead of a column of straggling neophytes. "If this is a bad time..."

"It is, Adeptus. Come in. Close the door."

Johanus scurried forward, barely avoiding being caught in the reinforced steel door as it sang closed of its own accord. It was accompanied by the telltale hissing of hydraulic bolts ramming home.

Sturbridge descended from a throne of precariously balanced books. She strode quickly and purposefully over to him and stood uncomfortably close. He held his ground, but found himself leaning backward slightly.

"Who is Ernst Lohm?"

"Why, he is an artist. In the Village. I think," he added lamely.

"You think?"

Johanus hesitated a moment too long and then the words tumbled from him hurriedly. "Yes, an artist, a painter. I have seen his work. It is extraordinary, really. I can hardly describe it. It all reminds me of abstract equations, spatial formulae, almost a kind of *proto-diagramma*. You would have to see it. You *should* see it, Regentia."

"And you are personally acquainted with the artist?"

Johanus shuffled his feet a bit. "Yes, Regentia. As much as anyone can be said to be on personal terms with Ernst. He is not the type of person who accumulates casual acquaintances."

"Not the right kind of casual acquaintances, at any rate," she replied disapprovingly. "Tell me, is collecting artists a regular hobby of yours or is this a special case?"

That shocked him into silence, and he took his time in answering. "It's obvious you're upset about this for some reason, Regentia, but I don't understand why. I haven't done anything wrong here. It's not like I've breached the Masquerade. I have been the very soul of discretion. Ernst is as entirely in the dark about... about the existence of our kind as he was before I first laid eyes on him."

"Are you feeding from him?"

He winced at her blunt question. It was like being asked by his mother if he were sleeping with someone. But to his credit, his answer was unhesitating, without any effort to conceal or deceive. "I have, if you must know. Yes. But not regularly."

"More than once?"

He nodded. "On three occasions. But I really don't see..."

“And the last time would have been?”

“Three nights ago.” A look of concern caught up with him. “Why, what has happened?”

“Ernst Lohm is missing, presumed dead. You may be the last one to have seen him alive.”

Johanus visibly paled. “But that’s impossible. I...” he broke off abruptly. “Three nights? No one has seen him for three nights? It just can’t be. Even if he were totally absorbed in a new piece, he could hardly have gone three days and nights without once stirring from his studio. You will excuse me, Regentia. I must go. I have to make certain...”

“You are not going anywhere.” There was a note of finality in her voice that preempted all objections. “I need you to think. If Ernst were alive, if he feared for his life, if someone had made him an *uncomfortable* proposition, where would he go?”

“Regentia! Surely you don’t believe that I... I did no such thing. You must believe me.”

“Must I? I do not recall authorizing any ‘recruiting efforts’ on your part. You are—or you *were*, as your current status may be subject to review after we have resolved the present embarrassment—my Master of Novices. Do you believe that this position somehow entitles you to earmark mortals for your own personal breeding stock?”

“Certainly not.” Johanus was fuming, his voice clipped, tight, controlled. “Lohm evidenced a rare and unsettling gift. It bore further observation. He might have, given a decade or two to develop his talent, proven a suitable candidate for admission to the vestibule of House Tremere. Or he might just as easily have descended into the grip of madness or laudanum or spiritualism. Even if I had found him at the point of death,” he choked for a moment on words that might prove a bit too close to the truth, “even so, I would not have presumed to act, to free him, without having first sought out your sanction.”

“You have already presumed too much. Are you aware that you are not the only one that has been paying court to this young artist? I see you are not. You did not stop to think that our cousins might also take an interest in this shining new talent?”

“You mean the Toreador?” He almost laughed aloud. “Your pardon, Regentia. How could the Toreador ever welcome one such as Ernst into their midst? They hovered around him, certainly, but they were terrified of him, mortified by his work. You should have been there at the exhibition last month. It was glorious. I can see them still, the entire gaggle of hangers-on, involuntarily clutching delicate lace handkerchiefs to their faces in distaste, fanning themselves compulsively. And all the while, as they congregated about the cheese tray, a blasphemous procession of formulae—these improbable guests from beyond the discrete spaces of our world—leered out at them from the keyholes of each and every picture frame. It was sublime.”

“You underestimate our cousins at your own peril,” Sturbridge replied coldly. “I believe it may have been they who startled your young friend—not the other way around. Assuming, of course, that it was not your own indiscretion that set him to flight. But you have not answered my question. Where would he have gone?”

He managed to ignore the renewed accusation and sat in silence for a time. “The stone garden,” he answered at last. “It was a place that he used to come to meet his... that we used to meet. I doubt that the Toreador even know of its existence. I can show you.”

"You can tell me. *You* are not going anywhere. You will remain in your quarters until I decide what should be done with you. In the interim, Master Ynnis will see to the novices. That is all."

"But Regentia..."

She only glared at him.

"Yes, Regentia."

He bowed and turned back toward the doorway just as the bolts of the ponderous steel door hissed open. He was halfway through the opening when her voice stopped him.

"Johanus." He half-turned.

"If he is still alive, I will find him."

He seemed about to respond with the obvious question, but the fight had gone out of him. He absently nodded his acknowledgement and withdrew.

Wednesday, 24 June 1998, 10:17 PM
The Stone Garden
New York City, New York



The small, neat plaque on the gate read, “Wages and Sons.” From this distance, Sturbridge at first thought it said “Wages of Sin,” an inscription she found curious, but not altogether inappropriate.

The gate swung back noiselessly at her touch, despite the carefully polished chrome padlock which was intended to keep the gate from doing precisely that. Nor did the electronic sensor on the strike plate register the break in the circuit—its usual indication to pass along a warning that the gate had been opened.

Sturbridge noted these things absently, almost after the fact. She did not wave some magic wand or recite any half-forgotten incantation. Doors just opened for her. They always had. Like at the supermarket. It was a basic courtesy that by now she took largely for granted.

Beyond the gate lay a short, curved drive leading up to a carport. She could make out a pair of uncomfortably long black automobiles parked side by side, bedded down for the night. A white-pebbled path stretched away across the grounds and wound around to the back of the converted manor house. The building itself was unlit and silent, the funeral parlor closed for the night.

Sturbridge struck out along the path. Her footfalls crunched gratingly against the stillness of the night and the solemnity of the surroundings. The white pebbles gave off a faint, reassuring glow in the diffused moonlight. Sturbridge, however, had eyes only for the single point of shadow marring the path—the one perfect crimson drop that stood out in sharp relief. She bent and extended her forefinger. The droplet latched onto her fingertip and clung tenaciously, surrendering its hold only when touched experimentally to her tongue.

Sturbridge cocked her head quizzically. Not at all what she had expected. She rolled the droplet around on her tongue to make quite certain. Satisfied, she nodded, straightened, and rounded the curve of the path.

On this side of the manor, the wall ran closer to the building, forming a small, enclosed yard—a private cemetery. The path meandered through the smooth marble stones and across the immaculately tailored lawn to the back door of the house. The second trail—the nearly imperceptible thread of dark droplets that Sturbridge followed—stuck closely to the first and vanished among the polished marbles.

But even from here, Sturbridge could tell that something was not right. She was not unaccustomed to the trappings of death, having been there at least once already. But there was something else here. Something that made her uneasy.

The *arrangement* of the stones bothered her, she decided after some thought. They were bunched too close together, as if the dead were simply heaped one on top of the other. And the gleam off the marbles was wrong—too glaring, too uniform, too perfectly reflected. The whole scene felt somehow false, a flawed replica. A trap.

Sturbridge forced herself to move. She had no clear plan of action in mind, but she was all too aware that, in the open space between the house and the little cemetery, she was exposed, an easy target. She advanced cautiously.

Her first realization was that she had certainly found that for which she had been searching. The smell of spilled life here was strong, nearly overwhelming. Something within her stirred in answer to that scent. Something sleek, dark, powerful. It flared its nostrils, snorted and reared—revealing wicked hooves, each as large as a man’s head and shod in glyphs of sizzling neon. She roughly leaned into its neck with all her weight and wrenched its head around and down. This was no time to allow the Beast to take the bit in its teeth.

But there was clarity in that purely bestial, single moment free from the cloudy filter of reason. In that instant, all of Sturbridge’s senses were alight. She was keenly aware of the body of the young artist lying sprawled, though as yet hidden from sight, in the midst of the carefully arranged tombstones. She also knew without question that his was the only body in this “cemetery.” The headstones were immaculate, pristine, unmarred by the rough touch of any chisel. Unburdened by names, dates, epitaphs.

This was no place for the dead. It was a gallery, a showroom. A place where a master stonemason might display his wares to his grieving customers. The only things planted here, Sturbridge realized, were the headstones. *The Stone Garden*, Johanus had called it. *The place where Ernst came to meet his...*

Sturbridge caught the sudden movement out of the corner of her eye. Above her and behind. From the rooftop. The flash of moonlight on metal. She was moving before the impression had time to coalesce into conscious thought. She dived between the headstones, rolled and came abruptly, jarringly, to rest against the corpse of Ernst Lohm.

Three sharp shots rang out. Shards of marble exploded in their wake. *Someone’s loaded for bear*, she thought. She closed her eyes tightly in an effort to block out the proximity of the corpse, but it was no good. The scent of life was rich, heady. Her forearms squelched in sweet sticky puddles of it. The Beast tossed its head and stamped the ground, churning earth and spilled life into a thick, rich loam.

Sturbridge cupped her hands, scooping up a double fistful of vitae and the reflected light of pebbles and tombstones. She raised it to her lips.

“*Fiat lux.*”

The nightmare threw back its head and its hooves flashed magnesium bright. A sudden flare erupted from the rooftop. Its searingly bright light reached Sturbridge a fraction of a second ahead of the shriek from the contorted silhouette revealed there.

It was over in an instant, a verdict as swift and unanswerable as a lightning strike. In its wake, the only sound was the heavy thud of a large, inanimate object falling twenty feet to the front lawn. Then solemnity and silence reasserted their claim over the premises.

Sturbridge came to her senses face down in the wreckage of the dead artist’s throat. She pushed herself away, angrily wiping at her chin with the back of one mudcaked hand. Her left shoulder stung, and a quick investigation revealed a shard of marble still lodged deeply there. It grated against the shoulder blade when she moved. Already she could feel the wound closing, the flesh reknitting. With an effort of will, she stopped the flow of healing blood. She braced herself and ran a cruel fingernail along the length

of the wound, reopening it. Better to leave it thus until it could be tended properly back at the chantry.

With her good arm, she unclasped a tiny teardrop-shaped vial from a gold chain at her throat. She stooped again to the body of the young artist and collected what was essential—three perfect beads of spilled blood. The broken remnant of Ernst Lohm she left there among the pristine marbles of his stone garden.



Thursday, 25 June 1998, 10:45 PM
The Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

"Aisling, darling, I came as soon as I heard." Nigel seemed disheveled and out of breath. Sturbridge shook her head at his affectations within affectations. He was of course, like all of their kind, quite literally out of breath, and had been so for some time.

"I seem to recall telling you not to come again." That brought him up short, but he recovered immediately.

"Of course you did, dear. But I had to bring back your little watchdog, didn't I? I couldn't bring myself just to turn him out into the street. I'm afraid that, after hearing his news, I found that I would not have the opportunity to play with him as I had so hoped. It is no matter. But you are hurt!" he scolded. "You did not tell me."

She had winced away as he took her arm. "It's nothing. An ache in the hollow of my shoulder, a souvenir from hanging about cemeteries late at night."

"Let me see that." Nigel made a great fuss of trying to mother her while Sturbridge, just as determinedly, parried his efforts. But there was no hiding the true extent of her injury from him.

"Hanging about cemeteries, indeed! That's a bullet wound. I have not lived so sheltered a life as you seem to believe."

"I assure you, you are mistaken," she countered. "But if you have come here only to offer questionable medical advice, I must conclude our interview. I have no need of a physician, even one with your reputed 'affinity' for the scalpel."

Nigel tsk-tsked. "Now, play nice. And I was so looking forward to nursing you back to health. I am sorely in need of a diversion. I have been out of sorts since this whole situation with Ernst first arose. Your man, Talbott, he tells me you have found him."

"Yes. He is dead, Nigel, and beyond reach."

A look of irritation flitted across his face. "Dead, do you say? Truly dead? This I must see for myself. Take me to him."

Her voice was calm and level, as if addressing a particularly slow child. "I imagine he is in the morgue by now. They would have found the body this morning."

"You found him and then left his body for the—"

"I did. The boy's body is of no further use, Nigel. He is gone."

Nigel seemed to wrestle with some further accusation, but choked it down. "Tell me, how did he die?" His voice was clipped, terse.

Sturbridge studied him for a long moment as if trying to determine how much to reveal. "His throat had been torn out," she replied truthfully, glossing over the strict chronology of events. "There was nothing you could have done for him. Nothing."

Nigel's look had become calculatedly nonchalant once more. "And you have questioned your 'associate' about this matter? About his whereabouts on the evening of the murder?"

If Sturbridge were in the least discomforted by this new line of accusation, she gave no sign of it. "My associate was confined to his quarters, pending the conclusion of my investigation into this matter."

"But how is that possible? When I came here two nights ago..."

"Nigel, Ernst Lohm was killed only last night. I know. I felt the warmth of his blood. It spoke to me. There is very little that the blood conceals from us."

Nigel suppressed an involuntary shudder, his nose wrinkling in distaste. Blood magic. Thaumaturgy. The warlock's dark gift. He had a vision of Sturbridge sitting beside a moonlit corpse, her robes soaked to the elbows in spilled life, distilling truth, sifting entrails, reading omens. But yet the dead man held his peace. His secrets remained his own.

Nigel shook himself to banish the image, suddenly painfully aware of the silence that had fallen between them. He blurted out the first thought that came to mind. "And you found nothing near the body?" It was, perhaps, a miscalculation.

"For instance?"

"I don't know," he snapped back, trying to regain his equilibrium. "Brushes, pigments, canvas?"

"Ah, then you have searched his studio. And recently. Good," she countered. Faced with his puzzled look, she explained further. "You knew that the body was not discovered among his own things."

"Yes, yes," he admitted. "My associate was half-mad with grief. He quite literally tore the studio apart."

"And what did you—excuse me, did *he*—discover?"

"*He*," Nigel replied with emphasis, "could find no sign of... of what Ernst had been working on." *Damn it.* He had not intended to say that much. Sturbridge's insinuations had him ruffled, off balance. Her presumption!

"What was he working on?" Sturbridge pounced on the dangling thread of conversation. Nigel fidgeted, took out an ivory snuffbox and politely offered it to his hostess. Sturbridge waved it aside distractedly. "Nigel, we need to account for about five days' time. If Lohm was working on something—and that something has also disappeared—we need to know what it was. And how far along he was. And who else knew about it."

Sturbridge did not know if it was due to the contents of the snuffbox or the fact that Nigel was himself distracted, but she noted that he neglected to sneeze after taking his pinch of snuff.

"If you must know," he said, dabbing at his nose with an immaculately pressed silk handkerchief. "I am told—by those close to the artist—that it was to be his masterwork. My associate," here he looked hard at Sturbridge as if daring her to contradict him, "says that Ernst would not let anyone near it until it was completed. He kept the studio locked and would not answer to anyone. Not even to his intimates. He says that Ernst called it *The Angel*."

"Thank you, Nigel." Sturbridge stared at him long and calculatingly. At last, she seemed to make up her mind. "I have news for you as well."

He looked as if he might offer some further flowery rhetoric or flattery, but thought better of it. He waited for her to continue.

“There was blood found at the scene. Someone else’s blood.” This was true enough—the droplets of blood on the path. Sturbridge failed to mention that she had also found a significant quantity of this ‘other’ blood *inside* the body of the victim. Potent blood. Vampiric vitae.

“And you have,” again the look of distaste creased Nigel’s features, “*examined* this blood?”

“I have.”

There was an expectant silence between them. It was Nigel who finally broke it.

“And what did you discover?”

“The blood was that of a Nosferatu. The last being, no doubt, to see Ernst Lohm alive.”

Sturbridge had the momentary satisfaction of seeing a look of pure ice and daggers consume her guest’s features. He took her hand and pressed it mechanically to his chill lips, forgetting to flush blood and warmth to them as was his customary affectation.

“Thank you, my lady. You have been most helpful. I am in your debt.” His cape cracked like a whip as he spun and stalked from the chantry.

Saturday, 27 June 1998, 11:59 PM
The Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York



Sturbridge glanced, for perhaps the hundredth time, at the intricate brass water clock at the north point of the *diagramma hermetica*. The gleaming arcane mechanism gave no indication that more than six hours had passed since Sturbridge had first set it into motion.

Two of the three perfect crimson beads still hung precariously over the beaten-copper basin below. By a potent sympathetic magic, the second droplet would not fall until its owner's blood next spilled upon the ground. It was as if time itself paused and cocked an ear, waiting expectantly for the next droplet to fall.

Sturbridge had not been idle. Even after assembling, adjusting and attuning the delicate and fickle instrument, she still had to link it to the circle of appotation. Her preparations were patient and precise. She was just refreshing the circle, satiating its ravenous thirst with a fresh application of the life's blood of a hawk (hawk for swiftness and surety of flight) when she caught the telltale hint of movement from the brass *mechanica*. She ran her tongue over the blood-tipped feathers of the hawk's breast, sealing the precise incision. Whispering reassuringly, she ran a cold finger down the length of its back and set the magnificent animal back on its perch. At her touch, the bird stirred, blinked, and then shook out its feathers, emerging from its near-petrified state.

Sturbridge had already turned back to the water clock. The second bead of life swelled, drooped, and stretched viscously before surrendering its hold. There was a single chime, deep and low, as it struck the expectant copper basin below. Bracing herself, Sturbridge stepped confidently across the line drawn in blood.



Sunday, 28 June 1998, 12:01 AM
An underground chamber
New York City, New York

There was a whimper and the resounding crack of a whip. A flame sizzled and sputtered to the smell of seared flesh.

"I will ask you again. Where is it?" demanded a voice raised in mounting anger or excitement.

The answering silence was complete, a vacuum. *Nature abhors a vacuum*, Sturbridge thought ruefully, emerging into the dim, rough-hewn chamber. An unsettling feeling of vertigo washed over her and she stumbled, trying to force her eyes to focus on her new surroundings. She had no doubt that wrath and the crack of the whip would swiftly rush in to fill that vacuum.

"I have been more than patient, wretch. You have stolen something that is precious to me. You will return it now," the voice took on an edge of ice and daggers, "or you will suffer until you do."

There was the slight but unmistakable sound of steel being drawn slowly, patiently across parting flesh. Sturbridge latched onto the glint of metal, a wicked knife. She saw a precious ruby line run the length of the blade and fall neglected to the stone floor. At the exact moment of impact, somewhere behind her, the water clock chimed, low and mournful, for the third and final time.

The room snapped into sharp focus. There were a dozen figures in the dim underground chamber. Thirteen, she corrected herself, counting the unlucky number hung by his wrists from an ancient cast-iron chandelier. Their missing Nosferatu. The last being, save one, to see Ernst Lohm alive.

The unfortunate swung slightly, like a pendulum, bearing mute witness to the subtle stirrings of the earth. It seemed he was already betraying secrets.

The thing that immediately arrested Sturbridge's gaze, however, was not the path he cut through space, but rather the quiet grace with which he did it. If the hanged man were aware of the indignity of coarse ropes, or the kiss of wicked knives, or the sputter of the flaming whip, or even the small lost sound of falling blood—he gave no outward sign.

Rather he seemed transfigured, ennobled. Suspended in midair, the crippling curvature of his spine seemed to fade from view, his silhouette revealing only a gentle, elegant arc of back and neck. The perpetual tension that gnarled his hands into nearly useless bludgeons had fled, abandoning him to solitary peril. The lines of hand that peeked from his bonds seemed graceful, reposed, fluttering gently like delicate white birds. The raw sores that once marred his features had surrendered to the precise ministrations of hot steel. They had sighed, burst, and collapsed into the gentle trickle of blood, washing clean the radiant white marble of cheek and jaw.

He was beautiful. Utterly beautiful. More a piece of sculpture than a creature of flesh and blood. He was a masterwork that might have stepped straight from the Renaissance courts of Florence or the Vatican. A Michelangelo. No, better still, a Donatello. Here was no mythical hero. It was a vibrant figure, a vulnerable figure. A *human* figure.

It was so incredibly lifelike, she half expected the sculpture to move. The whip cracked. The perfect arc of back contorted painfully. The veneer of cool marble crumbled, revealing the writhing form beneath—still clinging tenaciously to the cruel parody of life.

“Enough, Nigel.” Her own voice rang out, calm and authoritative. For a moment, she regarded her own words with curiosity, as if they were strangers come upon her unexpectedly in the dark. Resignedly, she stepped forward into the light. There was no turning back now.

The man with the knife spun upon her, wide-eyed, but quickly recovered himself. “You. You have no business here, Aisling. I require no assistance in wringing the information I require from this wretch’s blood.” The look of polite distaste, so conspicuously absent while he had plied his own bloody trade, reasserted itself.

His circle of intimates edged cautiously forward, drawing a ring around Nigel and Sturbridge. A voice that was nearly a purr accused, “Nigel, dear, you have been holding out on us again. You *must* introduce me to your little playmate. She is simply too... severe.”

“This is neither the time, nor the place,” he replied coolly, his eyes never leaving Sturbridge.

“Nor the man you are looking for,” Sturbridge countered. “This Donatello here did not kill your young artist. You know that.”

“I know no such thing. You are the one who led me to him. You and your blood magic. Do you now tell me this is the wrong man?”

She considered. “His blood was certainly at the scene. Although more of it was actually inside your young friend than on his corpse.”

“What are you saying? That Ernst was... that he was bound to that *thing*? That monster?” He gestured angrily at the hanged man with the knife, slinging droplets of blood.

Sturbridge smiled. “I should not be so hard on monsters. But you have it quite backwards. It was our Donatello that found himself indebted to young Ernst. Come now, Nigel. You knew all this. You had been observing our young artist’s nocturnal forays for some time now. From the safe vantage point of your ‘back parlor’—the funeral parlor which overlooked Ernst’s stone garden.”

“I did no such...”

“Oh, I’m sure it wasn’t you personally. Not all the time. I believe it was one of your associates that I ran into there last night, keeping watch over the bait. Waiting to see if the ‘monster’ who had defiled your pet artist would be drawn out of hiding.”

“That is ridiculous. I did not even know of this creature’s existence until you revealed it to me.”

“But you did know where Ernst was killed. And you also ‘knew’ that the injury to my shoulder was from a bullet wound. Now what put you in mind of bullets? I told you it was an ache from hanging about cemeteries late at night—and it was. It was a fragment of a marble headstone that was lodged there. Your associate’s shots missed, Nigel.”

There was a growl from a familiar silhouette amidst the ring of supporters. Nigel shot him a look that silenced him instantly.

“And how do you suggest that I knew that young Ernst had been... misused by that foul wretch?”

"The same way that I did. You fed from him. There would be no concealing the potency of the vitae inside him. Vampiric blood. Nor would a connoisseur like you be likely to mistake the taint of the Nosferatu. I tasted it in the blood, of course. The blood conceals nothing from me. But you, what was it that revealed it to you? Was it the boy's supple alabaster skin, gone suddenly coarse and common? Was it the touch of his hand, once satiny, but now inexplicably clammy? Was it—"

"Enough! You will not speak thus to me. I will not justify myself before you. If I released the boy from his bondage to this odious creature, if I took his miserable life, what is that to you? I will not be reproached for doing so. There is no crime in it. He was a mortal, Aisling. Nothing more."

Then she heard her own words parroted slowly, monstrously back to her: "Who's Ernst Lohm and why should I care? The boy is dead. They die all the time, these mortals. It is the single defining act of their existence."

Sturbridge stood in silence for a long while, her head bowed in defeat. At last she stirred. Without raising her head, she intoned hollowly, "Go, Nigel. Take your friends, take your toys, and go."

"We are not going anywhere until I get some answers from this damnable..."

"Ernst is dead, Nigel. You need to forget him. You need to move on. He struck his own dark bargain." Her voice dropped to a whisper, pitched low so that those gathered around them would not hear. "It may hurt like hell right now. That he would turn his back on you, on all you had to offer him, and choose..." Her voice trailed off and she found herself gazing at the malformed and broken wretch dangling from the ceiling.

His voice was pitched equally low, but it was hard, cruel, threatening. His eyes bore into hers. "If I cannot have the boy, I will have that painting—his final masterwork, his dying breath. I would look upon it. Peer into it and scrutinize him. Interrogate him. There are questions I would put to him, and words." His tone softened as if the fury within him had all but burned itself out. "Words left unspoken between us. That painting is my last link to him, Aisling. My last chance to be near him again. My last chance to say those words. It is my right. You cannot deny me."

She regarded him levelly for a long while, once again finding herself sizing him up, reevaluating. Her voice, when it came, was calm, confident, authoritative. "I will find your painting, Nigel. There is nothing more to be gained here. Go home now. And try to rest. You may come to me again, tomorrow."

He would not meet her gaze, but turned to his circle of intimates, already gathering his stage manner around him like a comforting old cloak. "The witch has given her blood oath. She will extract the necessary information. But come, there is surely more palatable diversion to be found elsewhere. Gentlemen?" He gestured for them to precede him as he bowed low to Sturbridge. "My lady, I leave you to your study of entrails and oracles. Although I must admit it is not you, but rather this unfortunate whom I envy. Tonight he achieves my fondest hope, for he finds himself in sole possession of your attentions. Until tomorrow then, dearest."

The Nosferatu flinched at the whip-crack of the twirling cape as his inquisitor withdrew. Sturbridge crossed to the hanged man quickly and began searching for some way to lower him to the ground. "Are you all right? I'm going to set you down now. Do you think you can stand?"

He grunted, which she took for an affirmative. The rope ran over the ring of the chandelier and back down to a bracket in the wall. She placed one finger to the knot and it hurriedly unraveled. There was a further grunt as the Nosferatu's feet hit the floor. He staggered, taking up the burden of his own weight once more and bending beneath it.

Sturbridge eased him to the floor and, with a deft twist of fingernail, opened up her wrist. "Here. Drink. I've got no idea where we are, and you'll need your strength before we can go anywhere. I'm Sturbridge," she added, seeing his hesitation. As if that explained everything.

He held up one gnarled and palsied hand before his face, fending off the much-needed nourishment. "Why?" he asked in a husky, broken voice. "Why did you call me Donatello?"

Sturbridge drew back at the question, at the intensity of his scrutiny. Returning his stare, she realized the reason for his hesitation. He thought she was mocking him.

"When I saw you hanging there," she began cautiously, as if the sound of her voice alone might be enough to set him to flight. "You reminded me of a sculpture, a statue. A perfect, gleaming figure of white marble standing against the ravages—the indignity—of time. A vibrant, a vulnerable, a *human* figure. A Donatello."

She shrugged, almost apologetically. The blood had run the length of her arm and now fell steadily from her elbow to the floor below. He bowed his head, whether in shame or resignation, she could not tell.

With one mangled hand, he pawed her arm to his lips and drank in great ragged sobbing gulps. After a time, his gasping sobs grew more regular and then ceased entirely. She lowered his head gently to her lap and sealed the now-jagged gash in her wrist.

She looked down at the ruin of his face, now once more in repose. The worst of the knife work had re-knit itself, her blood ministering to his wounds from within. Only then did she turn her attentions to the wreckage of his back and what she knew she must find there.

His shirt hung about him in tatters. Carefully, she peeled back the blood-soaked rags. It was a small mercy that the whip had not been barbed. At some point, however, his inquisitors had set fire to its tip—an ancestral enemy that bit far more deeply and lastingly than any steel barb.

The new linen bandages covering most of his back had taken the worst of the scourging, but it remained to see how much lasting damage had been done to the tender flesh beneath. Slowly, with mounting anxiety, Sturbridge peeled back the wrappings.

They came away in one continuous sheet with a wet, sticky sound that spoke of fresh scabs not yet fully formed and old wounds reopened. She gasped.

There, peeking from beneath the bandages, was Ernst Lohm's masterwork, his *Angel*, worked into the very flesh of the Nosferatu's back. An immortal masterpiece.

Sturbridge peered closer, drinking in every detail. Yes, she was intimately familiar with this dark, cowed figure. The wings of purest flame. The mangled right arm dangling limp and useless like a scythe in spring. He was Uriel, the Gatherer—the Angel of Death. Blood stained the hem of his robes. Fresh, raised red weals. The livid crimson stood out boldly, holding its own against the flaming oranges, imperial purples and midnight greens that the artist had invoked to breathe life into his harbinger of death.

Sturbridge absently stroked the head that lay in her lap. What a terrible and enigmatic gift to receive at the hand of his devoted and doomed young admirer. For a moment, she was consumed by a simultaneous envy and pity for this dead, crippled husk of a man—this doubly blessed monster who was himself both a timeless work of art and the medium for another's masterpiece.

She cradled the broken shell of his body in her arms. He felt unnaturally light and brittle, as if he might crumble and scatter under the rough caress of a strong draft. A double armful of crisp autumn leaves.

She wondered how he might hope to endure. She could not imagine him facing the physical rigors of the coming nights, much less the far more onerous challenge—the reality of waking each new night knowing only his own deformity and never once being permitted to glimpse the radiant beauty that was always within reach, but ever just beyond his line of sight. Hidden from view. Obfuscated.

Sooner or later, Donatello's patient shadow must catch him up. Sturbridge imagined the Gatherer simply tapping his longtime companion on the shoulder—neutral ground, the no-man's-land midway between them—and leading him home. It was inevitable, as certain as death. But it was not the dying that was difficult, it was finding the strength to remain among the living, to rise each night. To drink life, to endure.

She did not envy him the struggle of waking to this blasphemous parody of the divine gift—of life everlasting—knowing that the Angel of Death himself was ever at his back. Hovering, waiting only for him to stumble, to slip. Just once. Tap.

Sturbridge carefully replaced the linen bandages. Drew up the sheet to cover the face of the dead. Eclipsed, if only for a moment, the immediacy of those terrible, piercing, and hauntingly patient eyes.

Tonight, at least, he would be safe. She curled her arms around him protectively—like raven-dark wings—and he slept soundly, mercifully. The sleep of the dead.





part one:
chessmen
on the Board

from Friday, 1 January 1999
to Monday, 21 June 1999





Private Correspondence, Received 9 May 1999

From Lucius, Position Unknown

To the Very Reverend Madam Sascha Vykos, Priscus of the Sabbat

My Dearest Vykos,

How can I describe to you my feelings upon hearing from you again after so many years? Words are rough clay vessels that tend to crack when filled with such emotions—emotions that run deep and span lifetimes. I had thought you lost to me for all time.

To learn that you are not only alive, but here! It is altogether too much to hope for. It is almost better to believe this all some cruel joke or perhaps a cunning trap. Between Truth and Treachery, the latter is much the more constant mistress. She never strays far from my side these nights.

But your letter gives me cause to hope. I had almost forgotten what a fierce and terrible thing it is to hope. This is another debt I will have to repay you when we meet.

Ah, but what am I saying? We both know that such a meeting is impossible. As you have pointed out, your mere proximity places me in a rather precarious position. I cannot leave the city without attracting enough unwanted attention to destroy the both of us. You cannot venture so deeply into hostile territory. If you were to attempt it, all of my influence would not be enough to shield you from the consequences.

No, for the present you must lock away all thought of me in the secret places of your heart and make fast the door. If you will only keep faith a while longer, I will contrive to come to you, whatever the price. You may rely upon it.

I am not so vain, however, as to believe you have come all this way—across the intervening oceans and centuries—merely to look up an old friend. I fear your very presence bodes ill for the doves among us.

Have no fear, your secrets are safe with me. I mention this only in the foolish and sentimental hope that perhaps once you have loosed your hawks, we might arrange a rendezvous under the flag of a parley. You see how eagerly I embrace any pretense that might bring you to me once more. I am almost shamed by the fierceness of my desire to hold your delicate throat within my hands.

Ah, soon my dearest. Keep your secrets safe a little while longer. What are a mere few weeks to us, who have measured our loss and longing in centuries? With each passing day, the anticipation of our reunion consumes me.

I remain, yours in undying devotion,

—Lucius

Saturday, 22 May 1999, 11:00 PM
Suburban Lodge
Cincinnati, Ohio



Nickolai awoke bathed in blood-sweat. A thin red film coated every inch of his body and had already soaked through the silk bedclothes. Ruined.

He peeled away the clinging top sheet and, holding it at arm's length, let it slump to the floor. Blood puddled and lapped over his hands as he pushed himself to his feet. A trail of sticky red footprints followed him down the hall and into the bathroom.

In a matter of days, no doubt, the authorities would discover these macabre signs and begin the search for a corpse that they would never find. But that was nothing to Nickolai. This particular ambulatory corpse would be far away from here long before daybreak.

The shower hissed to life. Nickolai's hand shook as he fumbled with the dial. *Running water*, he thought. *Just what the doctor ordered*. For the first time this evening, he smiled. Running water was the usual folktale prescription for these situations. *Interpose running water between self and pursuing nightmare. Take once per night as needed*.

His kind, however, were traditionally on the receiving end of this particular superstition.

Nonetheless, the scalding water worked as advertised. Its humble magic not only dispelled the physical signs of the previous night's struggle, but some of the terror as well—the terror of waking with the certainty that, while he slept, he had been observed.

It was always the same—the faces of the children, watching him, judging him. He could find no hint of accusation in their glassy, unblinking eyes, nor words of condemnation on their cold, bluish lips. But the very sight of them sufficed to fill Nickolai with a dread, a certainty of condemnation.

For the third night in a row, Nickolai had dreamt of the Children down the Well.

Nickolai closed his eyes. The faces were there still, awaiting him. Round and bright as moons, smiling up at him from just beneath the surface of the still water. Infinitely patient. His gaze was arrested by the face of the nearest youth, a boy of no more than seven years. Nickolai traced the gentle curve of the youth's smooth, unblemished cheek. The boy's icy blue eyes were as large and perfectly round as saucers. His hair fanned out all around the bright face like a fishing net cast out upon the surface of the dark waters. Tangled strands lapped gently at the slick side of the well.

The faces neither moved nor spoke. They had been drowned and their bodies had apparently been some time now in the waters. Although the faces were calm, almost serene, Nickolai knew that their deaths were not the result of some misstep in the dark.

They had *been* drowned. He repeated the phrase a second time with a slight, but significant shift of emphasis. They had been willfully drowned, cast into the well, abandoned to panic, flounder and sink beneath the chill waters. Lost to sight. Lost to memory.

Only they did not stay down (would not stay down!). They had performed that final and miraculous transformation.

They were like the alchemists, struggling for decades in their damp cellars to work the Great Art—to transmute lead into gold—to free themselves from the burden of their leaden physical bodies and achieve the pure gold of spiritual transcendence. But it was the Children who had discovered how the trick was turned.

The waters of the well had swallowed them utterly and completely. But the children, they had worked the Great Reversal, swallowing in turn the waters of the well. They rose, ascending bodily, if not into the heavens, at least to the water's surface. There they hung, suspended like luminous moons, presiding over the benighted waters.

These were his silent accusers, his judges. The lapping waters whispered to him like a lover, promises and gentle reproaches.

Nickolai no longer railed against their rebuke. In a strange way, he had begun to look upon their nocturnal visits as something of a legacy, a birthright.

They were old certainly, those bright, youthful faces. Older by far than Nickolai or any wrong he might have committed. Still, he knew himself to be party to the crime against them—if not against this child who bobbed gently against the slick stones of the well, then certainly against hundreds like him. Souls he had cast suddenly and unprepared into the river of night.

Nickolai had always suspected (but did not know, could never know now) that the well was brimming full of youth, swarming with bright golden eyes, buoyed up ever nearer to the well's lip by the sheer mass of bodies beneath. He imagined that some night soon (very soon now) he might awaken to find that they had spilled out over the brink of the well. He imagined the tide of the drowned washing out over the fields, running like a tangled river through the woodlands, crashing against the heel of the mountains. Nickolai wondered what, if anything, might hope to stand against that great flood—whether any bulwark against the rising tide might hope to endure.

No, they would win in the end, these Children. This flood of shining victims. They had the weight of numbers behind them. They had the advantage of age—of uncounted ages. And they were so very patient.

Nickolai knew that he was to be their victim as surely as they were his own. He had been specially sought out, chosen, marked. When that tide finally rose, when his dream lapped over into the waking world, he would be culled out. Nickolai did not fear death (he had been there at least once already). Nor did he fear oblivion. But he very keenly felt it his duty to remain among the living. This desire did not arise from any overdeveloped sense of self-preservation, nor even of self-interest, nor certainly of self-importance. Nickolai had a very acute sense of what he was. He was the last of his kind. And that was a great and terrible responsibility. He had witnessed what no one should be forced to witness—his brothers, his order, his house, being slaughtered to a man. When Nickolai's death came for him at last, it would obliterate not only his physical form—a debt which was, admittedly, long overdue—but it would also erase forever certain memories, ideas, ideals of which this physical form was the final repository.

With Nickolai's death would pass forever the sight of that ill-fated ritual enacted beneath the streets of Mexico City—the massacre that had destroyed his brethren. With his death would pass the memory of the multiform and varied wonders, the arcana, the passwords, the miracles, the secret sigils, the hidden names of God—the hard-won treasures of centuries. The legacy and birthright of his people.

And with his death would also pass the last living memory of those unforgettable eyes, their terrible brightness undimmed by the weight of death and dark water upon them. In victory, the Children must necessarily die with him and the night tremors—*les tremeres*—at last come to an end.

Nickolai killed the spray of water and walked dripping from the tub, painfully aware that he was one evening closer to that end, and not knowing how to arrest or even delay its coming.



Sunday, 23 May 1999, 4:50 AM
Suburban Lodge
Cincinnati, Ohio

Scalded clean and dripping wet, Nickolai perched on the edge of the bed. He took care to avoid the blood that still puddled on the mattress. He tried to force his thoughts to focus on his next move, but they led him inevitably backwards.

Up to now, his movements had been instinctual—a headlong flight away from the site of the massacre—away from the blasphemous ruins beneath Mexico City. Nickolai's sole purpose had been to put as much distance as possible between himself and the all-too-recent nightmare. If the truth were known, he could not say with certainty that it was not already too late.

He did not know how long he had lain pinned and helpless beneath the ruins. He might have been unconscious for a few hours or for several evenings. Nor could he be entirely sure that he had not slipped into the deeper torpor as his shattered body struggled to mend itself. If this were the case, the lost time might be measured, not in nights, but in months or even years.

Too long, he thought. Too late.

Nickolai had awakened to a ravenous hunger, but he dared not pause even to hunt. He picked his way back over the U.S. border on foot, avoiding even incidental contact with the least threatening of humans. To draw any attention at this point might have proved his undoing—hastening his detection and destruction.

Once over the border, he had grown bolder. He allowed himself the risk of preying upon the occasional passing motorist for sustenance and transport. He began to put a slim but critical buffer of blood and distance between himself and the pursuing nightmare.

Ironic, he thought. It was only in the wake of these savage predations that he began to rise above the demands of his purely animal instincts. It was as if only by satisfying these primal, bestial needs, the more rational civilized thought processes could begin to emerge.

Irony. It was a human concept. It was the first time since the catastrophe that his thoughts had risen above the level of flight, of feeding. Nickolai felt as if he were coming home. As if he might somehow survive all this.

Slowly, so as to not provoke the beast, he began to rein in his reckless flight. For the first time, he took note of his surroundings. He was somewhere in the deserts of the southwestern U.S.

As reason gradually returned, Nickolai was horrified to find himself among the familiar touchstones of his unlife. With mounting dismay, he recognized that his footsteps had been drawn to the well-known gathering places, the chantries, the dead drops, the places of power that made up the legacy of his people. It was almost enough to drive him back into the clutches of the beast. Blindly, he fled. Nothing was so dangerous to him now as the familiar. Whatever had destroyed his brethren would surely seek out any survivors. One of the first places it would look would be here, assuming that any stragglers would return home.

After several nights of further flight, always looking over his shoulder for signs of pursuit, Nickolai had felt safe enough to come to ground for the first time. The Cincinnati hotel room was a far cry from the comforts of home, but that might have been the exact reason it appealed to him.

But even here, half a continent away from the source of his flight, it was not far enough. He wondered if it would ever be enough. Shaking his head, he banished such thoughts from his mind. He had to focus on the pragmatic.

The first thing he had to do was to determine exactly whom he needed to avoid. Certainly, an encounter with any of the members of House Tremere would be a death sentence. The slaves of the pyramid bore no love for the thaumaturges of House Goratrix.

Nickolai considered. There might still be others, however, that he could reach. Others who were of the blood but not of the pyramid. Refugees, rebels, by-blows, outcasts.

Again, he found his thoughts returning to the legacy of his people. If he could find an apprentice, a successor, then the knowledge of his house might not pass entirely from the earth.

With excruciating care, he began gathering his tools.



Tuesday, 1 June 1999, 2:37 AM
Mezzanine, Fox Theatre
Atlanta, Georgia

The few, wispy clouds did not obscure the stars, but rather added an illusion of depth, of reality. Victoria Ash leaned back in her seat, taking in and finding comfort in the expanse of crisp night sky. She did not care that the vista was “merely” a projection upon the grand auditorium ceiling. She did not care that the Moorish battlements were but a decorative framework for stage and balconies. In some cases—*very many*, it seemed—illusion was quite preferable to reality.

It was impossible to view the night sky in Atlanta. Oh, the sky was there, of course. But there were no stars, no sense of the infinite. Only a hazy pink glow, electric illumination bleeding from horizon to horizon, obscuring what, to a Kindred, was one of the few anchors in time. All too often, loved ones passed beyond; cities, nations rose and fell; forests burned; even mountains once impenetrable were scarred by modern man. Only the oceans and the stars, it seemed, remained constant, and this city offered observation of neither.

What it did offer, however, was opportunity.

“Good evening, Ms. Ash.”

Victoria did not start, nor did she so much as look away from the soothing faux-heavens. She hadn’t heard him approaching, but neither had she expected to—not if he didn’t wish to be noticed. “Do you have what I asked for?” Victoria said, not rude but, at the same time, not encouraging familiarity.

“I do indeed,” Rolph answered.

Not every member of his clan, contrary to popular belief, smelled as if he had rolled in week-old refuse. That was the first thing Victoria noticed after his unheralded arrival: the absence of stench. It made dealing with Rolph tolerable. Ugly, Victoria could abide for a short while, but those more aromatically challenged of Clan Nosferatu were never welcome in her presence. Not that she had anything against them *personally*. Victoria prided herself upon her magnanimity. She did not begrudge those more grotesque beings the hunting grounds that were beneath her station, or the filthy little burrows they carved out of the dirt; she merely saw no reason to allow those creatures to offend her sensibilities by coming near her.

She turned toward Rolph, reached out her hand. Thankfully, he wore a long robe with a hood that concealed most of his face. In the darkened theatre, she could barely make out the unnaturally pointed chin and the large nose, sharply bent. Rolph handed her a legal-sized manila envelope.

“Thank you,” Victoria said. Rolph bowed slightly.

She opened the envelope and began to sift through the contents—casually, so as not to suggest that Rolph had done her *too* much of a favor. The Nosferatu were the elephants of the vampire world—they never forgot. The tiniest bit of aid rendered was filed away in their memories, a debt to be called due perhaps years later, quite often at the most

inconvenient of times, and sometimes by a *different* member of the clan, in a different city or on a different continent, as if they shared some communal sense of recall.

"Is everything to your satisfaction?" Rolph asked.

Victoria continued to sift through the envelope's contents: photocopies of deeds, business records, cash withdrawals and deposits for various bank accounts. "It seems to be," she said nonchalantly.

In truth, the records were helpful, but hardly vital. They would help Victoria solidify her presence in Atlanta, her adopted home. The financial information pertained to the interests of a former Kindred, Marlene, a Toreador of ill repute, who had met an unfortunate end. The establishments, each of which Marlene had controlled to varying degrees through intermediaries, reflected the banal vulgarity that had also been Marlene's dominant quality: strip clubs, adult bookstores, "lingerie" showrooms, and so on.

Victoria was not enthused by the prospect of peddling vice, but she did have her pragmatic bent. If a mortal proprietor was already accustomed to handing over profits to a mysterious silent partner, what could be the harm in assuming that role? It was also a very practical preventative measure to ensure that no one else moved in on what had been Marlene's territory. As the old saying went, "Nature abhors a vacuum," and Victoria thought of herself as nothing if not a force of Nature.

"Yes, I believe this will be adequate," Victoria said.

Rolph might have smiled within the shaded recess of his hood. "We are pleased that you have chosen Atlanta as your new residence."

Victoria smiled, recognizing, though still not averse to, flattery when she heard it.

"Despite Prince Benison's best intentions," Rolph continued almost conspiratorially, "there is a certain... cultural and artistic sensibility that is lacking among our Kindred. From what I have heard, I suspect you are more knowledgeable in those areas than was Marlene."

"Ha!" Victoria coyly raised two fingers to her scarlet-painted lips, as if to restrain further comment upon her predecessor.

"Forgive the unwarranted comparison," Rolph said quickly, lest he had offended. "Some of us remain hidden away from society, and polite conversation does not come easily to our lips.... That, and the Toreador we have grown accustomed to here have been of a certain... base element...."

"Well then," Victoria said at once, "we will have to show everyone different, won't we?"

"What do you mean?"

It seemed so obvious to Victoria. What could be more natural? She wasn't sure why she'd waited this long to embark on such a course of action. "A coming-out. A grand party." Instantly, her mind was racing; she formulated countless plans, motifs, decors, with each passing second. She could host the gala here at the Fox, or perhaps at the High Museum.

"Of course," said Rolph. "How fitting. Will there be art?"

"Ah, so you are the art lover, are you?"

"I appreciate beauty... from which I am so far removed."

Victoria felt a lump in her throat; she was nearly moved to reach out and actually touch Rolph's arm. How quaint—a beast pining for the beauty that was his antithesis. How her mere presence would enrich these creatures' lives, here in this southern, backwater city.

“Have you tried your own hand at the arts, Rolph?” Victoria asked, speaking as might a parent to a child.

The Nosferatu nodded. “But I have not had much success, I’m afraid.”

Victoria nodded sympathetically. “What—sketching, painting?”

He nodded again. “And a bit of sculpting. Though my creations were as deformed as I am. Or more so, if that is possible,” he added with a self-deprecating shrug.

How ghastly indeed, Victoria thought. But she was determined to show pity to this creature. “I will exhibit my private collection of sculpture,” she said magnanimously.

“You have a private collection?”

“Most certainly. One of the finest in the world. And you will be invited.” The words were out of her mouth before she could reconsider. Victoria’s enthusiasm momentarily waned, but she maintained the veneer of her smile. She didn’t relish the prospect of socializing with Nosferatu, but it was done. She couldn’t uninvite Rolph, and the city as a whole would benefit from her largesse. So she would go about making her coming-out the event of the season—of the *year*, or perhaps the decade—for this tired city. She began formulating the guest list at once. Dear, conniving Benito would have to attend, of course. And if all Victoria had heard about Prince Benison was true, then she would be able to instigate a delightful bit of mischief by inviting certain individuals: Benjamin, for one, leader of the city’s anarch resistance, who, nonetheless, would be granted safe passage to an Elysium; and the Brujah archon Julius came to mind as the perfect guest for her purposes. Perhaps he would be able to attend as well.

“I would be honored to attend.”

“Hm?” Victoria had almost forgotten about Rolph. “Oh, yes. Of course.” Yes, she would have to allow him to attend. Even in his inclusion, however, there was a sliver of redemption. Inviting a Nosferatu was the type of unexpected exploit that Victoria liked to undertake. Unpredictability, to her way of thinking, was synonymous with freedom. There were beings in the world—beings as arcane and mysterious to the Kindred as were the Kindred to mortals—that would usurp control of her destiny if she allowed them to do so. By doing what they could not have anticipated, Victoria asserted her independence. The more unpredictable the better. Even in such a small thing as this.

“Of course you will be welcome,” she said to Rolph. “And your friends as well.”

As Rolph bowed again and showed himself out, graciously not taking any more of her time, Victoria congratulated herself on her latest stroke of spontaneity, which no one—and no *thing*—could have predicted.

Thursday, 3 June 1999, 10:29 PM
Beneath Manhattan
New York City, New York



Calebros allowed Umberto to “lead” his elder along the unlit passage. Those younger occupants of the warren seemed to think that Calebros never left the grotto, his “office”: that he never ceased poring over the countless reports and clattering away on his time-tested typewriter. Perhaps they were not grossly mistaken in those beliefs, he reflected. The particular curvature of his spine, along with the merciless arthritis that racked his every joint, did not make for ease of movement. Calebros preferred to stay put. The youngsters also would not be inaccurate to assert that, as for company, he preferred that of his Smith Corona to them. Still, they mistook his unwillingness to venture beyond his sanctum for an inability to do so. They assumed as much.

“Undisciplined,” Calebros muttered.

“Pardon?” Umberto paused and turned back toward his elder.

“Keep moving or we’ll never get there,” Calebros scolded him. Umberto, crestfallen, continued onward.

Undisciplined intellect, Calebros thought. *Assumptions are but the signposts of an undisciplined intellect*. That’s what his sire, Augustin, had always said, and truer words were never spoken.

For several minutes, the two hunched creatures continued onward, Umberto slowing his steps so as not to outpace his elder, Calebros slowing to avoid stepping on the shuffling fool before him. Eventually, they approached a ladder.

“There’s a ladder here,” Umberto said.

“Yes, I can see that,” Calebros said, and, when Umberto continued to hesitate, added, “I do know how to use a ladder. Get out of my way.” His talons clicked against the metal, but the slippery, fungus-covered rungs did not prove an impediment. There was pain as he climbed—his shoulder, elbows, knees, and neck—but the discomfort was no greater than that which challenged him when he rose from his resting place each evening.

The ladder led to another corridor, which ran past a small, cramped room where several more people were gathered and busy at a game of cards. Their familiar humor grew silent as Calebros passed. Either they feared attracting his displeasure at their idleness, or they were simply surprised to see him out and about, or perhaps a bit of both. Calebros ignored them and made his way to one of the next doorways, Umberto’s computer room. Umberto slipped past and easily into the seat before the terminal. He began typing in commands.

“I thought you said he was ready,” Calebros grumbled.

“He is. I’m just double-checking the link security.” Umberto’s nimble fingers tapping rhythmically across the keyboard sounded like the first spattering drops of a summer shower against a tin roof. His earlier hesitancy now vanished as he immersed himself in the embrace of technology.

“I could hook you up a terminal of your own,” Umberto said without thinking, “if you got rid of that fossil of a typewriter and cleared off your desk—ow!” He jerked forward, away from Calebros, who had just boxed his ears. Umberto wiped a small trickle of blood from his right earlobe. Calebros took the seat that Umberto hastily vacated. An eardrum was a small price to pay to maintain the primacy of the pecking order, the elder thought.

“Is it ready?”

“Yes,” Umberto said, rubbing his ear. “Just type in what you want, and then hit enter. Your text is displayed after the ‘C’.” Umberto busied himself with massaging his ear and stretching his jaw, mouth open, mouth closed, mouth open....

Calebros, seated at the terminal, stretched his legs to ease an aching knee, but met resistance under the desk. He pressed harder with his sizeable foot, eliciting a squeak of discomfort from below.

“Who’s down there?” he asked gruffly, already knowing the answer.

“Me, Mr. C.”

“Me? Mouse, get out from there, you half-animate fur ball. Some of us have work to do.”

“Sorry, Mr. C.”

As the mangy little creature squeezed from beneath the desk and scabbled away, Umberto directed a half-hearted, perfunctory kick in his direction, but the elder Nosferatu had already turned his attention to the computer. Calebros’s fingers, despite the long, gangly talons, moved with alacrity across the keyboard:

Instant Message

C: Hello? Are you there?

R: I am here. Are you well?

C: Well enough. What news?

R: I met with V. Ash three nights ago; have since learned that she is planning the party for the solstice; probably will take place at the High Museum, if Prince Benison is amenable.

C: Do you expect him to be?

R: Hard to predict with him, but I don’t know any compelling reason that he should object.

C: Is Ash suspicious?

R: Not at all. The party, of course, was completely her own idea—as she sees it. She has already made arrangements for the particular statue to be transferred. I will see to it that H. Ruhadze is on the guest list. Will June 21 allow you sufficient time to prepare?

C: It should. If Benito is on the guest list. Do you know if he is?

R: He was one of the first she contacted. He is planning to attend.

C: Splendid. I will inform Emmett. Any other news?

R: Hilda sends regards.

C: No time. Must go. Goodbye.



Calebros pushed back from the terminal, forgetting the chair he was in had wheels—unnatural, that—and nearly running over Umberto. “Can you print a copy of that and bring it to me?” Calebros asked.

“Certainly.”

“Good.” With much creaking of joints, Calebros lifted himself from the chair and made his way back down the hallway. He felt his mood noticeably improved. Rolph was a stand-up fellow, and arrangements in Atlanta were progressing nicely. Emmett would be pleased as well. The entire operation promised to be a quiet, tidy affair.

Calebros paused at the doorway to the room where the card game was taking place. He poked his head in. “Who’s winning?”

A brief, dumbfounded silence followed before someone managed to reply: “Uh...Cass is.”

“Good,” said Calebros, as he continued on his way. “Very good, indeed.”



Friday, 11 June 1999, 9:40 PM
Loading dock, High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

"And then this dude says, 'If you on the schedule for that night, you better make sure you get off it.' Except he doesn't say, 'schedule,' right? He says, 'shedule,' like he got a damn speech impediment or something."

"He say what?" Odel asked, turning off the forklift so he could hear better.

"He says, 'shedule. Get off the shedule,'" Tyrel said more loudly, even though the forklift was off now.

"Why he say that?"

"I told you, I think he got a speech impediment. He always talk funny. I think he from Boston or New York. Maybe California."

"Naw, I mean why he tell you to get off the schedule?"

"*Shedule.*"

"What the hell ever. What difference it make to him?"

"He says he's doin' me a favor. Gonna be some action that night I don't want to be messed up in. He says stay away. Gonna be trouble. That's why I'm tellin' you too," Tyrel said.

"What kinda trouble?"

"Don't know. Just said trouble I don't want no part of. Now, listen. He's a strange one. He pay me sometime to tell him what I know about people. I don't know if it's drugs or what, but I figure if there's trouble, he mixed up in it, and he oughta know, see?"

"Huh," Odel scoffed. "He just tryin' get you fired."

"All I know, he ain't lied to me before. I gonna do what he says."

"Suit yourself."

As the forklift hummed to life again, a figure separated itself from the deepest shadows near the back corner of the loading bay and slipped out the open door. None of the dockworkers noticed.

Friday, 11 June 1999, 11:54 PM
Rebekah Scott Hall boiler room, Agnes Scott College
Decatur, Georgia



The knock on the door was faint over the clanking and hissing of the boiler, but Rolph knew who it was anyway. He didn't have many visitors, and only one ever knocked. He opened the door and was greeted by a lithesome young blonde in a short plaid skirt and white oxford shirt.

"Surprise!" she said, striking a pose.

"You do *not* look like a college student," Rolph assured her. "You look like a porn star pretending to be a Catholic schoolgirl. An *aging* porn star, at that."

"You say the sweetest things." Hilda stepped past him, giving him a peck on the cheek as she did so. "But don't think all your sweet talk is going to get you into my panties."

"Don't worry."

"You sly devil."

Rolph rolled his eyes. "Hilda. I'm a vampire. I'm functionally impotent. *Why* on earth would I want to get in your panties?" he asked, adding with more than a little cruelty, "Unless I had a very large truck I needed to park."

"Very large truck?" She seemed shocked, but then an evil grin spread across her face. "You sly, *euphemistic* devil!" She groped at his crotch, but he hopped out of the way. "How large is very large? Bring all that horsepower right over here."

"Dear God," Rolph groaned in exasperation.

"Funny. That's what they always say. Dear God. *Dear God. Dear God!*"

"Are you completely done? And stop humping the steam pipe."

"Spoilsport."

"What's news tonight?"

Hilda let her Catholic-schoolgirl facade fall away with a sigh. Her skirt was long and tattered, the crisp white shirt now dingy and bulging from the pressure of countless rolls of sagging flesh stuffed into too small a garment. Her haggard face was also a victim of gravity, with dark bags under her eyes and floppy jowls all dangling. Her grin was practically toothless, her teeth far outnumbered by the stiff stalks of hair that sprouted from her nostrils.

"More Sabbath action," she said. "London Tommy is warning some of his contacts away from the High the night of the Solstice party." With so few teeth, Hilda had a habit of smacking her gums together when she spoke. The effect was unappetizing, to say the least, yet still somehow managed to make Rolph thirsty.

"London Tommy," he repeated. "I suppose we'll need to pick him off once all this blows over. Can't have *too* many Sabbath hiding amongst our anarchists, and he's one of the more active ones."

"What's wrong with now?" Hilda asked. "I say we do him now."

Rolph was taken aback for a moment. He was so often preoccupied with Hilda's other perversions that he tended to forget about her sadistic streak, which was, in keeping with anything relating to Hilda, fairly wide.

“No,” Rolph said. “If we take care of him now, his Sabbath buddies might get antsy. This little raid or whatever they have planned for the High is perfect. There’s some shooting, confusion. We grab Benito. Nobody is the wiser. They assume the Sabbath is responsible for him going missing. Emmett will love this.”

“And there’s the Hesha thing,” Hilda pointed out.

“Right. I’ll see to him myself. Was the statue there yet, with the others?”

“*The Dead Abel*,” she nodded. “Unloaded tonight.”

“I’ll update Calebros.”

“And when all this is over,” Hilda said, rubbing her fat fingers together, “we’ll run London Tommy through the meat grinder.”

“Ah... yes.” For a moment, Rolph pondered which would be worse: to be in Hilda’s good graces, or her bad graces. In the end, he couldn’t decide if there was much difference.

Saturday, 19 June 1999, 9:12 PM
Chandler Room, Omni Hotel at CNN Center
Atlanta, Georgia



Polonia surveyed the conference room with a critical eye. *Perfect.*

Still, he seemed somewhat preoccupied as he went about his ritual—shifting a place card here, removing a piece of chipped crystal there, plucking out an ill-concealed listening device. Absently, he corrected for a half-dozen subtle but potentially disastrous breaches of etiquette and precedence. He was painfully aware of just how little it would take to transform a Sabbat war council into an uncontrollable raging maelstrom.

He completed one full circuit of the prodigious conference table and began again. The fingertips of his right hand trailed along the surface of the rough-hewn table as he went. The touch was reassuring.

The blackened oak table was a presence in the room. Polonia approvingly ticked off its virtues. To begin with, it was massive. Its sheer size made it unlikely that even the most hulking Tzimisce monstrosity would be able to smash it or (as they were so wont to do) smash someone else *with* it. This alone would prove a telling advantage when the discussion grew heated, as it inevitably would.

The great circular table had the additional weight of tradition and history about it. The piece had been brought in, at considerable expense, from a private collection in England's Lake Country. It was undoubtedly a forgery, but it was a forgery with a history. And that made all the difference. Like its legendary predecessor, this round table was intended to forestall the endless posturing and power plays that might otherwise arise in such an assembly of proud and temperamental warlords as each vied for a place of honor near the table's head.

Polonia smiled at the thought. It was not only the table that had no head. It was the whole damnable assembly. He was all too aware that there was nothing to compel the factious Sabbat pack leaders to follow his lead. He had spent a good deal of his effort in planning this event simply to ensure that he would not be among those torn to pieces during the opening arguments.

As the Sabbat Archbishop of New York, Francisco Domingo de Polonia was undeniably one of the foremost Cainite leaders in North America. New York was, after all, one of the first Sabbat footholds in the New World and it remained the jewel in its crown, despite a nagging Camarilla presence there. Polonia suspected that the fact that he still thought of America as the "New World" was perhaps a bit too revealing of his age. It was precisely this patient nurturing, however, that had grown New York from the mere stuff of pre-industrial nightmare into the full-blown playground of Gehenna that it was today.

It was only fitting that, even here in Atlanta, far from his sphere of control, the responsibility for hosting this little get-together should fall to Polonia.

In the geography of the undying, only Miami dared put itself forward as a rival to New York's preeminence. Between these two cities lay only an unbroken stretch of

enemy territory covering nearly the entire Eastern Seaboard. Polonia knew his power and influence were dulled and muted here in Atlanta. The city had been a Camarilla stronghold since its founding. There was little he could depend upon here. Certainly he could be sure of the loyalty of those hand-picked forces he had brought with him to the council—assuming of course that no more compelling opportunity arose for them. He would ensure that no compelling opportunity developed. It was an arena in which he had some experience.

The gathered Sabbat warlords, however, were an even greater uncertainty. Drawn from marauding bands that ravaged the length and breadth of the American countryside, these autonomous mercenary groups gave allegiance to none and respect only to a select few—those who had earned such through trials of fire and sword.

In less than an hour, Polonia realized, this conference room would be filled with a clamoring throng of the most ruthless tyrants, predators, fanatics, Mafiosi, serial killers, highwaymen, gang lords, and anarchists that had been gathered in one place since—well, probably since the onset of the First Crusade.

Polonia's thoughts only reluctantly returned to the present century. This modern assemblage would be the pride of the Sabbat—the elite of the elite—the pack leaders, the prelates, the warlords. All those who could command a following of at least a dozen Cainites would be on hand to strike a blow against the hated Camarilla.

Polonia had come around full circuit again to his own seat and to the body that swung gently behind it, like a tapestry. It was intended as a visible sign of the proximity of the Camarilla—a young Toreador, prim, effete, immaculate. He did not seem in the least inconvenienced by the coarse noose or by the improbable angle of his neck. Like the rest of the room, he was perfect.

Polonia wanted to keep attention focused on the Camarilla—on its posturing, its weakness, its vulnerability. He could not have been more pleased with his hunters' catch. The victim's hands were clasped before him in an attitude of supplication. They clenched a viscous-looking black candle. Polonia lit the wick and long shadows stretched away from him in all directions.

By the light of the candle, Polonia further scrutinized the victim's features. Priceless. Even the Toreador's fangs were vestigial, unthreatening—a fact that, no doubt, explained the curious artifact Polonia had found earlier.

He again drew out the carefully folded and slightly perfumed silk handkerchief. Opening it, he revealed an intricately etched silver bauble—a long thimble of exquisite workmanship with a wicked lancet protruding from the tip. Swiftly, Polonia tapped the underside of the victim's chin, withdrawing the lancet before the first droplet of blood could fall. He carefully rewrapped the delicate silver needle to the sound of the first drops hissing and spluttering onto the oily candle below.

He was now irrevocably committed to the ritual at hand. It was only with great reluctance that he turned his back upon the conference room. His fingers ached for the tactile assurance of the great table, to make one last circuit of the room, to order the uncertainties of the coming night carefully.

Enough. There was nothing more he could do here. Resignedly, Polonia gave the corpse a gentle shove, setting it swinging in a slow pendular arc. Blood and wax splattered an intricate spiral pattern on the tile floor.

He wondered what signs and omens might be read in the curious pattern of fallen droplets. Here in a gentle spray of trailing blood, an influential warlord lay dead, slumped over his cups. There, in a notable clot of wax, he saw a seal affixed to a compact that would bring feuding pack leaders together and give the entire Camarilla cause to tremble.

The answer was here somewhere, hidden in the riddle of falling droplets. But which images were glimpses of things to come and which were mere phantasms conjured from a desire, or its converse, a fear? Polonia, faced only with further uncertainties, abandoned his musings.

He could not resist taking one last long look over the room. Then, with mingled satisfaction and resignation, he reached out a sure hand toward the swinging corpse and took a single step sideways into shadow.



Outside time The Abyss

Polonia pushed through the barrier and into the tenebrous realm known only to the most accomplished shadow warriors of his clan. The room beyond looked very much like the one he had just quit. A rough-hewn circular conference table dominated the hall. In the uncertain half-light, each of the wormholes that riddled the oaken surface was clearly visible, thrown into sharp relief.

The play of the light and shadow worked further mischief over the carefully ordered feast hall, seeming somehow to exaggerate Polonia's chair. It now resembled nothing so much as an empty throne draped languidly with the trappings of the grave. This funerary seat presided over a great banquet of tarnished silver, goblets brimming with dust, delicately woven cobweb linens. Polonia surveyed the board with a hint of satisfaction. A vibrant red apple atop a decorative fruit bowl immediately arrested his gaze. Aside from the candle flame, it was the only spot of color in the room. All else was decked in subtle and varied shades of gray.

"Missed that one," Polonia mused aloud.

"Poisoned, perhaps," came the reply. "Very romantic, but not quite so effective. Surely it will not be necessary for your guests to keep up the appearance of eating on such a grand occasion."

No matter how many times it happened, Polonia always found himself somewhat startled at the transitionless appearance of the envoys. One moment they were not there, the next they were—speaking, or taking, or touching.

Polonia turned quickly, but not so quickly that the other had not already taken his elbow to usher him to his chair. The sensation was not unlike sawing through bone. He disengaged as politely as he could manage and took his place at table. "No, more likely the apple conceals some weapon or perhaps even an incendiary device."

"Ah..." the envoy replied with escalating interest. There was a flutter of a breeze and a shadow seemed to break away and stretch toward the apple. Suddenly, a brilliant flash illuminated the room. Tatters of shadow streaked in all directions and then fell to the floor in a gentle rain of scorched confetti. The explosion of light and its aftermath were accompanied by a complete and unsettling silence.

Polonia settled back in his chair. There were no further stirrings, no further signs of color, of vibrancy. He resigned himself to wait.

"A most excellent incendiary. Yes, quite satisfactory. Borges?"

Polonia had expected the voice to come from one of the corners of the room, where the shadows had fled. He was disappointed as the form materialized directly before him, standing atop the table. It made a low bow.

"In all likelihood. It bears his mark," Polonia replied, trying to appear unruffled. "I understand that in Miami such modern contrivances are all the rage—firearms, grenades, flame-throwers..."

The shape before him fluttered excitedly at the very mention of flame-throwers. "Will Borges be in attendance, then?"

"Yes, of course. You will see him yourself. He will be seated directly opposite me. There." Polonia gestured to the far end of the table where a crude wooden stool half leaned against the table leg. There was a truncheon of stale bread and a tin cup sitting before the stool.

Polonia smiled at this further contrivance of the shadow realm. He was well acquainted with the subtle alterations these environs worked upon the eye of the beholder, images carefully arranged to flatter, to tempt, to cajole.

He found himself once again thinking of the strange omens worked in blood and candle wax at the threshold of this twilight realm—reflections of desires and of fears made manifest. Visible emanations of things that were hidden or, more accurately, concealed.

"I was under the impression that Borges had sworn never to set foot in Atlanta."

Polonia smiled. "He made a great show, of course, of not coming. I believe my fellow archbishop took it as something of a slight that the honor of conducting the siege did not fall to him."

"He may well have more to say about that issue before your gathering is concluded."

"Yes, I am much of the same opinion," Polonia replied. "Atlanta is, after all, veritably right in his backyard."

"And quite some distance from your own territory. I believe I understand you. He had, no doubt, extended his ambition, if not his actual hand, over the city already?"

Polonia laughed aloud. "Yes, his agents were among the very first sent in to reconnoiter the city and, later, to disrupt the operations and posturings of the Camarilla. But there was never any real possibility of Borges passing up this war council. The Siege of Atlanta will be something talked about for generations to come. It is simply too great an event to be missed."

"If they don't all kill each other first," the shade replied.

"If they don't all kill each other first."

An uncomfortable silence fell in the shadowy throne room. It was the envoy that broke the silence.

"And what of the regent? Does she send no representative to the council?"

"The regent?" Polonia lowered his voice. "Our Most Distinguished Excellency is content to remain unavoidably engaged in Mexico City. No, she has made it quite clear that she is taking no hand whatsoever in such 'regional squabbling.'"

"Ah, but she could not remain uninterested in anyone who could bring the feuding war bands together and drive the Camarilla from Atlanta. Such a one would certainly be well on his way to winning a cardinal's throne."

Polonia could feel the seat shift beneath him, expanding, bearing him upward. He made a dismissive gesture with the flat of his hand and the motion ceased. "The Vicar of Caine merely exercises her uncanny sense of when there is likely to be any contention among her archbishops. She is shrewd enough to remain conspicuously absent on such occasions. No regent, no legate to argue her cause, not even a nuncio to proclaim her will."

Polonia broke off. It was always a somewhat delicate matter as to how much one could or could not say before the envoys. It would be foolish to believe that the regent's

mastery of the shadow was not as great as Polonia's own. It was quite possible that the regent might be just as adept at extracting damaging testimony from the shadowy envoys as she was from the Cainites that fell under her power.

The envoy interrupted these musings. "You fear that they will not put aside their differences, that they will not follow your lead."

"I fear," said Polonia, "that we shall bring down upon ourselves the bloodiest internecine war that has ever ravaged the Sabbat."

"Ah, but you have gone to such great pains to ensure that this does not happen," the envoy soothed. "Look around you. All is in order. Everything in its proper place."

The envoy cast an admiring eye over the precise arrangements. It paused, its shadowy hand eclipsing the place card to Polonia's left. "Vykos? I do not believe we are familiar with..."

"No, you would not be. A Tzimisce. From the Old Country. She is the special emissary from Cardinal Monçada of Madrid." Polonia's tone betrayed his resentment of what many would see as a foreign intrusion in a purely domestic matter.

"Ah, now Monçada, that is a name that I do know. But what interest can the great cardinal have in this undertaking? It has been quite some time since he last turned his attention to these far shores."

"Monçada is a dangerous and cunning strategist," Polonia mused. He toyed absently with a rusted chalice. "It is less than a year now since the newest member of the College of Cardinals secured his office by putting an end to the ravenous Blood Curse. The pestilence had utterly decimated Sabbat packs on both sides of the Atlantic.

"In New York, no fewer than one in every three pack members fell victim—a loss from which we will not soon recover. Madrid was rumored to have been even more savaged by the epidemic, some reports placing the level of attrition as high as three in four."

"Death by pestilence," the envoy commented ruefully. "Such a needless and wasteful final emanation." There was a sudden dank chill in the air, which might have been a sigh.

"Given such desperate odds, some would say that it is no coincidence that Monçada should have been the one to make the critical breakthrough. If he had failed to do so, he and all of his line would certainly be dead and forgotten by now.

"There are those, however," Polonia's voice fell to a conspiratorial whisper, "who go so far as to say that Monçada's discovery was not merely an act of Providence. I have heard it told that it was Monçada's own agents that engineered the plague in the first place, although for what possible advantage I could not imagine. Not that I would count myself among these rumormongers, you understand."

Polonia paused significantly before continuing. "At any rate, none would contest the fact that Monçada has set his ambitions very high indeed—and that he is not adverse to resorting to extreme measures to accomplish his ends. It would not be unreasonable to think that he is positioning himself to contend for the regency itself."

"And what price would be too high to pay for such a lofty prize?" the envoy replied excitedly, borne along by this train of thought. "The lives of a few hand-picked followers? He certainly would not scruple at so meager a cost."

"It is not the lives of his own followers that concern me," Polonia replied coldly, picking at the nearest of the coffin nails that pierced the arm of his throne. "Merely having forces present at a victory in Atlanta will not bring Monçada a single step closer to the regency."

“Yes, but... oh, I see. You fear that perhaps it is not only his own followers that he is willing to sacrifice. What, after all, are the lives of a few dozen upstart New World Sabbat to the great cardinal?”

“What worries me more,” Polonia replied, “is that Monçada might be willing to sacrifice all—his followers, his allies, victory in Atlanta itself—for some greater advantage. The cardinal weighs out his gains and losses very carefully, but I cannot see his shadowy scales and I mistrust them greatly.” He pressed on. “How does a victory in Atlanta measure up against the possibility of destabilizing the North American Sabbat? Of weakening the regent’s New World power base? Of depriving her of her nearest allies? It is quite possible that Monçada’s emissary comes not to bolster but to betray our war effort.”

If Polonia had hoped to startle some reaction from his shadowy companion, he was disappointed. The envoy merely nodded, accepting this new information without comment or censure. After a pause, the shade asked somewhat distractedly, “But why would he send a Tzimisce as his representative?”

Polonia had been troubled by this choice of ambassador as well. Monçada was a Lasombra, a shadowmancer like Polonia himself, and the regent, and most of the other highly placed leaders of the Sabbat for that matter. It would have been natural for Monçada to send one of his attendants, a fellow Lasombra, to the gathering.

A Tzimisce was another matter entirely. Although the Tzimisce had always proved steadfastly loyal to the Sabbat and formidable allies to their brethren Lasombra, they made for notoriously poor politicians, negotiators, and councilors. Few would think to stand against a Tzimisce in head-on conflict—for they were fearsome foes, with a flair for inspiring awe and terror. But sending a Tzimisce to represent you in council was paramount to throwing down the gauntlet.

“Perhaps he hopes to strengthen his position and support among the New World Sabbat,” Polonia said. “After fighting side-by-side against the Camarilla, Monçada might well hold up the Siege of Atlanta as an example of how his forces had stood with Borges and myself—up to the waist in the blood of the enemy, or some such romantic notion—while the regent, whose forces were close at hand, could not be bothered to lift a finger to come to our aid.”

“Ah, and if some new cardinal should emerge from the struggle,” the envoy chimed in with honeyed words, “he would naturally be well disposed toward his new sword-brother.”

“A more pleasant thought, certainly, than the possibility that he might be sending a Tzimisce because no one is more capable of disrupting a fragile peace than a ravening, short-fused, shape-shifting monstrosity.

“I can’t help but feel that Monçada’s involvement bodes ill for our best-laid plans.” Polonia fixed the envoy with a gaze that allowed for no argument. “I will be relying upon you to neutralize this threat.”

“How may I assist you in this matter?”

Polonia unwrapped a small, tattered piece of cloth. Until recently, it had been a delicate, perfumed silk handkerchief. Now it resembled nothing more than a scrap of hooded mask a leper might use to cover his deformity.

Inside the folds of burlap shone a brilliant glare of silver light. The envoy shrank back instinctively.

Polonia held out his hand, his face half-averted from the newborn star in his palm. Reluctantly, the envoy took the proffered parcel and hastily rewrapped it.

“You will position yourself here.” Polonia pushed himself up and moved one place to his left. His hands rested on the back of the chair before the place marked *Vykos*. The frame of the chair seemed to be crafted entirely of gleaming white bones, cracked off sharply at the top. Polonia unheedingly wrapped his hands around the jagged edges. His knuckles showed white with the intensity of his concentration.

“The silver will strike true—even through the barrier that separates the two rooms.” He brought one hand down and around in a leisurely arc and tapped at the empty space where the guest’s throat would be.

“Do not hesitate to strike should I signal you. The touch of the silver will do you no lasting harm. Nothing, certainly, compared to my anger should you fail me.”

“We shall not fail you,” the envoy replied, still holding the deadly parcel at arm’s length.

“You never have done so before. Please send my respects to your lord and master and tell him that Polonia has the honor to remain his good and faithful servant.”

With that, Polonia turned and reached up to touch the corpse, which still swayed gently behind the throne. One brief sideward step and he was back through the barrier and in his own world once again. A world filled with shadow and with moonlight and with the trappings of the grave.

Saturday, 19 June 1999, 11:35 PM
Chandler Room, Omni Hotel at CNN Center
Atlanta, Georgia



"And another thing. I don't really care *how* things are done back in New York. We ain't in New York. We don't want to be in New York. And I'm getting just a little bit tired of hearing about New York. If I wanted things to run just like they do in New York, you'd be the first to know."

Caldwell punctuated each point by jabbing a finger in the face of the man opposite him. He leaned far out over the conference table to do so, as if it were the only thing holding him back from physically assaulting his counterpart. Seeing that his antagonist was losing composure, Caldwell pressed on more aggressively.

"I'd call you up myself. I'd say, 'Costello! I've been thinking. What we really need around here is a little more, you know, New York. Would you mind terribly coming down here to Atlanta and straightening all of us backwards bumpkins out? You will? That's swell! You're a regular guy.'

"So in the meantime, why don't you just take your sorry old mostly dead and starting-to-stink wormy carcass back to LaGuardia, and just park it right there next to your telephone—at the very center of the known universe—and wait for my call, all right?"

Costello fumed. Liquid darkness seeped from his fists, which were balled tightly around the arms of his chair. From over his shoulder, his shadow unfurled silently like a bird of prey and perched menacingly atop his seatback.

"Why, you misbegotten and ungrateful cur," he began, rising from his seat.

"Gentlemen!" Borges's voice cut through the building tension. "We are not here to give vent to our differences, but rather to lay them aside. There is important work at hand. Glorious work!"

At his first word, all eyes turned toward Borges. He held their attention, not with his gaze, but with his immaculate and predatory smile. His was the face of an ancient and well-loved mastiff. The upper part of that face was hidden in perpetual shadow. Light could not prevail across the barrier in either direction. Below, however, the lines of cheek and jowl were yet visible, and these clearly showed the wear of passing years. Slowly and not without apparent effort, the Archbishop of Miami rose, gesturing for everyone else to be seated. He trailed one hand along the edge of the table, feeling his way around its circumference. "There will be ample opportunity to demonstrate your prowess upon our common enemies."

Reluctantly, both Caldwell and Costello settled back into their chairs.

"Yes, that's better. Sit. Drink. Be of good cheer," Borges soothed. "We are gathered on the threshold of a glorious victory. Before we have parted company, we will strike a mighty blow—a blow from which neither the Camarilla, nor their Antediluvian puppet masters, shall soon recover.

"However," Borges raised a cautionary finger, "we are still poised upon that threshold. There can be little doubt of what awaits you beyond the doorway." He gestured toward

the room's sole exit, but all eyes fell rather upon the corpse of the hanged Toreador youth that swung gently next to it. "This is Camarilla territory, gentlemen. Have no uncertainty as to what fate would befall you if it were *you* caught on the wrong side of that door.

"The game, gentlemen, is called Blood Siege. The stakes, nothing less than uncontested ownership of the city of Atlanta."

A howl of enthusiasm went up from a Tzimisce war ghoulish seated much further down the table. Perhaps "seated" was not the proper word. The ghoulish *loomed*. The hulking form was easily nine feet tall at the shoulder and gave the impression of being stooped nearly double under its own weight. It shuffled unsettlingly from side to side, giving rise to a sound like a whetstone biting into a pair of shears. The crystal goblets upon the vast conference table trembled and sang slightly in response to each of the beast's movements.

A very slight man, who looked like no more than a child beside the hulking war machine, craned upwards and spoke to it in hushed tones. The booming reverberations fell silent.

Others around the table made a point of not noticing this timely intervention. In fact, the other Sabbat leaders and councilors maintained a healthy distance from the pair. If the truth were known, their aversion to the towering aberration did not even approach the unease they felt in the presence of its prim, bespectacled companion, the man they called the Little Tailor of Prague.

Two seats on either side of the Tzimisce and his attendant war ghoulish remained vacant. No one among the company made the least attempt to conceal a distaste that was rooted in more than mere xenophobia. Only Caldwell was so incautious, however, as to remark upon this fact. "Does that—Christ, I don't even know what to call it—that *thing* have to be here? I can't even think with it sitting right on top of me like this." He pushed back his chair and made to rise.

The man seated on his left placed a restraining hand on Caldwell's arm. "Hold your ground, *Capitán*." His voice was low, with just a rumbling hint of threat in it.

"Jeez-us H..." Caldwell turned his head away with a snort of disgust. His commander did not release his grip on Caldwell's forearm until he felt the resistance go out of it. Caldwell, did not, however, pull his chair back up to rejoin the conversation. Instead, he propped first one foot and then the other noisily upon the table, crossing them.

Averros chose to ignore this slight show of defiance. He pitched his voice so that it carried across the entire room. "But my associate raises a good point. We have answered this urgent 'summons' to council. Not because we acknowledge that this assembly has any authority to 'summon' anyone, because it doesn't—let's get that straight from the outset. And not because our esteemed (if conspicuously absent) host, Polonia—and the rest of his New York syndicate—has any jurisdiction here at all, because they don't. And not because any one of you has any claim upon us, or even any reason to expect our support—because you don't.

"The Nomad Coalition is here, gentlemen, because the word is out that Atlanta is spoiling for a fight, and you guys don't have the experience, the firepower, or the balls to carry that fight without us."

A roar and a riot went up from the gathered Nomad war chiefs and even Caldwell was on his feet. A man to Averros's left brandished a fist in which danced no fewer than three wicked and vitriolic-looking butterfly knives, each blade as long as the man's forearm.

The venerable Borges raised a hand for silence and the crowd gradually began to quiet back down enough so that individual voices could be heard once more. Even some of the Nomads seemed inclined to return to the table, gathering whatever chairs remained in serviceable condition after the outburst of exuberance.

It was a new voice that cut through the clamor. “Honorable Borges—” the sound of the woman’s voice had an appreciable effect upon the burgeoning mob. Attention turned toward her. “Honorable Borges, we are pleased to be invited here as a guest of this council. Know that Montreal stands firmly behind the decisions and actions of this assembly. We would further like to express our apologies that the archbishop could not personally be in attendance, but we are confident that you appreciate the weighty demands of his office.”

Encouraged by a gracious nod of acknowledgement from the Archbishop of Miami, the representative from Montreal continued. “We have come at your behest, to offer what good council we might. We have come in good faith and in accordance with the terms set forth by Archbishop Polonia in his invitation. We have come with the clear understanding that there were to be no weapons of any sort allowed within the Council chambers.”

A Tzimisce some distance around the table performed a particularly life-like, if ill-mannered, transformation of its middle finger—a gesture intended, no doubt, to express his opinion of the feasibility of such a ban given the present company. The representative from Montreal pretended not to have observed this commentary.

“Yes, the sound of drawn steel. I heard it quite unmistakably,” Borges mused aloud. “If any here have weapons about their persons,” his Cheshire-cat grin was the only thing visible beneath the cowl of purest shadow, “let him put them aside now.”

Nobody moved.

“Hardin...” Averros prompted.

“No way. No fucking way. I’m not giving my blades to some—”

“Do it.”

“No. That’s it. I am out of here. As far as I’m concerned the whole lot of you can just kiss my cold white...”

Averros rose.

Hardin cursed under his breath. “So is this how it’s gonna be?” Hardin tried to push past, but Averros put a hand on his chest.

Hardin’s hands were at his sides, but an unmistakable ring of metal told Averros that they were no longer empty. Hardin spoke very slowly and softly. “Why don’t you do everyone here a favor and just get the hell out of my way?”

“Can’t do that, buddy. Too many pack mates have gone to the Final Death so that you can be standing here, mouthing off and making an ass out of yourself. That contract’s been written in blood. Nobody walks out on the Coalition. One in blood, one in body. Now, put the blades on the table.”

“You talk a good game about this Coalition.” Knives began to flicker open and shut in nervous agitation. “But when it comes to the show... well, we all see how it is, don’t we? It’s all brotherhood and all-for-one crap as long as it’s all going your way. But what happens when they turn up the pressure? What happens when it comes to sticking up for your own?”

All around them, other leaders of the Coalition were getting cautiously to their feet and beginning to form a cordon around the two antagonists. Averros didn't even glance aside to weigh where the support was lining up. He just smiled and reached out a hand. "The blades."

Hardin seemed nervous and distracted. He glanced around for encouragement and must have found at least a few friendly faces in the throng. He turned upon Averros with renewed determination.

"This is the big time, tough guy. Whatcha gonna do? These bastards here," he gestured to the conference table where the rest of the assembly looked on with alternating distaste, detached curiosity, and ill-concealed blood hunger. "You think these guys are gonna stand with you when they see how you pay back the folks who put you where you are now? Come off it. These guys are the real deal. Hell, these guys *are* the Sabbat, and I mean the real Sabbat. The folks that make things happen. You're not dealing with a bunch of low-life drifters and clansmen, fugitives and survivalists, weirdoes and cultists anymore. You think these guys are sitting around waiting for someone to come along and tell them what to do and who to do it to?"

"Look at that guy," Hardin gestured angrily in the direction of the Little Tailor. "You think that guy gives a damn about your Coalition? That guy is one weird mother. And I'm willing to bet that he's been doing that same twisted shit since before, well, since before Dr. Frankenstein was a glimmer in Mary Shelley's eye. And he'll *still* be doing it long after you and I have bought a worm farm—*really* bought it, I mean. For keeps, this time."

"For keeps," Averros agreed ominously.

Hardin circled warily, positioning himself so that the wall was behind him and Averros had to turn his back on the entire treacherous assembly in order to face him. The knives were spinning freely now, flipping through a complex series of patterns, too fast for the eye to follow.

"Don't be an idiot," Hardin's menacing whisper cut through the barrier of whirling blades between the two. "You're unarmed. I'll cut you down where you stand, before you can even lay a hand on me."

"Look, I don't want to kill you and my guess is that you don't want to die," Averros said in a tone one might take in addressing an idiot child. "Although I wouldn't want to have to prove it with only the evidence of the last few minutes. If you want to do this thing, take your shot. Otherwise, give me the blades and sit down, 'cause I've got a city to storm and some Camarilla bastards to hunt down and make plead for their pitiful unlives, and you are holding up the show."

"So what's it gonna be, Ripper? You take a cut at me and you won't walk out of here. You know it. Look at these bastards. Go ahead, look at them. These guys will eat your sorry carcass for lunch—would have eaten it already if I weren't standing here between you and them. You think they're playing around? This is for keeps, Ripper. This is the show. So let's do it like you mean it. One blood..."

Hardin's right arm shot out, unleashing a screaming arc of steel at point-blank range.

Averros made no effort to sidestep the oncoming blade. He held Hardin's eyes unflinchingly.

The swirling knife cut hard, banking out and down. It slammed home into the table with a resounding *chunk* and stood there trembling.

“One body.” Hardin snapped the remaining blades shut and purposefully turned his back on Averros. He took three steps toward the table. With each step, he could feel the muscles between his shoulder blades tense in anticipation of the retaliatory strike. Once. Twice. Thrice.

Nothing.

He let out a long slow breath as he slid the blades noisily, disdainfully, across the great circular table. They clattered to rest near its center, well out of reach of any of the councilors seated around the perimeter. Without a sideward glance, Hardin took his seat. “Your pardon, venerable Borges. I believe the gracious lady from Canada had the floor.”

Averros held his ground as if lost in deep thought. His gaze never wavered from the space Hardin had so recently occupied. He could not help but feel glad for the respite offered by the other’s theatrics.

He let his eyes fall closed for a moment as he collected himself. With one part of his mind, he summoned up the power of the blood to staunch the new wound in his left side, just beneath his arm. With another, he reached for a loose strand of shadow and lashed it in place to mask the cut where the blade had sliced neatly through his leather jacket—without even slowing—and then glanced away sharply to impact the table.

Snatching up another trailing end of shadow, Averros turned toward the assembly. He flashed a disarming smile for the benefit of those who were still watching him expectantly, and took hold of the high seatback with both hands. He leaned into it, feeling its weight, its solidity. It steadied him.

His side still burned like hell, but he couldn’t spare it much attention as yet. As the eyes around the table turned once again to the Montreal delegate, Averros took advantage of the opportunity to send the thread of shadow snaking toward the knife that still thrummed in the tabletop. The twist of darkness coiled tightly around the blade, concealing any telltale trace of blood that might yet be clinging to it. Only then did Averros allow himself to relax a fraction.

Hardin would pay later, of course. And keep paying, the smug bastard. Averros had seen the gleam of triumph in Hardin’s eyes just before he had turned his back. Averros would make a point of remembering that look, so that he could arrange Hardin’s face in just that same expression after the body had been laid out.

No, there was no doubting it. Hardin had scored first blood and he *knew* he had done so. There would be no working with him until he had been put back in his place.

But to his credit, Hardin had kept his little show of defiance private, just between the two of them. To the rest of the council, it must have appeared as if Hardin had backed down—backed down in a rather flamboyant manner, but backed down nonetheless. That counted for something.

He had allowed his commander, and thus the Coalition, to save face. Lord knew the Coalition had little enough clout here as it was—only what shred Averros could personally wrest from the voracious lords of the Damned seated all around them. It was something of an unwritten rule among the Sabbat. A law of conservation of respect. Among this company, esteem could neither be created nor destroyed. It had to be taken from someone else who already had it.

Yes, Hardin deserved some credit. He had pushed the matter to the brink, but had drawn back from the edge before blowing their one shot at the big time. Maybe he only did it because it was the only way he could think of to save his own miserable undead hide. But he took the fall.

Hell, Hardin knew what was at stake here. A victory in Atlanta would give the Coalition the clout it needed to play with the big boys. But they wouldn't get a juicy piece of the action in Atlanta unless Averros could convince the council that he had what they desperately needed—a bloodthirsty horde of seasoned killers poised (as far as such a mob might be said to demonstrate any degree of poise) to descend upon the unsuspecting Camarilla.

Averros was a fair, if unforgiving leader. Hardin, he decided, would pay. But he would be punished in a manner that suited his transgression—he would suffer personally and privately.

"We are satisfied," the Montreal representative waved dismissively toward the blades in the center of the table, as if she would brush them from sight.

"But we," Averros countered, "are not yet satisfied."

Dozens of wary eyes regarded him once again.

"The point I was making, gentlemen, and the point that *Capitán* Caldwell had expressed so frankly in his earlier comments, is that all weapons have not been removed from this council chamber." He turned pointedly upon the Little Tailor of Prague.

His meaning was not lost upon his audience. Even the war ghouls began to growl menacingly in protest.

The gentleman so accused did not meet Averros's gaze. Instead, he very slowly removed his eyeglasses and held them up to the light. Taking a tattered and obviously bloodstained handkerchief from his pocket, he proceeded to polish the lenses. Periodically, he paused in order to hold the frames up to the light again. It was not long before it became clear to all assembled that the lenses had become evenly coated with a clinging red film. Satisfied, the Tailor replaced the glasses on the bridge of his nose and addressed the group.

"Gentlemen, it is to me no great surprise that many of you should remain somewhat apprehensive, even distrustful of my presence here today. I knew that, as a visitor from the Old Country, I could expect something of a cool reception from my New World cousins. No, do not deny it. I know this to be so."

The Little Tailor held up a finger to forestall an argument that was not forthcoming. All eyes were immediately drawn to that wickedly tapering finger. Like many of his Tzimisce brethren, the Little Tailor was not easy to look at. Each of his fingers had apparently been stripped of all flesh and sharpened into long, delicate needles of bone. He wagged his finger knowingly at them, revealing long viscous-looking lines of blackened catgut threaded through his needles. These strands ran along the inside of his palm, over the hump of his wrist and away down his forearm into the recesses of his sleeve. Averros's first disturbing impression was that the Little Tailor's hands and arms had been flayed open, revealing the taut lines of vein and artery beneath. He quickly saw that this was not so. The moist black catgut simply wound over and about his arms, like thread on a spindle.

"You are jealous of your hard-won freedoms," the Tailor continued. "This is good. And for many of you present at this assembly, perhaps, the excesses—even the cruelties—"

of Europe's ancient ones is not the stuff of distant legend, but rather of all-too-recent memory, yes?"

There were a few mutterings of assent from around the table, but the rumbling undertone was dangerous rather than affirming.

"It is nothing with which you need concern yourself, Master Tailor." The voice was icy. It belonged to an ambitious young Lasombra of Borges's camp. Perhaps even one of his kin, the Tailor thought. It was always difficult to tell among the Lasombra. They had an unsettling habit of fawning all over their elders, even when they had no right to expect that such attentions would be received. They were like puppies in that respect, squirming over one another, shouldering their way toward the center of their master's attention and affection. It was, well, it was just not quite proper. It was enough to make any self-respecting Tzimisce somewhat queasy.

The Tailor remembered the youth's name from an earlier examination of the golden place cards—Sebastian. Such a lovely name. It always reminded him of beautiful young boys pierced through with barbed arrows.

"The fact of the matter is," Sebastian was continuing, "that we are justifiably wary of the convoluted games of dominance and empire played by our old-school 'cousins' across the Atlantic. How can we hope to make any progress in tearing down the deadly web of intrigue cast by the Antediluvians, if in so doing we blunder into a no less formidable trap laid for us by our European counterparts?"

There were scattered words of assent and one loud "amen" from the New York faction. Perhaps there was some story there, the Tailor thought, but it would come out in time, no doubt. He knew from his decades of experience among the dungeons of the most notable houses of Europe—it would all come out in time.

"The one fact that you are overlooking," a commanding voice cut through the commotion with military precision, "is that the gentleman of Prague is no power monger. So far as I have been able to determine, he himself has little, if anything, to gain from this undertaking."

"Except, of course, the favor of your master!" Sebastian retorted, turning angrily upon the speaker. "You will not deceive us so easily, Vallejo. Do you deny that the Butcher of Prague is here at the specific request of your beloved cardinal?"

All around the table, faces that had not seen the sun in generations suddenly went a full shade paler. Only the very incautious even dared to look in the direction of the Little Tailor to observe the full effect these words had upon him. A number of those present had spent the entire assembly thus far very pointedly avoiding that particular ancient and derisive epithet. Sebastian surely realized his mistake as soon as the words had left his lips. But he stuck to his guns and did not turn from his confrontation with Vallejo.

"The butcher," the gentleman of Prague repeated the words as if searching for some meaning in them. Sebastian winced, hearing the syllables parroted back at him. He tensed, expecting a blow.

"The baker. The candlestick maker," the Little Tailor mused aloud. "Now there's a moral there somewhere. No, that's a fable." He seemed lost in thought. He drummed the tips of his fingers together distractedly. The bone needles clacking together sounded like the rattle of machine-gun fire in the silent chamber.

The entire assembly seemed to hold its breath.

“Do any of you know the one that goes...” the Little Tailor began. “No, never mind, you wouldn’t know.”

Sebastian was perspiring openly now. Tiny beads of shadow and blood seeped from his pores and stood out in bold relief on his forehead.

“Be easy now, grandfather,” another Tzimisce soothed, perhaps the representative from Detroit. “You have much work to do still this evening and we mustn’t keep you from it.” He took the ancient one by the arm to help him to his feet.

The war ghoul bellowed a challenge, shattering the uneasy hush that had fallen over the room. The other quickly loosed his grip upon the Tailor’s arm and retreated a few quick paces.

“All right,” the Tailor chuckled indulgently. “One more, but then it’s off to bed with all of you. Let’s see now. This is one of my favorites. Humpty Dumpty. Humpty Dumpty sat on a...” His voice trailed off into a quiet murmuring that, after a while, might have been the beginnings of a snore.

As one, the group seemed to exhale. But soon a low chuckling was heard. It began deep in the Tailor’s chest, but it rose in pitch and intensity until it swallowed the room.

“No, that’s right. They couldn’t put him back together, could they?” His eyes remained closed as he spoke and he smiled contentedly. “Well, it was like a jigsaw puzzle, really. Yes, a life-size jigsaw puzzle. First, they had to gather up all the little pieces. And they weren’t likely to find all the little pieces, now were they? No, not if you’ve hidden them well. They’ll never find the pieces. Never find the pieces. Never find...” his voice trailed off into a taunting childish singsong.

Very soon, the unmistakable sound of snoring echoed across the conference table.

“I believe,” said the venerable Borges, “that we should adjourn for the evening. If any of you would like to pursue further some of the issues raised here, I will be more than happy to receive any and all of you in my suite on the upper floor of this hotel. For the rest of our honored guests, I will bid you good night and look forward to seeing you here again at the same time tomorrow evening.”

The company did not quite tiptoe out of the room, but they did retire in short order, leaving the old one and his attendant war ghoul in possession of the field.

Sunday, 20 June 1999, 1:50 AM
Faust Nightclub
Manhattan, New York



"What's cover?" Julie had one hand deep in the pocket of his Oleg Cassini slacks.

"For you?" Tony the doorman shot back with a look of disinterest. "Twenty bucks."

Julie looked down at the line of people there before him. He pushed his sunglasses up the bridge of his nose and hid behind the collar of his overcoat. It was a wet night, a bit chilly. Julie's breath puffed around him in ephemeral wisps of steam.

"I sure hate waiting in line," said Julie deliberately.

"Funny. These guys love it." Tony jerked his thumb at the queue.

Sarcastic bastard, but he's probably heard it all before.

"I'm sorry. What was the cover? Fifty dollars?" Julie peeled a bill off the roll of money without removing his hand from his pocket. It wouldn't do to have the rubes noticing him too much.

"That's right," Tony said, taking notice now that it wasn't idle banter. "Coat check's right inside." Tony took the fifty and opened the door, releasing a thunderous welt of 150-beats-per-minute deep house music.

A girl in line started complaining, but Julie was inside before he could hear what she said. Patting the bump that was the wallet with the fake ID, Julie passed his overcoat to the check girl. She smiled, handed him a ticket—number 231—and winked. Julie blew her a kiss and lurched toward the bar.

"Absolut screwdriver," Julie shouted at the bartender, hoping to be heard over the din.

The A-list was out in full force tonight: club kids, speed-heads, spectacular drag queens and other beautiful people stalked the dance floor and displayed themselves at the booths that dotted the club's mezzanine.

Bingo. Julie's eyes met his mark.

"*I said seven bucks, sunglasses.*" Julie threw a ten on the bar, took his drink and moved toward the back of the bustling room.

Frankie Gee sat at a table to the rear of the dance floor. Julie would have to move past him to get to the bathroom. He looked up at the DJ booth, where a pair of androgynes in shiny shirts flitted back and forth, clasping headphones to their ears and twisting the knobs on their mixing boards. The air was heavy here, fresh cigarette smoke, the reek of alcohol and the omnipresent bass of the sound system making oxygen a valuable commodity.

Drink in hand, Julie shoved his way toward the end of the row of booths and into the restroom. Under the first stall he could see a pair of feminine legs on their knees facing a decidedly male pair of shoes. The second stall remained unoccupied. A pair of young club crawlers in baggy pants stood before the urinal trough.

"Help you sir?" asked the attendant, a Mexican or Puerto Rican who was a hundred years old if a day.

"I think I left my hat here last night."

“Ah, yes sir. I get it.”

The attendant opened the cupboard beneath the sink and produced a New York Yankees baseball cap, which contained a brown paper package tied shut with twine. Julie tipped the man a twenty. The attendant looked up at him with a smile and a knowing—if misunderstood—thumb of the nose. Julie’s sunglasses hid the disgust in his eyes.

He stepped back into the open stall, ignoring the slurping and throaty moans next door. Dropping the cap to the floor, Julie ripped open the package, dropping the shredded brown paper into the toilet. He took the pistol and shoved it into his pants at the small of his back, patting it to make sure it didn’t bulge too much from under his suit jacket. To keep the attendant in the dark, he took a few loud, staccato sniffs. *Let him think I’m a coke fiend—whatever.*

Julie steeped out from the stall; the boys at the urinal had left already. The attendant smiled at him and gave him a towel after he washed his hands. Julie made to leave, but the attendant remarked, “Bad karma!”

“What?”

“Bad karma! Leave a tip.”

“Fuck you. I just tipped you.” Julie couldn’t believe this guy.

“That was before. Tip for towel. No tip; bad, bad luck.”

“Here’s a tip: Shut the fuck up.” Julie barged back out to the club proper.

The smoke got in his eyes, bothering him.

Frankie Gee still sat at his booth, which was up against a mirrored wall. Two guys from his crew sat with him, and each man had an overly made-up skank at his side. There were twenty, maybe thirty drink glasses at the table—mixed drinks, shots, martini glasses. Quite a party. The whole group laughed. The men made exaggerated gestures with their hands. The women blinked frequently.

Julie moved to flank the table so, with any luck, he could approach it unnoticed. He jostled people out of the way, moving through the bodies on the floor like Moses through the sea.

A foot in front of the table, Julie stopped. The goons looked at him, as did the women, all with expressions of interrupted laughter. Frankie Gee looked into his drink, a full glass of—vodka?—with a twisted lemon peel in it.

“We know you, sporty?” grated one of the goons.

“You know my boss.”

The girls scattered. The blonde one climbed over the back of the booth to get away. This wasn’t going to be a fistfight, they knew; this shit was about to get serious.

“Who’s your boss? He’s got real balls hiring a guy wearing shoes like those,” shot back the other thug.

“Big Paul.”

“Fuck you, punk. You’re no Gambino. Big Paul’s been dead for ten years.”

“Call me a loyalist.”

“I’m about to call you an ambulance, fucko,” said the first tough. He went to his coat pocket, but Julie was quicker. Grabbing his own gun, Julie put three bullets into him before the man’s hand made it out. Four more shots into the other one, one of which took off about a quarter of his head. Ten shots left. Julie heard the screaming; out

of the corner of his eye he saw people rushing past him, desperate to make it out before they got shot, too.

Frankie Gee just sat there. "You cocksucker. You just killed two perfectly good men."

"They didn't do *you* much good, Frankie."

"I guess you're right. Fuck 'em."

Ten shots, all in Frankie's chest. The man flipped over the back of the booth as Julie's barrage walked him up and over the leather seat. Blood and gore splattered the mirror beside the booth.

Julie walked around the side of the booth to inspect his handiwork, the work of God's calling.

Something was wrong. Frankie Gee lay in a heap, twisted over himself, looking up at Julie with a smile on his face. He gathered himself up from his awkward position, got to his feet and looked down at his chest. Ten holes, unmistakable, clear as day.

"You fuck. You kill my guys and ruin my shirt? Nice grouping, though." Frankie put his finger into one of the holes.

"What the fuck?" Julie stammered, pointing his useless pistol at Frankie. This didn't happen. People don't get up with a quarter pound of lead in them. He was in over his head: Julie felt a dull, knotty horror in his belly. He was going to die. Bad karma.

"How witty," Frankie said, looking Julie in the eyes. "I gotta say, though, I didn't expect much else from a third-rate buttonman like you. Joe was right about those shoes. You're the second one this week. What the fuck is it with you wackos? You been crawling outta the fucking woodwork lately...."

What was this guy? His gorgeous suit, desecrated with his own blood; his showpiece girls and armed companions; a hundred-thousand-dollar Mercedes in the valet lot. He was everything Julie had expected, except tougher, more powerful. More *evil*, Julie realized. The devil picks his servants wisely. Frankie's got something... *unholy*.

Summoning that unholy power, Frankie smashed Julie in the mouth with a fist that felt like it had a five-liter V12 behind it. Julie flew—literally—ten feet and crashed into a freestanding table, crumpling among capsized chairs. He looked up, blood marring his sight and giving him the feeling that his ears were seeping off his head. Frankie Gee loomed above him, bending down to grab his collar and lifting him from the floor.

"Pete! Come here!" Frankie shouted.

"Yeah, Frankie, what's up?" Julie wondered why this guy wasn't shaken, like the rest of the crowd that had panicked and fled.

"Tell Tony he's fired."

Pete ran off. Julie's vision faded completely; the last thing he saw was a lusty look in Frankie Gee's eyes as the man moved his face toward Julie's throat.

Julie felt an intense pain—as if his soul had caught fire. Every nerve that could still feel blazed with the torture, and Julie knew his blood was running out of him in rivers of red—was Frankie *drinking his blood*? It didn't matter anymore. Julie was done. The devil had won this round.



Sunday, 20 June 1999, 2:37 AM
Penthouse suite, Omni Hotel at CNN Center
Atlanta, Georgia

"I tell you, I don't like it," Sebastian stormed. He hung languidly on the heavy blackout curtains that ringed the lavish penthouse suite. They served a function much like tapestries in the great castles of Europe—to keep out the worst excesses of an unfriendly clime. In the wind-swept North Atlantic, the unwanted extremes were those of cold and draft, while here the obvious concern was to keep out the deadly rays of the unforgiving Atlanta sun.

Borges raised a quieting hand. "Enough. You made your point in council. And in doing so, you managed to avoid the primary threat—which was, incidentally, the very real possibility of your being gutted where you stood by Vallejo. But, as they say, tomorrow is another day."

"Vallejo? Who had time to worry about Vallejo? You threw me upon the mercy of the Butcher!"

"I?" Borges settled back deeper into the plush, throne-like chair facing the fireplace.

The flickering flames made Sebastian distinctly uneasy. It was not only that the evening was oppressively warm already. Nor was it merely the instinctive fear of fire that was deeply ingrained in all the Children of Caine. It was that, well, even when his master faced directly into the firelight (as he was doing at this very moment) Sebastian still could make out no hint of Borges's features save that gleaming, predatory smile.

It reminded him that although he and Borges were of one blood, they were not of a kind. "Your pardon, Borges. I am not myself. The very thought of that monstrosity! I feel quite unwell."

"Nonsense. It was a calculated risk. The exact probability of your being torn apart right there in the council chamber, although difficult to calculate precisely with all those Tzimisce wildcards in the equation, was actually quite slight."

"That is very reassuring," Sebastian replied. He picked up the poker and, holding it up to one eye, sighted along it. He tested its heft and struck up the *en garde* position. Borges continued to stare fixedly toward the fire.

"You might have told me," Sebastian continued, "that 'Butcher of Prague' was more than just a passing slight, a play on an occupational title." He resumed a more casual stance and, taking the poker between both hands, flexed it one or two times experimentally. "I actually thought for a moment there that he was going to lose it. I mean, *really* lose it. What would you have done if that thing had just gone berserk?"

Borges waved a hand dismissively. "Now, it did not come to that. And in this, at least, we have cause to be grateful. Yes, overall, I must admit to being quite satisfied with the evening's events."

"You did not answer my question," Sebastian brooded. Then, with a sudden theatrical twirl of the poker, he planted it like a cane and began to walk jauntily across the room. He stopped, trying to seem casual about it, directly behind Borges's chair. "But I did not

think the council such a decisive victory. The Nomads, for instance, monopolized far more than their share of the proceedings. I was well prepared to shout down a disorganized rabble of thin-blooded ruffians. But I thought they put in quite an impressive showing.”

Borges did not turn from contemplation of the flames. “Far too few casualties for the opening session. It bodes ill for the morrow.”

“An astute point.” Sebastian raised the tip of the poker and regarded it critically. “But a moment ago, you were claiming a clear victory for our party.”

“Well then, consider our gains.” Without turning, Borges ticked off his points on immaculately manicured nails. “One. With Polonia absent, we were uncontested in our assumption of the role and powers of council chairman. I cannot overstress the importance of this preeminence. The privileges of this position have allowed us to set the agenda, guide the discussion, define the terms of the confrontation with the Camarilla, bring pressing decisions to a head, or table them indefinitely. The game will be played by our rules.”

“Well played,” quipped Sebastian, taking an experimental swing with the fireplace iron. “Point two?”

“Two. All parties present, including both the Coalition and the Old Worlders, acknowledged our precedence in these proceedings and the superiority of our claim—Miami’s claim—in these contested territories. Did you note how they railed against our absent host while deferring to my authority? Our battle line is firm. The entire Southeast is our backyard, period. Never mind the fact that some of these renegade bands of Nomads have been operating in this region for years now. The home-field advantage, as they say, is ours.”

“Bravo. I shall especially keep this point in mind as I would like to further discuss our plans for the conquered Atlanta. But do not allow me to distract you. Point three?”

“Three. This Averros desperately wants to be a major player in this theatre. And he’s way out of his league. We can use that. Give him a bit of encouragement. Point out to him that there may well be another archbishopric to carve out of the Eastern Seaboard. A great triumvirate! Polonia in the North, Borges in the South and Averros—at the head of his glorious Nomad Coalition—in the Mid-Atlantic. A formidable line of battle from which the Sabbat could smash the territories in the soft Camarilla underbelly. But perhaps I get ahead of myself.”

“Not at all. You, sir, are a visionary. And visionaries must be given their full head of steam. Is there a point four?”

“Four. Neither of us is dead yet.”

Sebastian brought the poker down across the top of the armchair. He leaned his elbows upon it and spoke directly over his master’s head. “There are those who might quibble, but I shall cede the point. Very good then. Tonight we celebrate. But tell me first, what must we do on the morrow to press our hard-won advantage? That Tzimisce monster won’t be on hand again, will he? I must admit that he has me quite flustered. Doesn’t he have some battle ghouls to, if you will excuse the indelicacy, stitch together?”

“That, my child, remains to be seen. But pull up that stool and sit here at my feet awhile and we shall lay out our plans for tomorrow’s council. Your pacing will drive me to distraction.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Sebastian. He walked back around to the front of the chair and slammed the poker noisily home into its rack. He obediently retrieved the

stool near the fire. “Now let me see. The first order of battle, I suppose, is to settle upon some plan to push the siege into its final stages. To hasten the death throes of the Camarilla. Now let me see. If memory serves me correctly, as the Siege of Miami drew to its glorious climax...”

“Slowly, my son. You are so impatient. The first step is to finish driving the wedge between the New World Cainites—our party, of course, is already firm on this point but the followers of Polonia and the Coalition must be brought into the light as well—to drive the wedge between us and Monçada’s interlopers from Madrid.”

“Ah, I stand corrected. Or rather I sit corrected, but it is much the same thing. You are right, of course. Let’s see. That means the Butcher and his slaving horde of war ghouls. And Vallejo and his damnable legion of the cardinal’s household troops. And isn’t there a *koldun* sorceress somewhere in the lot?” Sebastian continued. “I don’t recall hearing from her today, but I picked her out easily enough. She is quite unmistakable. All tribal tattoos and blood body paint and bone piercings. Ghastly, really. And then, of course, there is this Vykos. Monçada’s handpicked emissary. That’s another thing I’m not in the least bit happy about. Vykos.

“I don’t really know anything about her, of course.” Sebastian pressed on, pulling a large opaque hookah toward him. “Nothing, of course except what the other councilors are whispering.”

He took a long slow pull from the mouthpiece and blew out a perfect ring of purest shadow. There was a long pause, but Borges did not seem eager to supply further information.

“She’s a Tzimisce, of course,” Sebastian hinted, still getting no reply. “And a particularly hoary old fiend if what they say is true—hailing from Byzantium or Constantinople or some such. An authentic Old World nightmare. You haven’t had the opportunity to meet the lady in question, have you, Borges?”

“Make yourself easy on that point,” Borges said. “They don’t let her kind out much. Like to keep them where they can keep a good eye on them, no doubt. You know the old saying, ‘always keep your enemies close at hand.’”

“I know the saying.” Sebastian shot Borges a look. “I have heard you cite it on numerous occasions. And I believe it is ‘always keep your enemies and your childer close at hand.’”

“Why, so it is,” Borges absently stroked Sebastian’s hair, and none too gently. “And I thought you weren’t paying any attention to the words of a doddering old man.”

Sebastian instinctively shrank from the mastiff grin, pulling free from the old man’s grip.

“Do not worry yourself over this Vykos,” Borges said flatly. “If you carry out your appointed task, if you drive your wedge skillfully, she will have no firm ground on which to stand.”

“But what if she is another ravening lunatic?”

“What if she is?” Borges repeated. “Ravering Tzimisce we have in great abundance. One more will certainly not threaten our position. What worries me more is, what if she is *not* a ravening lunatic?

“Now attend to me, and I shall describe how we are to proceed.”

And Sebastian stared intently into the dark cowl of shadow where the master’s eyes should have been, and committed to memory each word that passed those lips.

Saturday, 20 June 1999, 4:29 AM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia



Leopold sat with Michelle draped across his lap. They were both naked, though the cold of his workshop basement did not affect Leopold's body as it did hers. Though unconscious, Michelle reacted to the chill. The nipples of her small breasts were pointed and ripples of goose bumps appeared and disappeared across her long legs and up the small of her back to her slender neck.

He'd bitten her inner thigh, where the femoral artery began its descent down the length of her leg. She had feigned her passion at first, but she was slightly startled when he bit. He swallowed several mouthfuls of blood very quickly then, and her excitement became more authentic. Light-headed almost instantly, Michelle must have imagined Leopold very talented and eager to please.

After those first few mouthfuls of blood, though, Leopold was only interested in satiating himself. He fed infrequently because he felt awkward luring women to his basement for what he knew they assumed was sex despite the excuse of modeling for him. They always laughed at that, and then took it back a little when they saw that he really did have a workshop in the basement, but then laughed again when he asked that they take their clothes off.

It was even harder with men, because the man he might desire as a model wasn't necessarily gay, so rarely did he get them to his basement willingly. With them, it took some careful convincing, Kindred-style.

Like some of the girls—or perhaps they were women already, Leopold found that he was already losing the ability to guess the age of a human—Michelle simply took her clothes off and came at Leopold. So many of them just wanted a place to stay for a night. They were willing to work for the roof over their head, but the only work they knew was sex, and Leopold imagined they'd rather have it over sooner than later.

As he did with all the potential models he brought home, Leopold had picked up Michelle along Ponce before nearing his Piedmont Avenue home. Those that seemed disinclined to join him could always be nudged a bit. Leopold knew few of the potentially awesome powers possessed by some Kindred beyond this one, but he had no trouble convincing most mortals that he was harmless and friendly.

Michelle came along without Leopold needing to exert himself. She was a pretty girl who had obviously been on the streets just long enough to know how to use her good looks, but not long enough to understand that her good looks wouldn't last. There was something in that tarnished beauty that fit Leopold's mood.

When she sought his sexual attention immediately, Leopold regretted the lost opportunity to sculpt his vision of her, but he was not interested in imposing his will over another mortal that night. He accepted her desire and hopefully did something toward fulfilling it as well. At least she would have a safe roof this night.

He laughed a little at his idea of a safe house. He was keeping her safe by his standards, but Leopold doubted Michelle would characterize a place where she lost a couple of pints of blood to a fanged monster as safe.

Then he sobered and swallowed his laughter. Could this be what Kindred meant when they spoke of losing their humanity? Leopold had felt the Beast—that part of him that exulted when he stalked and killed and lost control of himself—but it was a simple matter to keep it at bay if he let his conscience be his guide.

But where had his conscience led him tonight? Laughter over draining the lifeblood from a world-weary soul like Michelle? Yes, he needed that fluid to live, but when had it become comical? Where was the sense of violation? Tragedy?

He knew there were many Kindred who regretted the loss of what they considered to be the human parts of themselves. Not the superficial losses, like breathing, or even the psychological ones like sunlight. But the essential qualities that defined humanity. The capacity to love, to dream, to empathize.

There were also plenty of Kindred who did not regret the loss, particularly the vile members of the Sabbat—those murderous and heinous vampires who cared little for Kindred other than themselves and to whom kine were cattle indeed. Kindred of the Sabbat, and some of the Camarilla too, seemed to toss away carelessly vital portions of themselves. Perhaps they considered such sentiments as mercy or love as the vestigial organs of mortal existence, but Leopold could not fathom the profound impact of such loss.

But perhaps he was on that very road.

Leopold inspected the wound he'd opened on Michelle's inner thigh. The ragged gash where he'd bitten her was right along the line molded in the skin by the elastic of her skimpy bikini underwear. That made him feel oddly queasy. Regardless, his work couldn't be left undone and especially when he could undo some of the harm, so he wet his tongue in his mouth and tentatively extended it toward the wound. As he licked it, tasting the blood of the injury once more, the rent skin mended. So well, in fact, that the traces of the elastic line were gone too.

Then Leopold regarded Michelle herself. She was paler now, and prettier for it. The ruddiness of the strains she placed upon her body with hard living and low-grade drugs was somewhat washed away. Her almost luminescent skin made her starved body diaphanous and the bruises from frequent injections less evident.

Hers was a beauty he could still capture and preserve. Many Kindred, especially Toreador, might think to cup their hands around her flame through the Embrace, transforming her into Kindred as well. Leopold didn't wish to have such thoughts himself, and he was pleased that such ideas were still secondary to his first impulse: to immortalize her in stone.

Leopold gave this more thought as he continued to sit cross-legged on the floor with her body supported by his bare lap. Though he was tempted, it was too close to dawn, so even a *bozzetto* would be rushed and ill serve the purpose of sparking his memory later.

With one of his slender fingers, Leopold wiped a few strands of dirty hair from her face and gazed at her. He suddenly felt silly for all the attention he gave her. She was pretty, yes, but he was never one for pets, and on some level he needed to ingrain the reality of his still relatively new station in life: he was Kindred, a being that could only be considered superior to mortals.

With that, he stroked her hair again, but this time more as if Michelle were a sleeping puppy than a person.

It was a funny business, he thought, this means by which Kindred fed. He laughed at the dichotomy of his thought of the Kindred set apart and above humanity, while it

was they who skulked about at night and lived a life akin to much earlier humans, like the ancient forefathers of ones such as Michelle who survived by hunting and gathering.

He carefully shimmied out from under Michelle, leaving her like a rag-doll on the floor. After gathering her clothing and tucking it under his arm, Leopold then stooped and gained hold of each of her armpits and partly dragged and partly carried her toward the stairs and then up into the first-floor kitchen.

The kitchen was a large room, as were all the rooms of the old and worn-out house. Unlike so many bachelor kitchens, though, this one was nearly spotless, though that was from complete disuse and not any sort of perfectionist attitude of Leopold's. For the sake of camouflage for houseguests such as Michelle, he did keep a few dry goods such as peanut butter and cereal in the pantry and cupboards, as well as a handful of non-perishables like cheap beer and frozen pizzas in the refrigerator and freezer, respectively.

As dawn inched closer, Leopold could feel cold trembles in his heart, something as he thought it had felt when his pulse raced when he was yet mortal. An icy hand clutching at him and urging him to seek shelter.

He hurried Michelle through the kitchen, down a hallway and toward a door he kept shut. He propped Michelle's naked and deadweight body against his thighs and knees and thus freed a hand to work the doorknob. Cool air rushed into the hallway as the door opened. It was the only room of the house that Leopold kept air-conditioned, and he did that only for the comfort of his guests. The expense was little enough and he reasoned that it helped maintain appearances.

The room was a bit of a mess. A bed with blankets and sheets half on and half off the bed. Many articles of men's and a few of women's clothing sprinkled about the floor but mainly gathered in one big pile by closet doors that folded open to the right and left. A long dresser of decent make with empty beer bottles and packed but not yet overflowing ashtrays.

Michelle's clothes fell to the floor and then Leopold hoisted her onto the bed and covered her with a sheet and a blanket. He adjusted the wall unit air-conditioner—the house was too old for central air—and then opened the closet. A small safe was bolted to the floor beneath the draping shadows of shirts and pants on hangers.

Leopold worked the dial and promptly opened the safe. He withdrew a few items, closed the safe and the closet doors and walked to the dresser in order to complete his camouflage.

He spread the items across the wood surface in a somewhat random fashion. Twelve dollars in a five and seven ones. A film of cocaine powder and a nose straw. And the *coup de grâce*: a small bag with several draws of coke still in it. This he placed underneath an old issue of *Time* magazine so it seemed overlooked.

Almost without fail, the desperate women he brought to his house would grab the cash and the coke and flee the premises before the man she didn't remember returned to catch her or perhaps desire intercourse again. Such a small amount of coke was inexpensive enough, but it was an item of great psychological value that allowed a woman to feel it was she who had come out better for the evening. Plus, the coke explained the headache and weakness they would have after losing a fair amount of blood.

Leopold closed the door behind him and locked the front and rear doors of the house before descending again to the basement. The basement door he bolted and barred from the inside. Only one guest had ever been so brave or greedy as to go to the great effort

required to break down that door. She had taken a few small sculptures, but Leopold regained them three nights later when he fed a little more deeply than usual. Even then, she had not troubled to tamper with the root cellar wherein Leopold spent his days.

Dawn was less than a half hour away, and Leopold didn't wish to risk the slightest exposure, so he retired to that root cellar. The ancient doors were of heavy and practically unbreakable oak. When he'd moved into the house, Leopold had removed and reversed the doors so the heavy bar to hold them shut was on the inside. A badass Brujah could smash his way through them, and a kine with a chainsaw could do the same, but he stayed clear of bad asses, and women for whom a small bag of coke was worth overlooking a night of forgetfulness did not go to such trouble.

So, Leopold was safe, at least for the moment and the coming day.

Sunday, 20 June 1999, 5:00 AM
Boston Financial Corporation
Boston, Massachusetts



Benito Giovanni, dressed in a fine dark suit, nervously tapped at one of his cellular phones. It was the newest model, sleek and wafer-thin with sophisticated programming options that allowed him to perform any number of acts of amazing communications wizardry.

His insistent tapping finally proved too much for the light object and it sprung out of position. Benito's brow furled even more deeply and his intense, angry eyes bore upon the black device. He straightened it and with a few deft moves realigned it with the other two cellular phones atop his massive, antique red cherry desk.

Benito greatly preferred things to be structured and dependable, but something was definitely amiss.

His face relaxed a bit as he gazed about his orderly office. The ivory decorations on the desk were almost fluorescent in the darkness. The perfectly polished and meticulously organized stands of oriental weapons cast strange shadows on the tables to either side of the enormous leather couch. Each end table held a set of matching katana and wakizashi, and the pommels of all four weapons pointed toward the couch. Above the couch, two original Chagalls hung in frames painstakingly aligned at the height of the third that hung behind Benito, between the absolutely spotless windows that overlooked the Back Bay of Boston.

His black suit was pinstriped with blue, and though it was almost dawn, his tie was still wrinkle-free and wound tight about his neck. Diamond-studded cuff links were positioned to be perfect mirror images of one another, and fabulous rings of white gold and diamonds were bound around each ring finger.

Benito was clearly of Italian extraction, and the fullness of such ethnic traits as his Mediterranean skin, black hair and handsome face made it probable that he was not too many American generations removed from his homeland. He wore a slight mustache that helped fill his narrow face, and his hands were clasped with index fingers projecting and pressed together against that line of hair above his lip. He rubbed them slowly back and forth, while his dark eyes glittered in the greenish light of the desk's bankers' lamp. Though in repose now, he looked like a predator, a man who was thoughtful in his stalking patience yet could ambush with an extreme extroversion if the situation required it.

He was also a powerful and wealthy man, and the office could have been that of any such man pondering unwanted and mysterious intrusions. But Benito was no ordinary man. Beyond the fact that the blood of the wealthiest family on Earth once flowed in his veins. Beyond the fact that he had risen toward the top of his family. Beyond the fact that this family was virtually unknown to the world at large. Beyond the fact that he worked only at night. And beyond the fact that he feasted on the blood of any secretary who could not properly maintain the attitude of his office while he slept during the day.

For beyond all these facts, and likely others of note too, Benito Giovanni, like some of his family, his clan if you would, was Kindred. Vampire. And few trifled with

Benito's rare mixture of substantial intelligence, devilish good looks, ungodly wealth, raw physical power, and eternal existence. Of course, there were other Kindred from other clans who possessed many of these advantages as well, but they were not Giovanni, and to Benito's thinking at least, that meant a lot. Benito managed a grim grin, for even he—a Giovanni himself—was sometimes scared of his family. Even he, a powerful member of the family, suspected only slightly the extent of the power and influence the Giovanni wielded.

But someone taunted him tonight, and had in fact been doing so all night long. Now that dawn approached, Benito continued to wait patiently but with rising ire to see if more information would be revealed. Yes, someone was clearly stupid or immensely confident because the phone rang yet again.

Benito pulled snug the black leather gloves he wore. They were pinstriped like his suit, and he made certain the lines were acceptably oriented before picking up the phone after its fourth ring.

"Hello." It was not a question like the previous three times he'd answered. Instead, it was familiar, but with a slight bite of anger, for Benito wished the caller to believe he now knew the caller's identity.

There was silence on the other end. Benito did not speak again, waiting silently to press a potential advantage, but also so that he might detect the slightest revealing noise.

The connection clicked dead. Benito knew he'd gained ground. If there was another call—and perhaps there would not be since dawn was so near, though he guessed there would be at least one more so the caller might reassert his earlier dominance—then Benito believed he could crack the fool. After all, Benito had reached his present position largely because he was a skillful negotiator. He didn't know law particularly well, though that knowledge would come in the centuries ahead, and he didn't have a grasp of the subtleties of international economics, but he did know people. Not what gave them joy. Not what they might want. But what they did not want. What they feared. And once Benito knew that, he cracked them, often seeing them capitulate without the need to raise his voice or make subtle indirect threats.

He knew, of course, that the calls were on purpose. A misdialing caller might have inadvertently tapped the numbers for his left-most phone, with its 212 New York City area code, or his right-most phone with its 310 Los Angeles area code, or even his wireless desk phone with its 617 Boston area code. But the *** area code existed only for use by the Giovanni family, and that was the prefix of his central cellular. It was his most important communications device, for it put him in immediate touch with other members of his family, and they would know the call an important one if it required the use of ***.

Regardless, he turned off the other two cellars. The ring of the *** phone was singular in its tone, so there was virtually no chance Benito was mistaking the ring of another phone for it, but this was becoming worrisome, so he took no chances.

A fourth time cinched it. This was a provocation. The first time was odd, but perhaps the caller was suddenly detained and delayed his call. The second could have been the callback that was likewise delayed, though it still aroused Benito's suspicions. The third hang-up was frustrating, but that no one was on the other end only worried Benito that a family member was in trouble and could spare but a moment at odd intervals to make a call. The fourth call, though, had revealed it as a game. The delay before disconnection was too great, so Benito began to tabulate possible responsible parties.

No Giovanni would have such lack of respect for this secret area code to play games on an **# line, but Benito did not know who else might possess the secret. Of course, there could be scores of others who did.

Who among these individuals, though, would call Benito thus? A mage, perhaps a member of the Technocracy? An ancient Kindred? Of those who might possess the secret, Benito could only imagine a stinking Nosferatu playing such games. Those vile sewer rats collected more information than they could profitably use.

None of his mortal enemies could have possibly managed to crack the security precautions that protected his phone and its communicating bandwidth from unwanted intrusion. No one accidentally overheard conversation over the **# line, and Benito knew the axiom most appreciated by Madelaine Giovanni, a famed assassin the family called upon when its need was greatest: whatever cannot occur through happenstance will not occur through intent.

Most certainly, no one accidentally misdialed the **# area code. There were no triple-digit area codes, and the only double-digit beginning that was close on a key pad was the 77 of 770 for Georgia.

Nevertheless, the phone rang again.

Benito quickly considered his best strategy. Feigning knowledge had rattled his opponent earlier, so he stuck to that tactic.

"Why now?" he asked of the unknown party. He spoke with some insistence but also with a hint of concern or befuddlement so the caller might perceive an advantage and strike for it.

There was silence, but the connection remained.

Something more, Benito thought. *He or she needs some bit more of evidence that I've seen through this charade.* He wanted to press the game to the next stage, beyond the bullying that seemed to give his assailant pleasure, but he might also dramatically weaken his position if his blind guessing revealed a complete lack of credible suspicions.

Therefore, after a moment, Benito added, "I've been waiting. Why now?"

The voice from the other end was surprisingly clear, as if the call was from the next room and not from Chicago, though it was foolish for Benito to imagine his foe was still there and not in hiding. It was this clarity, though, that somehow kept Benito from panicking, or at least from revealing any panic in his voice. If the voice from the past had been muffled and revealed the speaker's identity to Benito over the course of seconds instead of an instant, then he suspected the surprise and fear would have shown.

There was a chuckle first. "How could you know it was me? If only you'd seen through things so well a couple of years ago, Benito."

Benito said, "You used subtlety then. Now without shame you reveal your bullying nature." It was a quick quip of a response, and thank goodness words came easily to him, for he'd have otherwise been lost.

Without further banter, the Kindred on the other end of the line said something more before disconnecting. Benito allowed the phone to clatter from his hand onto the desk. His sense of despair and helplessness was such that several minutes passed before he straightened it and the others it disturbed as well.

After that first hesitation, though, Benito reacted calmly and thoroughly. First, he buzzed his present secretary, Ms. Windham.

“Sir?”

“Cancel my plans for Atlanta, but do not reopen that time for appointments.”

“Of course, sir.”

Second, he buzzed the head of building security, his strong-willed and militant cousin, Michael Giovanni.

“With particular attention to my own suite, double building security until I can speak with you about more specific and applicable plans.”

“Is there immediate danger, Benito?”

Benito exhaled for the effect of impatience. “No, or there would be no reason to save a discussion of specifics for later.” Then he hung up.

Benito reclined in his plush leather chair and was momentarily aware of the unconscious gesture to bring his index fingertips to his mustache again. He’d best be vigilant for all such events normally invisible to him.

Then he spun the chair around and looked at and into the Chagall hanging behind him.

Sunday, 20 June 1999, 5:00 AM
A private car
Manhattan, New York



Nickolai smiled. Sometimes, the simplest ruses were the best.

"Hello."

Click.

And so it went, several times over. Nickolai knew he was driving Benito Giovanni mad with the incessant and untraceable, if perhaps a bit rudimentary, prank.

Finally, Benito grew exasperated. The fourth—or was it the sixth?—time Nickolai called, the Giovanni answered the phone in a very businesslike manner.

"Why now?"

Oh, masterfully done, Benito, Nickolai thought to himself. Put me on the defensive this time. Still, you haven't yet played to my satisfaction. Through another flaming hoop, you dog!

"I've been waiting. Why now?"

Nickolai laughed. "How could you know it was me?" Had he truly known? Or had Nickolai simply taken pity on the poor necromancer, given what he was about to ask the Giovanni to do? "If only you'd seen through things so well a couple of years ago, Benito." *If only I didn't have to do what I'm about to, Nickolai smiled wickedly to himself, trying hard to erase the tone of malicious glee that edged his voice. Oh, the hell with it. I'm going to enjoy this.*

"You used subtlety then," Benito replied, almost too quickly. "Now without shame you reveal your bullying nature."

A puzzled look came over Nickolai's face. Subtlety? Such was the Kindred's stock in trade! Subtlety played as much a role now as ever. Didn't this bullheaded fool realize that Nickolai had cracked the Giovanni code? That he knew the isolated, secure-network PCS area prefix that the Giovanni were using for their mobile phones? *Don Giovanni, you are playing a foolish game, one that you cannot win.* Surely Benito realized that the endless nights grew long and that a fellow Kindred must take his mirth where he could find it. Eternity weighs heavily on the souls of the damned, or so some elder or another had told Nickolai during his brutal Tremere's apprenticeship. Only the worthy choose to do something with their time other than squander it, and isn't laughter the greatest medicine?

Enough.

"Miss Ash and her party—you will be unable to attend. I need you. Cancel your plans. Do what you have been told." *Terse, but effective.* Nickolai hung up the phone without waiting for Benito's reply. *And now, on to greater things. I have a plane to catch.*



Sunday, 20 June 1999, 10:55 PM
Ponce de Leon Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

Tireless step by tireless stride, immortal day by immortal night, Leopold incrementally left behind a life like that of the kine surrounding him. And that was a shame, for he felt more at home among these shadows of his old life than he did inside the halls of Elysium or within the edicts of the Masquerade, which were only two of the trappings of his life among the Kindred of Atlanta.

Yes, he felt more a part of the world, more connected to its vibrancy, its core, when among mortals and not among his vampire brethren. And that was foolish, because better than any other stalking the shadows of this street, Leopold knew these mortals were damn ignorant and completely out of touch with the greatest—or at least the most relevant—truths of the world.

It made him quiver with loathing and hate and resentment, for he knew that he was only incompletely informed himself, yet he comprehended mysteries these people could not begin to suspect, let alone fathom. Yes, the kine yet wielded great power, for otherwise the Camarilla would not order the vampires belonging to that group to maintain the Masquerade, to make certain the first priority of nightly Kindred life was to continue to hide themselves from prying mortal eyes. The Inquisition had taught the Kindred well. But the essence of mortals was weakness and vulnerability.

Perhaps that's what drew him to them. Especially these people, the night people of East Ponce. They were on the fringes of human society just as Leopold remained on the fringes of vampiric society. They were the artists, the poor, the mad, the whores. And for his part, Leopold frankly felt he knew too much already, so participation in the events of Kindred society would only increase the uneasiness he felt among his own kind. He did not want to know that Prince Benison controlled the police department so no man or woman or child was safe even from their mortal kin if he desired it to be so, or that Victoria Ash could with a thought so thoroughly pillory an artist's lifetime work that he might be forgotten even on the cusp of being recognized and perhaps immortalized.

These were some of the basic and everyday truths of a world where creatures who lived by night also ruled the day.

Leopold shuddered, but the terribly muggy and humid summer weather did not encourage it. Thank goodness the solstice was but two days away. That would mark the height of summer, but its decline as well.

He stopped walking and leaned against a streetlight post, his back to the roar of too-fast cars cruising in and out of this seductive area of the city, his feet pointed toward the center of the sidewalk.

This heart of East Ponce, north of Little Five Points, stretching eastward from Peachtree Street and Atlanta's downtown, was a congested area. The streets were not wide, though four lanes managed somehow to run through the area. The side streets were packed with small houses with patches of green that passed for lawns. And Ponce

itself was a jumble of the everyday and the unusual or even unique. Recognizable fast food joints rubbed shoulders with eclectic coffee houses. Just east of Leopold was the neon-lit corner of Ponce and Highland, where the old Plaza Theatre still showed small-run movies and where an ancient 24-hour diner still bustled.

Leopold felt that he should light a cigarette, but he'd quit that when he stopped breathing. It was too much effort to draw and circulate breath, and without that, the fortifying burn in the lungs was missing, and so there seemed little point to smoking.

He watched the people pass by. Many didn't look at him at all. Others glared at him and flared their nostrils in an effort to provoke him. But no one made a special effort to avoid him, as he did not appear threatening.

Except for the clean T-shirt and khaki painter's pants he wore, Leopold might well have passed for a permanent resident of the street. His hair was an unkempt mop of black that looked like it was meant to be short but had grown for six months or more without any care. His hands were filthy with dirt, which was caked under his nails and between his fingers too. He had an unhappy face, like a man who was looking for something but never expected to find it. His mouth was small, and his lips pursed. Though he was quite slender and of average height and build, his face seemed heavy, almost sagging. His eyelids drooped and his too-ample cheeks seemed to contain cotton wads used to calm a toothache.

Mostly, he was just tired. He'd been disappointed to discover that vampires felt fatigue as acutely as mortals.

As he watched the people, he noted that while he felt comfortable among them, he still did not interact with them, except when his various needs of sculpting or dining demanded it. He wondered why. Perhaps it was genetic—or at least the Kindred equivalent of genetics, blood ties, that made him seek human company at all. It was a Kindred's blood—not an egg or sperm—that provided his new genetic imprint, but did that overwrite what he'd been as a man?

Leopold was Toreador, which meant, of course, that his sire—whoever she was, whatever her mortal life had been and no matter how different that was from his own—was Toreador too. And her sire, and the sire before that and before that, back however many generations it required to reach the so-called third, the legendary Antediluvian who founded the Toreador bloodline in some ancient time. This founder was only two generations removed from the hypothetical original vampire, to whom Leopold had read references as “Caine,” the man Western mythology reviled as the first murderer.

Leopold could come to no conclusions about whether it was Kindred blood that prompted him to act certain ways, or whether it was a clan's predilection for a certain type of human—like the Toreador's choice of artists, or the Malkavians' tendency to Embrace the insane—that created such a likeness among Kindred of a specific clan. Did his Kindred blood redefine him, or did he fit the Toreador mold even before his Embrace?

Amidst the furor of Leopold's thinking, a thick evening mist of rain rolled in and left the streets and outdoor denizens of Atlanta covered by a film of water. Then cool air rolled in on the heels of the short midsummer storm, and this refreshed Leopold so that he did not mind the dampness.

In fact, the reflections of the streetlights in the oil-streaked lanes of East Ponce provided Leopold with a less personal focus for his thoughts. He stared into the wavering

ghost images and concluded that he still carried a human program within him—the DNA and nurture his mortal parents had provided—but that was now supported, not supplanted, by his vampiric blood.

Then he forced himself to abandon this line of thought. To some extent, it was a moot issue with him, or at least he couldn't very well look to himself as an example of any side of this internal debate. Perhaps if he felt he knew himself better. Perhaps if he felt the past he remembered was indeed his own. He needed his past. Then, and only then, would he be able to determine more about his future.

Leopold wondered if all Kindred lost touch with their past selves and became a new being at Embrace. If so, then surely he was a mortal reborn in the fire of blood. It was a thought that scared him, for the work of an artist could come only from experience, and without a past he had little to draw upon.

Leopold had fed well on Michelle last night, so there was no need to worry about food tonight. He was glad. It was time he seriously addressed the matter of his sketchy past. It was time for a test or experiment of sorts.

The walk back to his home on Piedmont Avenue was not formidable, but he didn't wish to cover such a distance on foot twice in one evening, especially now that he was resolved upon his investigations. A phone call gained him a cab in little time, so Leopold gazed upon the hot and humid streets of his city from the backseat.

Sunday, 20 June 1999, 11:18 PM
Chandler Room, Omni Hotel at CNN Center
Atlanta, Georgia



“And will you also deny,” Sebastian railed, “that your precious cardinal has taken an all-too-personal interest in the future of the city of Atlanta?”

Vallejo weathered these accusations, as well as the outburst of barking laughter from the Coalition side of the table that accompanied them, but his veneer of aloof composure was wearing thin.

“His Eminence, the cardinal, has made no secret of the fact that he is gravely concerned with the events unfolding in and around the city of Atlanta.”

“Secret? I should think not,” Sebastian retorted. “By now, surely even the Camarilla has learned of the presence of you and your ‘legion’—as I believe you are calling that mob of worm-ridden, somnambulant refugees that accompanied you from Madrid. Honestly, I don’t know what it is about the state of Georgia that so inspires Europe to throw wide the doors of her prisons at the slightest provocation.”

“I think,” replied Vallejo through clenched teeth, “that you overstep yourself, sir.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Sebastian calmed himself and began pacing the room. A dramatic affectation, perhaps, or it may have been intended to cover the fact that those seated nearest him had begun to edge away warily.

“Perhaps I should rather say what is foremost in the minds of all those here assembled. I shall speak plainly, sir. As even you must be aware by now, your very presence here compromises our position.”

Vallejo snorted dismissively into the silence that followed this proclamation. “Although I am willing to grant that yours is the more intimate knowledge of compromising positions,” he began, warming to the challenge at hand and encouraged by a new round of catcalls from the Nomads, “you must in return admit that, of the two of us, I have a few more seasons of campaigning to my credit. And I, for one, have yet to see the army that was lost on account of its receiving timely reinforcements.”

“It is not the reinforcements that worry me,” Sebastian was nearly shouting to be heard above the throng. “It is the cost of that reinforcement. We are not so green as you would have it. Do you think that the significance of your ambitious cardinal’s ‘interest’ is lost on this astute assembly?”

The pitched argument was interrupted by the resounding of three great blows upon the chamber door.

“Open!” cried a commanding voice from outside, “in the name of His Eminence de Polonia, Archbishop of New York, Gatekeeper of the New World, Guardian of the Paths of Shadow.”

The herald did not wait for the effect of his words to sink in. Before anyone could make a move toward the door, it burst inward. Revealed in the doorway was a broken and misshapen figure, wielding a gleaming silver-headed pickaxe. The implement had obviously seen some rough usage. It was weathered and battered and had an unmistakable

weight of ages about it. The wooden handle had been sharpened to a wicked point and blackened in fire. The sinister purpose of this makeshift wooden stake was lost on no one—especially in light of the fact that the lower three feet of the handle were stained dark with ancient blood.

The figure brandishing the pickaxe was no less disturbing. Its body was cumbersome and bloated, giving the distinct impression of a drowned corpse. Its facial features seemed mushy, like a porous fungus that might well collapse into scattered spores if even brushed with the fingertips. The creature's head was shaped something like a moldy apple that had begun to fall in under its own weight.

The herald came forward into the room dragging one leg, obviously no longer fit for bearing him up, behind him. He inverted the axe and banged its head straight down on the floor three more times.

The room fell silent.

A worm, easily as big around as a delicate lady's wrist, burst from the herald's cheek. His head sagged further and seemed about to collapse entirely. The worm twisted as if to regard the assembly, revealing no less than five segments of its slimy black body, before disdainfully withdrawing again from sight.

The herald gave no sign of being aware, much less discomforted, by this interruption.

"All rise!" he commanded.

All around the table, councilors began to stand—some of them much more quickly than others. Costello and the New York contingent leapt to attention. The visiting dignitaries from distant Sabbat cities who had little personal stake in the power struggle for Atlanta, notably Montreal and Detroit, also rose promptly to honor their host.

Even the Old World representatives—including the minions of Cardinal Monçada—were seen to be standing. To be sure, most of them, like Vallejo, were already on their feet in the midst of the heated confrontation with Sebastian. But none among them was so ungracious as actually to return to his seat.

The Coalition side of the table, however, was another matter entirely. Some of the Nomad war chiefs could be seen to shift uncomfortably in their chairs, but no one seemed anxious to make any move that might be interpreted as acknowledging Polonia's authority. Many watched Averros circumspectly—some clearly looking for his lead, others watching patiently for any sign of weakness.

In the midst of the uncertainty and tension, Caldwell slowly and deliberately propped first one foot and then the other upon the table. He crossed them with an exaggerated sigh.

Averros, who had settled back comfortably in his chair, now sat forward. He said something sharply to Caldwell, pitched low to keep it from the ears of those around them. Caldwell snorted.

With a mutter of disgust, Averros stood and, grabbing Caldwell by one foot, swung his legs violently from the table.

"What the hell!" Caldwell protested. Spun around and out of his chair, he found himself on his feet facing his leader.

"Not worth it," Averros cautioned, seeing the anger and challenge in Caldwell's face. Instinctively gravitating toward the confrontation, the other Nomads rose and pressed closer, encircling the pair.

“Yeah, you’re not,” Caldwell turned away, but he was hot and could not resist another parting shot. “But if you’re a real good boy and do just what master tells you, maybe the nice archbishop will let you lead us all in the national anthem, or the pledge of allegiance. Hell, you could even make hall monitor.”

Caldwell felt a tightening in his throat as his collar was grabbed from behind. He twisted in the grasp, launching a blow that would drive the claws of his right hand deep within his opponent’s chest cavity and tear out his black heart.

Shattered claws cascaded to the floor. Caldwell cursed and jerked back a bleeding and probably broken hand. He staggered back a few paces, but Averros did not seem inclined to pursue him and finish the job.

“The next time you pull a stunt like that,” Averros hissed just loud enough for the ears of his followers, who were crowding close around the two, “you’re dead. You understand? So you’d better just get used to the idea of being the best damn hall monitor in the whole Coalition, because the next time you step out of line, it’s over. The next time you mouth off, it’s over. The next time I have to remind you who’s running this show, it’s just over. Now straighten up your act, *Capitán*. Understood?”

“Sir,” Caldwell acknowledged somewhat grudgingly, without looking up. He occupied himself in pulling the bones of his fingers noisily back into their proper places.

Fortunately for Averros, he had not come to today’s council session as unprepared as he had yesterday. After the incident with Hardin, Averros was not about to be caught by surprise in a similar show of bravado today. He gingerly rubbed at the tender spot on his side where Hardin had blooded him. The damn thing hadn’t closed right. There had been fresh blood on the sheets this evening and even now the jagged pink seam still burned.

He had stitched it up hurriedly at last night’s council with a loose strand of shadow that was ready-to-hand. Earlier this evening, he had spent a considerable amount of time gathering up similar strands, testing their strength, weaving them tightly together into thick cables of shadow, and binding them about his person. The result was a protective vest much more formidable than mail, much more resistant than Kevlar—an armor that might well withstand just about any force he was likely to run into within the confines of the council chambers, short of the first gentle touch of the morning sun.

Unnoticed among the commotion caused by the Coalition power struggle, the only figure who kept to his seat throughout the entire proceeding was the venerable Borges. The rest of the Miami faction had risen to pay their respects to Polonia, but their own archbishop was under no such compulsion.

Polonia entered decked in all the formal regalia of his office—the traditional ermine robe, miter and crosier of an archbishop. It may have been a trick of the uncertain light streaming in from the corridor behind him, but he seemed to cast not one, but two distinct shadows before him.

As he crossed the threshold, these two attendant shadows grew more distinct, seeming to take on substance and dimension. Where previously both had stretched out flat on the floor before the archbishop, they now seemed to ascend, as if climbing a flight of stairs. First their heads emerged, breaking the plane of the floor at right angles. Then their shoulders rose into view. Soon it could be seen that each of the shadowy attendants bore aloft a small black velvet cushion. Upon each of these cushions rested

a precious artifact that was easily recognizable to the assembly. Upon the right hand was the golden apple of New York, and on the left, the orb of dominion over shadow.

The bearers deposited their charges with stately grace before Polonia's place at the vast circular table. They then turned and descended into the floor in the same curious manner in which they had emerged.

Polonia paused to survey the gathering before taking his seat. Everyone else was forced to remain standing as well. Receiving the homage of the gathered Sabbat leaders, framed by the spectacle of the young Toreador hanged from the ceiling behind him, Polonia was clearly in his element.

He addressed the gathering. "Thank you for coming, ladies, gentlemen, friends, honored guests. I sense a certain exhilarating expectancy in the air of this room—a premonition, if you will, that greatness and glory are close at hand.

"I appreciate the sacrifices that many of you have had to make in order to be with us on this momentous occasion. You have crossed vast distances and braved great danger to reach this meeting place, isolated deep behind enemy lines."

He reached out and gently started the body of the dangling Toreador swinging in a slow, circular arc.

"Let me assure you, therefore, that the decisions we reach here, and the challenges that we are called upon to meet in these coming nights, will give the Camarilla cause to tremble."

Polonia paused to allow the roar of the assembly to quiet itself.

"As you are no doubt aware, Atlanta has been a Camarilla stronghold almost since its founding. It is, perhaps, no great wonder that a city originally named Terminus should attract the attention of our rivals. It is the very sort of thing that would appeal to their affectations."

Polonia jabbed an accusing finger at the unresisting body of the young Toreador and was rewarded with a trickle of blood running down the victim's chest. The tantalizing aroma of it wafted across the room.

"You should also know that Atlanta is a city ripe for Sabbat conquest." He raised a hand in an effort to restrain their enthusiasms and began again. "For some time now, we have been engaged in laying the groundwork for the Siege of Atlanta. The Camarilla is reeling, gentlemen, and tearing itself apart in its flailing attempts to prevent its inevitable fall.

"It began with the Blood Curse. That plague savaged the Camarilla's numbers here. Losses among the most vulnerable fringe elements of their society—the neonates, the clanless Caitiff and the anarchs—are rumored to have reached as high as forty percent attrition within the opening weeks of the epidemic. And the pestilence raged unchecked for nearly six months.

"In a desperate attempt to halt the wildfire spread of the curse, the city's ruler, Prince Benison, laid down strict decrees aimed at quarantining these high-risk groups. Naturally, those who were subjected to the harsh dictates were resentful of being stripped of their liberties. The exact course of events and reprisals that followed from this point is a bit difficult to reconstruct.

"We know that, incited by the meddling Brujah, the anarchs revolted. Soon open conflict raged in the streets of Atlanta. It is further said that the Brujah made an attempt on the life of the prince himself, an unfortunate occurrence which only hastened their exile from the city."

Polonia waited patiently for this news to sink in. Borges and his faction were, no doubt, already apprised of the situation. They had had forces on the ground in the city for months now—running reconnaissance, rousing the anarchists, picking at the seam of the Camarilla's cherished Masquerade.

For the others present, however, the fact that the Brujah had been ousted from the city would be welcome news indeed. Polonia was pleased at the effect his words had produced. The assembly seemed in high spirits and there was much side discussion.

"The Brujah," Caldwell could be heard to snort dismissively.

"They are a hard-fighting clan," Vallejo admitted, in animate discussion with the delegate from Detroit. "Always the toughest knot of resistance in the Camarilla battle lines."

"Nah, the it's those damned Gangrel that you have to watch for. Maybe you don't have them so bad in Madrid, but up on the border, you can't swing a dead cat without startling up a whole nest of them."

"Certainly, we have Gangrel in Madrid. Well, not in Madrid, but in España, yes? In open terrain, I grant you, there is no fiercer opponent than the bestial Gangrel. But in the close fighting of city combat? No, here the Brujah are the more dangerous opponents."

"The Gangrel?" Hardin chimed in from across the table. "You're not from around here, are you? Where you gonna find Gangrel around here? Sure there's bound to be a few scattered packs holed up in the north Georgia mountains or something. But there's just no way a bunch of Gangrel are going to rush down here to Atlanta to defend the city. Believe me, there is no love lost between Atlanta and the rest of this state. And the Gangrel are going to be especially unsociable about the state's primary source of pollution and industrial ravages."

"Well, fewer Gangrel are fine by me." There were scattered words of assent from around the room.

"That only leaves the Tremere."

This bombshell brought the conversation crashing to a halt. It was an overstatement of course. There were actually seven clans that made up the Camarilla. Whenever discussion turned toward pure firepower, however, the three major threats in the Camarilla arsenal were almost universally acknowledged to be the Brujah, the Gangrel, and the Tremere.

The Tremere weren't a militant faction. Not in the same way as the Brujah and Gangrel were anyway. They were, however, feared for their prowess and the threat they represented. The Tremere were masters of Thaumaturgy. Their powerful enchantments had been the downfall of many Sabbat offensives.

"How strong is the Atlanta chantry?" Madame Paula, the *koldun* sorceress, had perked up at the mention of the dread Tremere.

"Strong enough," replied one of the Nomads, who boasted an especially chalky complexion (even for one of the damned) and unsettlingly pink eyes. *Such beautiful pink eyes*, Madame Paula thought. She could not recall ever seeing such a perfect hue in a Cainite before, but perhaps this was another New World novelty. She resolved to try it out herself at her earliest opportunity.

She emerged from her reverie as the albino explained further. "It's old—well, old by American standards—over a century. That means we can expect some pretty complex arcane defenses. And it houses at least a dozen warlocks."

"I think that estimate may be a bit inflated," interrupted Sebastian authoritatively.

"Okay then, say a half dozen, although I think it's pretty foolish not to expect worse. Does that make it any better? We're looking at some serious casualties here."

"And a siege does little to weaken the resolve of a well-established chantry," Madame Paula mused. "You can't starve them out, you know. And while you're occupied with slowly squeezing the city into submission, they will be picking away at the besiegers. Oh yes, every night. One here, a few there. It all adds up. Quite disheartening."

"If I may be allowed?" Vallejo's voice, tuned to the pitch of command by a lifetime of military service—many lifetimes in fact—cut through the room. "On this very point I have been instructed to deliver a message from my liege."

Polonia was suddenly wary. He glanced briefly to the opposite end of the table to where Borges sat, but his counterpart's face was as inscrutable as ever behind its omnipresent cowl of shadow.

The eyes of the assembly were on Polonia and he had no choice but to acknowledge the self-proclaimed messenger. "Yes, yes," he waved dismissively. "Hand it here."

"My cardinal thought it unwise to commit the message to paper. I can, however, recite it verbatim. It is only this:

"The council need have no anxiety over the Tremere. The cardinal's ambassador, the Lady Sascha Vykos, will neutralize the Tremere threat."

There were coarse barks of derisive laughter from the Nomads. Color rose in Vallejo's face.

"Desist at once," he ordered. "These are the words of His Eminence the Cardinal Monçada. You mock them at your peril."

His tone quieted the worst of the offenders, but from beside the Archbishop Borges, Sebastian rose to his feet to confront the Spaniard.

"Perhaps then you could illuminate us as to how this Vykos will single-handedly defeat the assembled might of the Tremere chantry. You must admit, on the surface of it, it seems quite... ridiculous."

"I am not given to know my lord's instructions to his legate," Vallejo replied coolly. "Nor would I be likely to reveal them if I did. I know only that it will be done. Monçada has given his pledge. It will be done."

"And where, exactly, is this ambassador? The council has been in session for two full nights now and has she even appeared to present her credentials? No. We are well aware of your master's 'interest' in this affair and I am of the opinion that we would be far better off without his meddling and yours."

"Why, you ungrateful lapdog," Vallejo began, his hand straying to his side where a sword might well have once hung, centuries ago. "I have warned you once and shall not do so again. If you persist in these ludicrous pronouncements, you must be prepared to defend them with your honor."

"Ungrateful?" Sebastian parroted in disbelief. "Do you think that we should be grateful for this intrusion? Your cardinal is a ruthless and cunning man. This is not an insult; it is merely a statement of fact. There is no denying it. I am familiar with his type. For him, a 'personal interest' is just of a polite way of saying that he has drawn up a deed of ownership, but the ink on the contract is not quite dry yet."

Sebastian knew that there were others, of course, who would do everything within their power to see that the *Cardinal Maledictus Sanguine*—the Cardinal of the Blood Curse, as Monçada was known by his detractors—did not extend his hand out over Atlanta. Perhaps the foremost among those who opposed Monçada’s intervention in Atlanta was Borges himself who, as it was said in the parlance of the Lasombra powerbrokers, remained ‘deeply concerned’ over the present state of affairs in the city. By ‘deep concern’ it was understood to mean that he had moved his forces into position to exert leverage directly upon the city.

Such concern, of course, was tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet. Monçada had countered in turn by “extending his sympathies” to the people of Atlanta. Which was to say, he’d escalated the conflict further by committing forces of his own—in particular, his elite legion of household troops, the unsavory war-ghoul from Prague, a koldun sorceress, and his personal representative, this Vykos.

It was an unorthodox and ragtag army, no doubt cobbled together on short notice. But as Sebastian systematically tested the mettle of each finger of the cardinal’s four-clawed reach, each was proving a power to be reckoned with. Collectively, they would be formidable indeed. But surely, not even Monçada could effectively wield this strange and unpredictable weapon across intervening oceans.

Sebastian heard his name mentioned and turned to his master. “I believe Sebastian was only expressing his admiration and perhaps envy of the cardinal’s ruthlessness and cunning. It would be very thin-skinned of you to take mortal offense at such innocuous comments. It was my impression that you were made of sterner stuff.” Borges flashed his mastiff grin at Vallejo.

Sizing up the situation, Sebastian was quick to chime in, “Of course, of course. Do sit down, my excitable friend. I have only the utmost respect for your dear Cardinal Maledi... Did I ever tell you,” he recovered seamlessly, “what my master always says about him? No? Well, Borges has always maintained that there is not a Cainite in all of Europe with such an unjustifiable—”

“Humility about his person,” Borges finished with a sharp glance at his young protégé. “Now, if we might return to the subject of pushing forward our preparations for the siege?”

“But that is exactly what I have been attempting to relate to you, gentlemen.” It was Polonia’s voice raised in polite disagreement. “There is not going to be any siege.”



Sunday, 20 June 1999, 11:38 PM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

The marble just didn't seem to live beneath his fingers when he tried to sculpt a Kindred. He couldn't say why, exactly. Leopold wondered if this block regarding sculpting Kindred had something to do with the past he could not clearly recall. He remembered "a" past, but he doubted it was truly his own. A neophyte in the complex scheming of the other vampires he called Kindred only because that was the civilized way to refer to a fellow vampire, Leopold now understood that some Kindred could as easily tamper with memories as he could with emotions, so he did not trust the odd past he thought his own.

Foremost, it was too pat, too storybook—an artist willing to sacrifice anything for his work, he apparently ran away from parents who expected him to assume the family warehousing business, and instead scraped together a living in New York City. He barely found the time to pursue his craft amidst the problems of earning money for meager supplies of room and board, fighting the cockroaches away from both of the former, and refusing more chances to sell out than he could even falsely remember.

Then the break for which every such authentic artist dreams: a benefactor, a modern-day Medici. Someone, anyone, with great wealth, who sees the heart of the artist's work and recognizes the greatness therein, and beyond that is humbled by it. Someone who realizes how empty her life of wealth-attainment has been and fervently feels, in the work of the artist she has discovered, the purpose that will redeem her life.

In Leopold's case, this benefactor was a gorgeous woman who offered more than just her wealth. Hers was a voluptuous and pristine form that could have inspired even a mediocre sculptor to great heights of prowess, let alone an artist who actually possessed some talent. After six months as the beneficiary of her wealth and posing, Leopold finally awakened to the fact that she had other designs for him as well. Unfortunately, those designs were not sex. They involved his entrance to the ranks of the undead.

One night—for she only posed for him at night, of course—after hours and hours of intense work, she stepped down from her platform and confidently approached her sculptor. Leopold had made some benign remark about how her lovely form deserved to be immortalized in marble, and that was when she approached. As her fangs flared and she drew Leopold toward her, she said, "My flesh shall endure longer than any marble."

The next snippet of Leopold's memory recalled his face being pressed amidst her bare breasts, where he partook deeply of a vertical crimson band that ran along her sternum. Then the waters of memory muddled, and he recollected very unclearly nights of flight and pain that ended in her death and his deposit in Atlanta.

Vampires might have vast powers, but they sure were clichéd storytellers. Or maybe Leopold had in fact lived a storybook mortal life. For some reason, though, he simply doubted that, or at least his subconscious mind doubted it and gave him a funny feeling whenever he contemplated the story.

So Leopold was attempting to reconstruct his true past, although he had compiled only three details thus far: first, the hollow ring of his supposed past; second, the fact that he could not recall questioning his past until about two years ago; and finally, his inability to sculpt anyone he knew was a Kindred. It was this final matter that most concerned him, and he'd conducted a few experiments to investigate the matter. Namely, he'd asked his friend Sarah, another Toreador neonate who had been new to Atlanta but subsequently succumbed to the Blood Curse, to set up some blind sittings for him. Specifically, he did not wish to be told whether or not the sitter was Kindred. And what had happened? Well, nothing, but that was the point. Half of the sitters had been Kindred. When he did not know their nature, Leopold had little trouble manifesting their likeness in clay. One of the sitters who was unable to be discreet about his nature so shook Leopold that he thanked the Kindred but asked him to leave—an unfortunate incident, as that Kindred was Trevor, one of the Brujah street sergeants who now bore a grudge for the slight Leopold had leveled him.

Certainly, Leopold could imagine that his difficulty sculpting Kindred derived from his work with the beautiful Toreador (who had conveniently insisted on anonymity, he clearly recalled) who ultimately shattered his life by Embracing him and forcing him to save his life by devouring her blood. Leopold was certain even non-Freudian psychotherapists would relent on a dramatic cause-and-effect such as this case, but it didn't seem right to Leopold.

After all, he knew about that event, or thought he knew about it anyway, and the contemplation of it directly did not concern him. Yes, his memories of that time were terrible indeed, and there could presumably be something of the saga he was keeping from his conscious thoughts, something so heinous that the solitary event was stricken from his memory and now unconsciously caused his troubles.

However, he just didn't believe it. Mostly, it was the lame story of the starving artist that did it. Leopold knew that he did fit that archetype. He was unkempt, lost long hours as though a fleeting moment while at work, did indeed starve for lack of blood when he sculpted instead of hunted. But he didn't think he could long overlook a beautiful woman who clearly wanted his hands to enact more carnal pleasures than fashioning her stone likeness.

For instance, though she probably thought him immune to her stunning good looks, Leopold had not overlooked the Toreador primogen of Atlanta, Victoria Ash. If anything, though, she gave some authority to his life story, for she was walking (not living) proof that such gorgeous creatures did exist. Another permutation of his new suspicions regarding his true past suggested that Victoria was his sire, and had concocted this simple cover story to hide that fact from him.

As soon as he imagined that, though, Leopold felt ashamed of such dull-headed paranoia as dominated conspiracy theorists. It's not as if those theorists were not right, for there were conspiracies aplenty, but they should stick to their best guesses, and not indulge any crazy suspicion that happened to catch their imagination. There were vampires behind many of the conspiracies, but not aliens or yetis or whatever silliness was presently in vogue. And just so, Leopold stuck to his central theory of an entirely other life now unknown to him, and not any number of possibilities he could concoct to fit the evidence. The idea of a missing life just *seemed* right.

Besides, Leopold felt such a brand of skullduggery did not become the ravishing primogen. Victoria seemed stronger than that, and not one to trifle with loose ends. He recognized her obvious beauty, but his gift as an artist was to see more deeply into people than that, and he believed that if Victoria were responsible for his past, then she would not hide him from it. She would simply kill him if he weren't of use to her.

He suddenly realized that part of this foolishness with Victoria was some vestige of mortal lust. She was just so damned beautiful that he couldn't clear her from his mind. Frankly, it excited him to imagine that he was her childe, and he suspected he would harbor this crazy thought for some time.

In fact, while he had spoken with her on the phone recently, Leopold had never been alone with Victoria Ash, though she was the head of his clan in this city. There was no point. He did the work that seemed important to him and steered clear of politics. Politics got one killed. Better just to follow everyone's rules—the prince's, the anarchs', the Camarilla's—and no one would have reason to be hostile, or even offended. The chance that he might accidentally blunder was what convinced him not to attend even events like the Summer Solstice Ball tomorrow night at the High Museum of Art. Such a density of Kindred would surely include one who thought Leopold a perfect foil or dupe for some scheme, and the fewer that knew of him, the better.

That had not stopped him from accepting a commission from Victoria for the party when she called a week ago. She had very specific requests, but suggested that completing the work was doing clan work, so for the pride of the Toreador he was required to accept. He did, and workmen—ghouls, Leopold imagined, for they hefted his sculpture as two mortals could not—had arrived to take possession of the work last night.

He was actually proud of the piece, and wondered if he'd ever see it again. The fifty thousand dollars the ghouls paid him in consecutively numbered, new one hundred dollar bills would have to eliminate or at least alleviate that thought. He already owned this house that served as his workplace and his haven, but eventually he would need more money in order to survive safely as an immortal being. He made pains to cross no one, but one haven was not enough, and until now one was all he could afford.

He almost put his plan aside in order to look through recent papers for clues to good second homes, but for some reason the itch to attend to the matter of his past was severe. Such thoughts had been idle speculation in the past, but now he felt the need to get toward the heart of the matter.

However, this was in all likelihood pure foolishness, for unless there were greater motivations at work—and Leopold doubted he could figure so prominently in any truly grandiose plan—then his fantasy-like life story was probably true. It bored him to think that. Since the past was gone already, he wished for something more vital in it, something he could tap to create truly great art, not just the fine showpieces he could create when concentrating on technical merit, or the outlandish pieces that came when he let himself loose. He was, after all, a good sculptor, so that part of his possible past was not a charade, for such talent could not be concocted, though Leopold knew that some Kindred were capable of patently amazing things. But who in history was the last sculptor to be concerned with plots that might change the world or affect lives beyond those of wealthy patrons or other poor artists dreaming of living as pathetic a life as most skilled but unexceptional artists experienced? Somebody from long ago, Leopold decided. Maybe

Leonardo or Michelangelo. Not even the great Rodin shaped international events, or at least so he thought.

So, Leopold decided to engage in an experiment that he hoped would either dissuade him from his theory or recommend it even more strongly. It was his intention to sculpt the bust of his Toreador sire. She was gone, and the memories of her were limited, but there was yet a strong picture of her in his mind, and Leopold decided to see if he could sculpt her. If he could not, then the explanation he would have to accept was that the terrible pains she had inflicted upon him were indeed the reasons for his troubles, and consequently she must be real.

On the other hand, if he could sculpt her when he could sculpt no other Kindred, then he reasoned this would prove a conscious connection to the still unconscious knowledge that his lovely benefactor was not real at all. That is, he believed that if he could sculpt the one Kindred who was presumably the source of the block that prevented such work, then she must not be the real reason and that would be because his unconscious mind might know better than his conscious mind that she did not exist. It would be no different than the likenesses of Bela Lugosi as Dracula that he sculpted, since he knew Dracula did not exist, yet it was a vampire he managed to portray in clay.

He would still not know for certain, but such a result would give him the confidence to proceed with other possible experiments. Perhaps even to go so far as to seek out another—maybe even Victoria—to see what might be done to help him regain his former knowledge. Such a gross move would be dangerous, though, for what if the Kindred he sought for help was part of the charade perpetrated against him? What if it was Victoria, and he revealed even slight suspicions to her?

Leopold laughed to himself. At the worst, he supposed, he might find himself in another city, perhaps on another continent, but maybe the story of his life would be a better one.

And maybe the discovery that his remembered life was a charade would only ruin his life. Should he give up a storybook past in order to learn that the truth might be otherwise? If his sire was a farce, a fable invented by someone hiding something from him, then what trouble, what very possibly dangerous trouble, might he stir up with the return of his memory?

But Leopold was decided in his course of action. Art was about truth, he believed. Though his work of Kindred might never be for public consumption—as such might be considered a dangerous leak in the Masquerade—Leopold felt it might reveal some truth to some few among the Kindred who sought it as well.

But not if he couldn't sculpt those who would see his art, for such an absence would have a clear impact on how his message was broadcast and hence received. Sculptors from Rodin to Brancusi spoke about humans with kind as the center of much of their work. Maybe there was a way to speak about vampires without Kindred in his work, but for his message to be honest, that method would have to come naturally and not be an impediment around which he constructed a method.

He finally exhaled a great breath and unrolled the cloth covering a large piece of clay he'd cut and covered with a wet towel earlier this night. He was anxious to get to work immediately, for although he was perhaps eternal so long as he fed on blood, his patience to achieve self-discovery was not likewise infinite.

The thought of blood made his stomach tighten, and his throat. He considered delaying his work to seek sustenance, but he resisted the possible procrastination and returned to gazing at the block of clay before him.

He stood and pushed the stool away so he might have freedom to pace about the pedestal upon which the clay rested. He placed his right hand on the clay and then walked clockwise about it. His strong fingers left four slight furrows in the medium, and these he lengthened through several revolutions by spiraling them higher as he continued clockwise.

He played thus for several moments—a cat toying with its prey. And just as suddenly as a cat realizing the game has breached the boundary into tedium, Leopold pivoted and attacked the clay. He was now a bird of prey, his fingertips pressed together like hawk talons as he struck the clay and withdrew a small piece of clay that he tossed to the floor outside the reach of his pacing feet.

Within a matter of ten flurried moments, the ungainly lump of clay was whittled down to a vaguely humanoid bust and Leopold was covered with dollops of the stuff. His fingers were shod in thick shells of grey, completely transforming them from implements seemingly capable of precise work to bludgeons presumably meant only for destructive endeavors. But then there was much that was destructive in sculpting, and Leopold believed in creation through annihilation, perhaps explaining why he was willing to destroy his current life if a new one was created in the process.

He felt himself letting go, though, which was always a good sign for his work. This was a feeling of separation from himself that he could not explain, and he could only describe it as an out-of-body experience wherein he imagined he sometimes looked down upon himself as he worked, though in such cases he had no conscious control over the work he did. Alternately, he sometimes faded completely and only when he grew desperately tired—or, now that he was a vampire, when dawn was near—would he wearily regain his senses and find a sculpture that was a stranger to him.

Invariably, though, this letting go resulted in better works—ones where technical concerns did not intrude and restrict him. It was also this letting go that in his youth had convinced him that he was a great artist and would eventually be recognized as such. The genius of greatness manifested in such odd ways, and he presumed this his eccentricity.

That hubris, however, is what in later years, more recent years, convinced him he would never achieve such greatness. Only when the artist was not aware of his own folly, his own freakishness, could greatness be realized. He realized then that he used this loss of control as an excuse to deserve greatness, instead of a whip with which to flog himself to greatness.

This time, he did at first feel like he floated over his studio. His reasoning was intact enough to be impressed with himself despite his lingering reservations about his talent. He saw a confident artist boldly striking marks into the surface of the clay model. Careful consideration seemed to occur instantly, for the work was steady and constant and there were no errors; at least there was no work that dissatisfied him, for no move was countermanded or covered up.

The form of a woman's face slowly gouged, carved and smoothed its way into existence. It would be a beautiful woman, Leopold understood, so long as the whole of her lived up to the sensuous stretch of the neck and the mischievous tilt of the head.

Then Leopold watched as the sculptor faltered. The rhythm of the work lost its 4/4-time magic and bumbled into a tragedy of inexpert improvisation. The sculptor even dropped his carving blade, and stood slack-jawed and dazed for a moment before retrieving it. Then it was as if an automaton were at work, as if the Leopold floating above the sculptor was the soul of the artist and not the artist's Muse. The sculptor worked methodically, inevitably detracting from the work by virtue of his attention to it, and in fact not adding to the work at all, because Leopold saw now that the sculptor was working in a loop of cutting, smoothing and replacing those same three areas of the bust.

Leopold was then certain that this was his unconscious block asserting itself, and this was without doubt the most demoralizing instance, for never had this fugue state failed to produce something which Leopold held in high personal regard. Even this state, the seat of his fervently desired genius, was incapable of success.

He felt doomed. And lost.

And he felt himself fading farther away, ever higher, though now it was escape, blessed escape.

It was the sensation of gradually losing focus on himself and the clay sculpture. Instead, he began to be aware of the entire studio, and he took it all in without the capacity to concentrate on any one aspect of it. He saw the pattern of the long tables along the walls and the portions of them that T-ed toward the main workspace. He saw the boxes of bozzettos and unfinished works atop the tables along one wall, though he was unable to pick out any specific piece. And atop the other tables he could only sense the blacks and grays and whites of clay, stone and marble.

Even these items of the large work studio faded and he gleaned the periphery of his haven: the loosely mortared bricks of the walls of this basement, the warped and water-stained but resolutely sturdy wooden staircase to the ground floor up into which he felt himself drift, and the door to the dry and cool vegetable cellar that went deeper even than the basement and within which Leopold spent every daylight hour comatose on a firm mattress, feather pillows and down comforter.

From the vantage of his height, though, he felt for a moment that there was something deeper even than his root cellar. Something dark and formless and powerful. Then it was gone, but shapeless appendages still tickled his brain as he floated even higher.

He eventually encountered the ceiling that was the ground-level floor. In his present state, the ceiling was also a permeable barrier that separated waking from sleeping, and the blurring details of all he had sensed snowed to pure white in a brilliant flash that suddenly brought Leopold fully conscious again.



Sunday, 20 June 1999, 11:57 PM
An abandoned steel mill
Atlanta, Georgia

The motorcyclist shot over the dark streets of Atlanta. He chose to remain off the main north-south arteries of I-75 and I-85 that cut downtown Atlanta in twain. The better to dodge tails if there were abundant side streets to screech along, and with a virtual blood hunt declared on anyone remotely considered an anarchy, it was imperative that the prince's minions not follow the courier to his destination.

He wove through the crisscrossing streets for which Atlanta is notorious and so only gradually made his way in the proper direction. Satisfied that no one tailed him, the courier made a final dash across a stretch of open ground toward a massive edifice of brick and steel.

He knew this was the time he would be most vulnerable, so he poured on the speed. The BMW motorcycle responded admirably, and the skilled driver edged the wheels around the numerous potholes and breaks in the road.

As he neared the facade—and that's all it was, as the bulk of the old steel mill was collapsed and left only this single proud wall—the courier took a final glance over his shoulder to make certain he was clear.

He was.

But then there was gunfire.

The thunder of large ammunition roared from the wall of brick and steel before him. The courier nearly laid the bike down on the broken pavement, the hard edges and potholes of which would surely have shredded him like a cheese grater.

When he recovered from the shock of being fired upon from his own side's position, the courier noted that the large-caliber weapons were firing into the sky over his head. First setting a course over the road that seemed stable for a moment, the courier craned his neck around and up. He couldn't hear them above the grinding of his own engine, but he could now see the three helicopters. One in the front appeared to be black and unmarked, and that was presumably the one that tailed him. The other two were closing rapidly from a distance, and they appeared to be police copters.

The courier cursed and then pumped the gas handle hard back to unleash all the might of his Bavarian motorcycle. The bike responded with a great burst of acceleration even though it had already been traveling at over 120 m.p.h. Not only was he likely to die for the sake of some fool message—no matter that it was deemed urgent—but he had also failed the most basic aspect of his duty: don't lead the enemy to the hideout.

Bullets suddenly sprayed around the courier like the patter of heavy rain. One of the bullets tore through his arm and lodged in his right thigh. He nearly spun out of control, but the ghoulish strength of his intact left arm was enough keep him in control, at least for the moment. The arm was almost worthless. He could still muster enough hand strength to manipulate the handlebar gas control, but there was no sturdiness in his elbow and the courier knew his ability to drive the motorcycle was severely impaired.

He glanced back again and saw there was a substantial gap between the lead helicopter and the two police ones. If he could maneuver himself into that crease, then he might live.

The courier slammed on his brakes. At the same moment, he laid the bike down on its right side and leapt off the saddle. He landed with both feet firmly planted on the top or left side of the bike and he surfed the road, his sole good arm maintaining its grip on the handlebars.

Sparks and pieces of the motorcycle flew as the courier struggled to maintain his balance as the bike careened over the potholed road. And then the helicopter whirled overhead, unable to check its speed as quickly as the motorcyclist. The courier could barely spare the time to watch the helicopter, but he did see it begin to slow as if the pilot thought to circle back for the kill. Then it sped forward.

Once the helicopter was past and committed to strafing the anarchs' position in the gutted steel mill, the courier hefted the bike back up with a Herculean tug of his left arm. His speed had reduced to perhaps only thirty miles per hour or so, but after he landed back in the saddle, the courier quickly accelerated beyond that meager pace. He fell in behind the lead copter, but ahead of the other two yet swooping in.

The bike was in sorry shape and it wanted to go to the right, but the courier tugged with his left arm to keep the wheel pointed straight ahead.

He watched as the black helicopter dove past the wall of brick and steel. Its forward guns demolished a section of the wall, and the courier saw the figure of one of his Kindred friends fall with the mass of debris.

The helicopter looped around to take another pass, and it was likely to be joined in its next attack by the two police vehicles.

Additionally, the courier was able to see the left-branching I-75 split from the downtown artery to his left, and a long line of streaking cars with flashing blue lights dotted the highway.

He cursed again and coaxed what speed he could from his damaged bike. He let the bike's rightward tendency assert itself and he circled around the wall to seek shelter behind it with his doomed comrades. He wondered briefly if it was any different facing Final Death than the mere mortal's death that stared him down. He might be a ghoul with Kindred blood in his veins, but he would still die in all the normal ways. How would the police handle his friends who wouldn't fall to a hail of gunfire?

It seemed to the courier that the prince carelessly toyed with breaking the Masquerade by sending his police after the anarchs.

So much passed through his mind in these final moments. The kinds of thoughts the courier had never had before, and would never have again.

Safe for a moment behind the walls and under a fragment of what might have been the second story's ceiling, the courier killed the motorcycle engine and hopped off the bike. His decimated right arm flopped at his side.

He saw Thelonious and hurried to the mighty Brujah. The man seemed unruffled in his fine business suit. He cradled a cell phone to his ear, but hung up just as the ghoul neared.

Thelonious looked too mild-mannered to be a Brujah, especially one so sought by the prince that these hordes of police were called into the fray, but the young and congenial black man could be ferocious when required. In fact, he was one of the few

individuals—Kindred or kine—to face Prince Benison in battle and survive. Of course, the prince survived too, or else the war between the prince's elders and Thelonious's anarchs would not be raging.

The ghoul said, "I'm sorry, master. I led them right to you. Once we beat them back or escape, I will submit to your punishment."

Thelonious seemed to not hear the ghoul at first, but then the Brujah said, "Don't be a fool, Thomas. This attack was underway before you arrived. They found us by some other means. A spy perhaps. One of us interested in the profoundly arrogant and demeaning society the prince has established in our city."

"If that's so, then I'll kill the traitor."

"I've already taken care of that," Thelonious said, holding a bloody palm toward the courier. Then he continued, "As for the police, perhaps we can frighten them off, or at least buy ourselves a little time."

At that, Thelonious raised his hand. Though the ghoul could only catch brief views of the black helicopter through broken windows and holes in the building as it whirled toward the edifice again, he could see that it was making another approach.

The guns began to tear at the bricks again, and Thomas flinched. But then two great whistling noises sounded, and a pair of fiery streaks blazed through the air. One streak whistled out of sight, but the other intercepted the helicopter and a tremendous explosion shook the air and earth.

A cheer went up among the anarchs, and Thomas saw that Thelonious smiled too.

"Let's see if that makes them think again," said the Brujah.

Indeed, the two police helicopters, which were also ready to make strafing runs, quickly gained altitude instead and shot high over the old steel mill.

The Brujah said, "Now's our chance."

Thelonious let loose a shattering whistle and he waved both his arms. The bulk of the anarchs on the ramparts immediately abandoned their positions and climbed or jumped to the ground. A couple, however, remained for a moment longer. They readied another missile, and Thomas watched as one of Kindred, a tough Brujah named Trevor, leveled the weapon at the receding helicopters.

The vehicles didn't perform their escape quickly enough and the missile launched from high on the old wall shot directly at them. The missile quickly outpaced one of the helicopters, and the pilot was not a vet skilled in dogfighting, so it too was snuffed in a crackle and thump.

"Here," said Thelonious, drawing the ghoul's attention back to his leader.

When the ghoul turned, he saw that the anarch leader was stripping off his clothes. The black skin of his magnificently sculpted body glistened in the moonlight. Then Thelonious thrust his forearm toward the courier's face.

"Take some blood. Without it that wound will be the death of you and you'll never survive the flight we're about to take."

The ghoul was astonished, but he did not delay. He grasped the Brujah's arms and thrust his greedy face full upon it. He knew he was fed on the authority of his leader, but he'd never actually tasted the blood of Thelonious, only his underlings. Therefore, the ghoul had never before tasted blood so fine, so aromatic, so full of life and power.

When the blood flooded into his body, the ghoul felt it go to work immediately. In an instant, it knitted his pulped arm and even restored some flexibility and strength. Kindred blood was amazing, he thought. Especially the blood of a Brujah primogen. Well a *former* Brujah primogen. In the wake of the anarch revolt, the position was no longer official.

Suddenly, the delicious sustenance was gone. A dribble of blood slithered down the Brujah's arm, but the bleeding itself stopped as soon as the ghoul's mouth was removed.

Then Thelonious pushed the ghoul so that he started to jog and then run under cover of night. The entire pack of eight other anarchs ranged behind the two of them. Five of those were Kindred, and three were ghouls like Thomas. Thelonious had promised the ghouls they would be Embraced as full vampires if this war was won.

As the ragged group ran across the debris-littered grounds of the old steel mill, Thelonious looked at Thomas and inquired, "Do you bring a message, or were you simply returning to HQ?"

Thomas could not so easily speak and run at such a demanding pace, but he managed to say, "I... do... have... a... message."

"Then give it to me," commanded the Brujah leader.

Thomas pulled a sealed envelope from his waist and thrust it clumsily toward Thelonious. The Brujah deftly grasped it and tore it open as they ran. How Thelonious then managed to read it while remaining cognizant of the terrain and maintaining his speed, Thomas didn't know, but it made him wish to become Kindred even more than ever.

"It's from Benjamin," the Brujah revealed.

Thomas was growing weary, but he felt the flush of the last of his leader's blood course through him, and he regained his breath. "Benjamin?" he asked.

"The Ventrue," explained Thelonious. Then the Brujah looked away as if revealing the content of the message only to a part of himself. "He says I should attend the party tomorrow night. Benison will be there...." His words trailed off, but his feet flew furiously and he stormed ahead of the others.

His voice echoed back to the group, "Meet at the next safe house in two nights." Then the seemingly polished surface of his skin refused to reflect any more moonlight, and as he disappeared into the pitch black of the night, Thelonious wondered if Benjamin's price was too high. Why should the Brujah trade one prince for another?

20 June 1993

Re: Investigation

Spoke briefly with Ralph via SchreckNET
line--reports said on Tuesday party
in Atlanta will call at midnight 6/22.
Some Sabbath activity in city, verified
by multiple sources, consistent with
report. -- *some movement from*

Minni

Said should provide opportunity for
Ralph interaction w/Hasha's man --

(re: Ed) Samett also planning
accordingly--reports arrangements

Vage

finalized; investigation matters to be
resolved, pursuant pending arrival at
Solstice engagement; hostess V. Ash.

Note: Julius to attend; likely result
Julius-JFH interaction obvious; cross-
reference also interaction MATVIX,

re: Julius-Victoria Ash;

Julius-Bleenor Hodge;

V. Ash-B. Hodge;

V. Ash-Theonious/Eastabi.

File action updates: Haximal

File action updates: Patrodon

Note: query Ralph re: General (Mat)

Monday, 21 June 1999, 1:50 AM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia



Leopold was instantly fully alert and conscious. This particular period of having let go was not marked by the confusion and sluggishness that sometimes greeted him when he reawakened.

He was momentarily confused by the shackles he imagined his hands were encased within, but he soon understood that his digits and palms were simply caked with dried clay. When he flexed his fingers with a slight bit of strength, the dried clay cracked and fell to the dusty floor in shards.

It was this dirty floor of his work area upon which Leopold reclined. His body was covered in the debris of many previous projects, as he was motivated to clean the space only when it accumulated in piles over which he might trip, and that meant once every six months or so.

He looked up at the ceiling, and for a moment imagined that he saw himself floating there. Now it would be the sculptor looking up at the Muse. All he saw, though, were the heavy wooden beams that had supported the ground-level floor for a hundred years and would do so for a hundred more. They appeared indomitable and immune to the passage of time. If only one of his sculptures—just one of them!—would stand up so well to the test of generations of Kindred and kine.

When he focused his sight nearer the floor, Leopold found that he rested with his head near the pedestal upon which he'd worked the clay bust. A sense of failure still consumed him. And frustration. And foolishness, too. How could he have truly imagined that his past held any odd surprises? Was this the dementia of eternal life that some Kindred claimed afflicted the minds of the elders? Leopold had not even scratched the surface of the mortal years allotted to some kine, and already he was cracking. He imagined himself being served up as an example of the weak-willed Toreador—a poseur sculptor who could not even last four score and seven or whatever it was the Bible promised.

Though clear-headed and strong of limb, Leopold felt no motivation to move. His vantage from the floor provided him as much of a view of his clay bust as his remaining confidence allowed: a slight nose poked out over full and perhaps parted lips.

And there he remained for a good length of time, lost in thoughts that led to little and amounted to nothing. Finally, the grit of the floor and enough of a desire for some sustenance urged him to his feet.

He stood and trod slowly toward the wooden staircase. His hand clutching the railing, he took slow steps up. Then, just as his eyes were going to disappear from the basement over the threshold of the floor above, he looked back at the bust.

An astonishingly lovely woman stared back at him, her head tilted to one side and her neck stretched outward. This was not a piece lost halfway to completion. It was a realized work, something of beauty, and Leopold cracked his head on the ceiling as he started and raced back down the stairs and across his studio to stand before the bust.

The woman's shoulders were bare and slim and smooth, so he imagined her either naked or in a low-cut dress that a woman with such lovely features might favor. Bones easily made themselves known beneath the clay skin of the woman, but something in how the shoulders were arranged or held square indicated strength or at least confidence.

The face was lit by a slight smile, but it was the other woman's other features that gave dimension to this expression. This came mostly from the eyes, which seemed slightly Asian in their bent. There was amusement in them, though it was somewhat hidden within the shadow of their long shape and the fact that they were partially closed. The cheeks were full but tapered to a narrow chin. Above, a single lock of hair fell across her forehead. The remainder of the hair was more controlled, as it was short and slightly curly.

What Leopold failed to note, as he'd not even thought to look for them, or perhaps because he saw them so often now that they did not seem out of the ordinary, were the woman's fangs. They weren't obvious, but the slightly parted mouth revealed the narrow tips of both upper teeth.

That was out of ordinary, and Leopold steadied himself on the pedestal, leaning forward with both palms pressed on the surface that also supported the bust and his legs spread a long pace behind him as if he were about to be frisked by policemen. His head dropped between his arms and hung like a motionless pendulum from his torso.

The teeth not only meant that he had sculpted a Kindred, but it was the particular Kindred he sculpted that disturbed and excited him even though it was not the beauty from the Embrace he remembered. He couldn't believe what he'd done, nor could he believe he hadn't recognized her immediately.

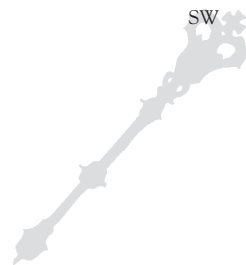
He raised his head and looked the woman squarely in her dark clay but lifelike eyes. This was Victoria Ash, primogen of Atlanta Toreador. Her lush, pre-Raphaelite sumptuousness was the epitome of beauty in Leopold's sculptor's eyes, though there was enough slenderness in her face to balance it and bring it closer to modern opinions of loveliness. The armless Venus held nothing over her as metaphor for timeless beauty.

He gazed at her for a long time, wondering what this told of his circumstances, his past. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the past, but was an augury of the future. Maybe Leopold would be doomed to know more of his future than his past. However, if Victoria was significant in his future, then Leopold decided he could forgive a lost past.

Then, Leopold slowly stepped away and gave himself the advantage of distance to look again and make certain. It just a moment, though. The tapered face, the slightly oriental cast, graceful neck. It was definitely she.

Leopold stepped forward again and bent down a bit. Methodically, as the Toreador savored each moment, he pressed his lips fully against the clay of the bust and held the kiss as he diligently worked his tongue into the clay of Victoria's open and smiling mouth.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 2:02 AM
The Skyline Hotel
Atlanta, Georgia



Benjamin stood on the top floor of his downtown hotel overlooking the beautiful nighttime skyline of Atlanta. One of his dozens of dummy corporations or shell companies—or some combination thereof that even he couldn't precisely quote—owned the building, and this top floor was officially full of equipment and only partially completed because the company's funds ran low before its design could be finalized.

It's true that it was only partially completed, but that was because Benjamin preferred it that way. He could afford great luxury, and he indulged himself with it at many of his other havens, but when Benjamin wanted to think, he required more spartan furnishings. A computer on a desk. A small side table. A large map table with ten flat drawers to store documents. A trap door for a quick escape.

Benjamin gazed north of downtown, past the high-rises. He wished he'd been watching when the missiles were launched. His perch would have afforded a fine view of the battle even though it took place two miles north of this haven. The Ventrue adjusted his glasses. It was a nervous habit from his years as a mortal. Otherwise, Benjamin appeared relaxed in his black and white crewneck shirt and black slacks. If not for the cross weaves of white in the shirt, Benjamin, a handsome black-skinned man, might have disappeared in the low light of the room. He would as soon disappear when in the midst of deep thinking, but something about all black didn't appeal to the Ventrue. Too trendy. Too rebellious. And he was neither Toreador nor Brujah. He'd leave such things to them.

Except he did have to intrude in their matters tonight. At least in the business of the Brujah and whatever other clans might be represented in the group of anarchs Thelonious led. Perhaps a Gangrel or two, but Benjamin's information pointed to a handful of Brujah and probably a couple of ghouls. And Thelonious, of course. It was a sad army, but the Blood Curse had reduced their ranks terribly, and Thelonious seemed against Embracing others simply to provide shock troops—a tactic preferred by the Sabbat, who cared little for the future of such troops.

No, the war Thelonious fought was a legitimate one, and the Brujah was too scrupulous to stoop to tactics that, if implemented, would risk a long-term victory to achieve a short-term one. Which meant that the Brujah's message must have a longer-term benefit that the Ventrue was presently overlooking.

Anyway, Benjamin was a little more pragmatic. He'd consider the shock troops if they would guarantee victory that would afterwards give the opportunity to more than make up for that wrong.

Of course, Benjamin's grudge against Atlanta's establishment was of a more personal nature, whereas Thelonious fought an ideological battle against Prince Benison. Benjamin fought for an ideology too, but he admitted to himself that the defeat of the prince and his damned wife Eleanor—his bitch of a sire who would exert control over him if she thought he might never return to her of his own free will—dramatically affected the methods he might employ.

Did Thelonious understand the subtleties of the decision Benjamin was about to make?

The Ventrue walked away from the window and returned the map table. All the intelligence his agents had gathered the prior day was spread across the flat surface. Benjamin had read through it many hours ago and found little of interest.

His hand drifted to a single sheet of paper, which he picked up and read again. Upon it was written, "Now is the time to take steps to block Benison. I know your secret, Benjamin, and Benison could learn of it at tomorrow night's affair."

It was signed, "Thelonious."

The message had arrived via a motorcycle-riding courier about an hour ago. It was enclosed in the letterhead envelope of a non-existent contracting company, and the courier who delivered it had told the front desk it was a work order that should go the top floor. This strange request had naturally gained the attention of Benjamin's ghoul, August Riley, a sharp young woman who managed the hotel and used the blood he granted her to stay on her feet twenty-four hours a day. Benjamin had used to work so tirelessly too, but that was before he was Kindred and could not remain active in sunlight.

Benjamin now accepted that it could be to Thelonious's benefit to reveal the Ventrue's secret at the Summer Solstice party this coming night. Anything the Brujah could do to divert the prince's attacks and attention might grant Thelonious time to regroup for possible counterattacks. But that still seemed awfully short-term. Still, short-term survival was a necessity for long-term victory.

Benjamin could indeed slow the prince's pursuit of the Kindred rebels, for while Benison controlled the police force of the city, all of the judicial system was under Benjamin's sway. Any number of steps could be taken by Benjamin's kine to shut down the attacks Benison was staging with his own puppets. Hell, even a search warrant denied here and there could buy Thelonious several days.

But did Benjamin dare such an action? There was no doubt that he did not care for the threat Thelonious leveled at him. Threat or not, Benjamin would have to do what was best for him.

What it really came down to, Benjamin concluded, was deciding the better pawn—or ally, if he chose to look at things that way—between Thelonious and Eleanor. Whichever way he chose—and he would have to consider the permutations for the remaining hours of darkness this night—Benjamin knew he could take no steps against the prince before the party.

Benison would know immediately that it was Benjamin's interference that slowed his pursuit of the anarchs, and the Ventrue reasoned there was no reason to create one's own trouble when others already had the ability to heap it upon you.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 3:18 AM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia



It was the result Leopold feared the most: an answer. But one plagued with innumerable more questions.

His answer was only that he could indeed sculpt a Kindred, though it required him enter his fugue state, a process he had never been able to control. More than that, this instance of letting go seemed different than ones before it. He recalled the details of what he considered his astral projection with little clarity, but he did remember feeling that his mental block had defeated even this magical state of creation. Then, he had floated even higher until he'd faded back to consciousness.

Normally, his ghostly presence lingered an arm's reach above his working self. Perhaps, though, his Kindred nature was heightening this power of his, or perhaps his was a power with even greater range than he supposed. Perhaps it was potent enough that he could again imagine himself an artistic genius—a creator with enough madness and extreme behavior to qualify.

Whatever had happened and was happening, Leopold knew he needed more answers. His pursuit would be defeating the hydra, for where Kindred were concerned, every answer created two more questions, but perhaps he would stumble across an eventual truth that would let him begin to cauterize the bloody stumps before more mysteries could sprout.

The problem was that his friends were as few as his enemies. He remained clear of politics in order to avoid creating enemies, but without an area of clout or control he could claim, other Kindred also had no reason to seek him as an ally. There were a handful of mortals he could turn to if desperate need arose—Rose Markowitz in particular, since he had saved her from the street and returned her to a life in art she presumably found infinitely more appealing—but there were no Kindred.

Unless Hannah might help him. He thought on that for a moment.

He remembered thinking of her mansion as he passed it last night. He thought of it as hers, though he guessed it was really the Atlanta chantry house of the Tremere, an extremely hierarchical clan that Leopold believed was bonded together by a common bloodline as well as common blood. That is, he'd heard that all neonates—newly created vampires—were required to drink the blood of all the elders of the clan.

Blood was a powerful force for Kindred, and not just because of its sustenance. After all, any substance that could transform a bloodless human into a Kindred held secrets as yet beyond kine science. A mortal who drank Kindred blood became a ghoul. A Kindred who drank another Kindred's blood could become the latter's thrall. In fact, Leopold had heard stories of countless ways that the power of Kindred blood could be tapped, and at the heart of a majority of these stories were the Tremere, a clan rumored to be descended not from Caine but from a secret cabal of wizards who had transformed themselves in the Middle Ages.

Leopold shook his head in frustration. There were so many stories. Each likely untrue but carrying within it a kernel of truth. He would need eternal life in order to sort all of this out.

He thought of Hannah and how he was almost glad for his inability—at least at that time about a year ago—to sculpt Kindred. He had never encountered such a morose, unanimated and unengaging Kindred or mortal. Hannah struck Leopold as combining all the worst characteristics of a prudish Victorian, prissy schoolmistress, and dour Quaker. She was skinny to severity, expressionless to stupefaction, and eerie as a Salem witch who wanted to burn.

She would not have been an impossible subject to sculpt, but Leopold did not imagine she would be an entertaining one. Not that Leopold doubted her ability to sit for hours or even days—interrupted by daylight, of course—if the sculpting required it, but he doubted his ability to find anything within her to animate the soul of her depiction in clay or stone or marble.

But he had tried that evening she suddenly arrived in his workshop. Leopold recalled that he had been having some trouble with an uncooperative model, when suddenly the frustratingly twitchy girl screamed and pointed at a black-clad and hooded figure standing at the base of the stairs. Leopold almost screamed too, but Hannah promptly lowered her hood and Leopold recognized her from one of his very few social engagements among the Kindred.

“I understand that you cannot sculpt the likeness of a vampire,” she said in a voice so uninflected that Leopold had to pick the words out of the mechanical hum that was the register of her voice.

The frightened kine shrieked again, hurling herself at Leopold and pleading for protection, but her voice gurgled to a halt and she collapsed to the floor with such suddenness that Leopold imagined that her bones must have liquefied.

“Yes, that’s true,” Leopold believed he’d said, as he crouched to the fallen woman and rolled her over. He brushed some debris from one of her breasts and off her stomach and propped her into a sitting position against a pedestal.

Leopold must have looked worried about the mortal, because Hannah remarked in passing that she would be fine and would be forever incapable of recalling the ten seconds immediately prior to collapsing as well as the first ten seconds after awakening.

She’d warned that it was actually approximately ten seconds, and then she asked what Leopold might do to her in that time. From anyone else, the question might have been mischievous or even malefic, but Hannah did not crack the slightest grin or reveal the minutest twinkle of her eye. Leopold gained the impression that everything she did was calculated to draw a response and her presence could not be a variable in her experiments, so she remained constantly withdrawn and was present only to record the results.

Leopold didn’t recall how he’d answered, but if he had it to do again, and his courage didn’t fail him, then he would like to say something outrageous to see how Hannah would react. He shook his head. She would probably take any suggestion, no matter how grotesque or enlightened, with the same stoicism.

This impression of Hannah’s methods was confirmed, at least in Leopold’s mind, when she then requested that he sculpt her. Leopold protested and a bit testily snapped at her, “Unless you know Tremere magic that can break my block, then you’re wasting your time.”

She pretended not to hear him, and Leopold was grateful, not resentful, of the fact, for she was an elder vastly more powerful than he. He swallowed his tongue and inwardly berated himself for his foolish outburst.

Hannah had then seated herself in the chair in which the kine woman had wiggled. Though an impossible subject, Hannah did at least sit still, though the absolute stillness was unnerving. Leopold was used to the Kindred's lack of breathing—though the rise and fall of a kine chest was a rhythm by which he paced his work—but Hannah's frozen demeanor was eerie.

When the witch grabbed the mortal woman by the foot and dragged her toward the chair, Leopold shivered at the creepy sight. She hefted the naked kine to her black-robed lap and held her still as well. "Start with the kine and slowly include me in the sculpture," Hannah had instructed.

Leopold spent most of the night at it, and the kine slowly revealed herself in his clay, but Hannah's image remained a crude outline without mirroring a single distinguishing characteristic.

Hannah let the torture end when she suddenly stood, toppling the human off her lap into a haphazard pile of pink flesh and jutting limbs. She then walked to the base of the stairs where Leopold had first seen her, and all this without a word before suggesting, "I brought no magic to break your block, but that does not mean that Tremere magic cannot assist you in the future."

Leopold tried to apologize for his failure, but a curt movement of Hannah's hand cut him off. "You have ten seconds," she said, pointing behind Leopold to the human.

Leopold glanced at the woman, then back to Hannah, but the Kindred was gone. The Toreador couldn't recall what he did with the eight seconds that remained to him after that. He chuckled to himself now as he understood that he may have forgotten, but Hannah probably had not.

That mysterious offer—if it was even that—from Hannah was all he had. He had no one else to turn to that he thought would be interested enough to listen to his predicament. He could go to his primogen, but that was Victoria and he would be embarrassed. He did not wish to reveal any of his thoughts regarding her. Besides, if she were involved in some deception, then it would be dangerous.

Not that any deal with Hannah would be anything other than a deal with the devil, but for some strange reason, she seemed to have a personal interest in Leopold, and if his visit could intrigue her for selfish reasons, then she might be motivated to take action that could potentially benefit Leopold too.

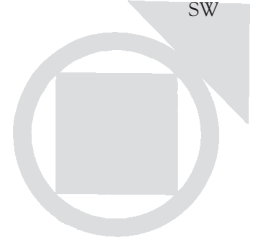
Leopold refused to fool himself into thinking Hannah might be cultivated as a friend. She was the type who simply did not have friends, or at least the friends she did have were known only to herself and not to those she marked with such favor. Her attitude was the same toward friend and foe, and in that she was both perfect and imperfect in the world of the Kindred. No one would ever be fooled by Hannah, for she seemed not to attempt deception, and while that removed a wide range of gamesmanship options from her arsenal, she also gained by this attitude. She was not shy about letting others know when their desires or goals aligned, as with Leopold.

The summer solstice was tomorrow, so the nights were short and it had been an exhausting evening, but there was still plenty of time to attempt to visit Hannah before dawn. Besides, the sooner she knew he hoped to see her, the sooner she might deign to do so.

Leopold didn't relish visiting the Tremere chantry, but he wanted to see Hannah before the party that would mark the night of the solstice, especially now that he believed he needed to attend the party. He would be careful and not stray from the piece he had donated, but whether he liked it or not—and at this moment he was definitely troubled by the future—Leopold needed to circulate among the Kindred and better learn the ways of their games.

He was truly damned.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 3:25 AM
Ansley Park
Atlanta, Georgia



Leopold supposed the mansion was one of the first Reconstruction homes in Atlanta. It was awesomely huge enough to have been the home of an important kine who saw to his own needs first. Or perhaps it was built at the behest of Kindred who needed safer hiding after untold dangers when Atlanta burned.

The mansion was indeed enormous. Four complete stories high with gables that seemed to crisscross in a confusion of dizzying angles. Great windows capable of illuminating entire ballrooms with sunlight, now cloaked by thick, velvet curtains perpetually drawn. Leopold guessed it must have more than fifty rooms within its walls. Hannah was surely in one of them, but was she too engaged in some bizarre magical activity to receive him this evening?

The Toreador was tempted to assume that was the case and try again another night before it was so late in the morning. But his need for answers drove him from the sidewalk along a short path toward the great iron gate at the foot of a brick walkway that terminated at the massive front doors of the mansion. The gate and narrow-spaced bars of the fence towered more than half again Leopold's height above him.

He noticed two security cameras rotate toward him and stop. They were mounted on the top of the brick columns that held the iron gate. The tall iron fence continued beyond each column.

Leopold looked directly into one of the cameras and hesitantly waved. He glanced back at the street to see if anyone was passing, and when he saw all was clear, he spoke quietly toward one of the cameras. "I am Leopold of the Toreador Clan, and I request an audience with... ah, Hannah." He stuttered because it seemed inappropriate to refer to the chantry leader as simply "Hannah," but he knew no other name or title. It would suffice. Or so he hoped.

And it must have, for in a moment the iron gate creaked open. Leopold looked at the hinges as he stepped through. He could detect no mechanisms that powered the opening, but he didn't wish to ascribe to magic every event he witnessed at the Tremere chantry.

Once through the gate, he walked steadily toward the front doors. The walkway was poorly lit, and a nervous feeling tickled him when the gates behind him closed. As he mounted the first of six brick steps, Leopold detected a shadow out of the corner of his eye.

He nearly tripped on the step in fright when a better inspection of the shadows revealed a pair of black mastiffs. They were both hunkered down and seemed ready to pounce and in an instant rip out his throat. Leopold knew enough about dog attacks to throw his forearm in front of his neck for protection should one or both leap, but the Toreador doubted such tricks would do him much good against these muscled beasts.

He stood for a moment watching them drink in his scent with twitching noses. Then the front doors of the house opened, and Leopold retreated toward the rounded

and open frame. Only after his feet were beyond the threshold and his arm brushed one of the mammoth door handles did Leopold turn away from the dogs and regard the interior of the house.

It was dark and incense-scented within the room, though “chamber” was probably more apt for the impressive enclosure. This door too swung shut of its own accord, and Leopold gained the uneasy sense of entering a carnival’s haunted house—a place meant both to frighten and invite, so that a guest’s discomfort could be turned to the hosts’ advantage.

Still, there was no one to greet him, so he paused a moment to examine the decorations. They were all unsettling. A two-dimensional skeleton of the extinct dodo bird in a shallow, well-illuminated and glass-covered crypt in the center of the floor. A framed document on the wall that careful inspection revealed to be the signed confession of a woman who had burned at the stake in Salem, Massachusetts. A small, almost circular table with a half-inch lip around it to keep three perpetually spinning tops from hurtling off the edge. Two black tops seemed to harry a small white one.

Leopold noted a mirror on the wall past the framed document, but despite great curiosity, he resisted peering within it.

The room itself was large and high. The ceiling extended at least three stories up, and various macabre portraits decorated the upper reaches of the walls. A great curling staircase wound along the wall at Leopold’s left up to a landing that disappeared into hallways to the right and left on the second story. The stairs did not continue any higher, but Leopold noted a third-floor balcony that overlooked this chamber.

There were also two pairs of great double doors in the room, one set in the walls in front of Leopold and another pair to his right. All four doors were closed.

The Toreador stood for a moment, alternately surveying each of the vantages the room held over him, but spying nobody to attend to him, he took a seat on a large red divan near the table of the spinning tops. The clatter and motion of the tops helped pass a moment or two, especially as Leopold did not desire to gaze upon the recessed bird bones that the divan so neatly overlooked.

Soon, a white-bearded older man entered the chamber through the doors that faced the front door. He was tugging at the sleeves of his tuxedo coat. “Pardon me, sir, but in absence of expectation of visitors this evening I’m afraid the staff has gone a bit lax.”

The man was Caucasian and his white hair bristled along the line of his jaw only. He was of average height and rather haggard appearance. As soon as he neared, Leopold ascertained that he was mortal, or at least a ghoul. Probably the latter, but it didn’t matter to Leopold. He wasn’t gathering information for a future raid on the mansion; he simply hoped Hannah could provide some answers, or even a solitary answer.

“I wish to speak with Hannah, mistress of this chantry.”

“Indeed, Lady Hannah has been apprised of your presence, Mr. Leopold, and she has instructed that you be escorted to her at once. You will please follow me, and please sir, do not stray a step from the path we take. If you do, you are liable to come to great harm, great confusion or both.”

“Great confusion?” Leopold asked.

“Yes, sir. Though the hallways seem entirely trivial to navigate, a wayward step is likely to deposit you in another wing of this house, or another house entirely. So please do take care.”

Leopold dusted off his pants as he stood. Perhaps the dim light of the chamber hid the dust, but a thin layer of it had covered his body while he waited.

The man took a small candleholder from a low shelf at the foot of the stairs. Also on that shelf were a number of narrow tallow candles. He placed one within the holder and snapped his fingers above its wick. It lit instantly, burning with a steady yellow flame.

The man, or ghoul perhaps, stepped to the base of the stairs and looked over his shoulder toward Leopold before mounting the first step. The Toreador took this as a sign to follow, and he immediately fell in step behind the servant. He reacted too quickly, though, and stepped on the servant's heel, causing the old man to stumble forward.

"Sorry," Leopold said as he moved to help the man to his feet.

The servant accepted the help, but he didn't reply to the Toreador's apology or even look at him. He merely dusted himself off and mounted the first step.

Leopold was still close, so he heard the ghoul whisper a name, "Hannah."

Though he couldn't see the flame directly, Leopold gained an impression of the candlelight from the flickering shadows and an aura of illumination that surrounded the ghoul's body. At the mention of Hannah's name, the light lost its yellow hue and assumed a violet-colored flame.

And because he couldn't see the flame directly, Leopold could not be certain of this, but he suspected that the purplish flame somehow led the servant to Hannah's current location. He surmised this from the way the ghoul's head flinched downward as if he were inspecting the light every time the pair achieved an intersection of possible paths.

The path the flame and/or the ghoul led Leopold along was extremely confusing. They passed through archways, traversed long and empty corridors, entered hallways and rooms through doors that seemed to serve no purpose, and generally took such a circumlocutory route that Leopold retained absolutely no hint of the direction by which he might return.

Furthermore, he was so careful not to stray from the path prescribed by the ghoul that he barely had half a mind to record the route anyway. He would surely rely on this ghoul or another servant to exit the mansion, so there was no reason to risk a misstep that might hurtle Leopold from this Atlanta abode to some other place entirely. That threat was a bit fanciful, and Leopold would have been tempted to ignore it anywhere but in the chantry house of the Tremere.

The ghoul led the way without comment but for occasional polite formality: "Duck here, sir, the ceiling's a bit low," or "Careful of the step, sir." Eventually he came to a halt before an ornate door that Leopold could not clearly see and turned to the Toreador.

The servant said, "Hannah is within this chamber. I will not announce you, as it was her request that I not do so. She might be in the midst of careful work, so I implore you to enter quietly and await her to address you. To do otherwise would be to abuse her generosity sorely in seeing you at all this evening, young Toreador."

"I understand," Leopold said. "But should I not simply wait outside the door until she beckons me within?"

The servant shook his head and answered, "Such was not her request. Now please enter." At which the ghoul stepped aside and then quickly strode past Leopold and down a long hallway the pair had traversed a moment ago.

As Leopold watched the ghoul's figure recede down the hallway, he marked the point at which he suspected he might no longer catch the ghoul even if he dashed at his fastest. Once the servant passed that point, Leopold was left with no alternative but to enter as Hannah had apparently requested. Pursuit of the ghoul seemed a reasonable option because Leopold did not wish to interrupt Hannah in the middle of some grisly experiment, and he could imagine no Tremere ritual that might be otherwise.

Again, though, he thought that a foolish excuse to back down from his pursuit of truth, or at least some answers. So he stepped to the door, took a deep breath in a pantomime of relaxation, as he no longer breathed, and slid his fingers through the door handle.

Only now when within a foot of the door could Leopold appreciate the quality of the carving on the oak door. It was very fine indeed, and he would have envied it if he'd ever seriously considered working with wood. He preferred marble and clay—lifeless media from which he could create life. Wood always struck him as too close to living. To carve it was less sculpting than it was experimentation, much as a scientist might do.

The door depicted a scene from the Greek myths, for the three-headed dog Cerberus stood faithfully and realistically rendered in a position before the gates to Hades. His shoulders were pressed low toward the ground, while his hindquarters pressed up. It left the distinct impression that the beast was about to lunge at an interloper, and Leopold was unfortunately reminded of the mastiffs he'd encountered outdoors. Perhaps they belonged to Hannah.

He depressed the latch with his thumb and pushed on the door. It didn't budge. Reflexively, he tried the other direction, and indeed, the door swung outward into the hallway. Leopold's domestic instincts were confused for a moment, as he believed that doors always opened into a room. Almost always, it seemed. The Toreador wondered if there was an explanation for the change. He suspected there was; either that or it was simply another tactic to make a visitor feel ill at ease. If the latter, then the dodo plus the tops plus the purple-flamed candle plus this door were certainly doing the trick. However, Leopold felt he was an easy mark for such games.

The room inside was filled with a thin reddish smoke that drifted in diffuse clouds. The room was mostly dark, but candlelight from every corner illuminated the area just enough to cause the smoke to seem to glow. Leopold stepped into the room and quickly closed the door behind him. Now was not the time to be timid, he thought. If this room held danger for him, then he had been led here with purposefully dire intent. Even if he managed to circumvent such intent once, he would not escape the mansion alive if the Tremere did not desire it. Therefore, his brazen move was born not so much of bravery but of resignation.

Before his eyes adjusted to the dim light, Leopold heard the regular ding of some small percussion instrument. The tone of the sound made the Toreador think of finger cymbals like the kind belly dancers used. And wasn't that a thought: Hannah cavorting and writhing like a belly dancer!

As the light became sufficient for him to see more, Leopold did in fact make out a moving figure in the center of the rectangular room. The movement was very slight, though, and the silhouette dramatically thin and pointed. He imagined that it must be Hannah.

The movement was the use of finger cymbals as he supposed, but Hannah did not emulate the wild gyrations of Middle Eastern dancers. Instead, when her slow and steady

beat called for it, Hannah lifted her left arm and mechanically crashed two fingers together. The brass implements flashed briefly in the low light, and Leopold noted this reflection was always in time with the noise they created. He doubted this was coincidental.

The perimeter walls of the room were lined with books, though no kind of book that Leopold recognized. These were of various shapes and misshapes and one close at hand that he could reliably examine bore a title on the exposed spine, but it was gibberish to him. Some oriental language, he guessed. Others he briefly investigated seemed bound in cracked leather, and the Toreador wondered if this wasn't a library of ancient tomes of magic.

Judging by the five candles, Leopold estimated that the room was about thirty feet across, though the presence of five candles suddenly alerted him to its likely pentagonal shape. Five low-rising tables with side edges cut at an angle so they could be pushed flush together sat halfway between the walls and Hannah's position in the center of the room mirrored the orientation of the walls. And through the silky strands of red smoke, Leopold noted that Hannah stood within a pentagram fashioned of metal and inlaid in the floor.

He hoped she realized he had entered, and he somewhat regretted the haste with which he'd entered. He thought it prudent not to disturb Hannah, but perhaps it would have been wiser to draw attention to himself to make certain she would not unknowingly place him in danger. Still, he reminded himself, she apparently knew he would be coming, so if she were unable to maintain her sense while in a meditative state, then surely she would guess that he might be present. Besides, what careful Kindred—and Hannah was surely careful—would let a potential threat remain in the same room when she was vulnerable?

Nevertheless, he continued to worry.

Gradually, the pace of the beat hastened, and Hannah's ringing cymbals seemed louder. Despite the increased energy, though, her motion seemed just as controlled and precise as before.

Then Leopold noted that the candlelight began to flash in time with the beat. First one candle and in a moment a second in unison with the first flared at the musical beat. The flash was not brilliant, but it was noticeable. As Leopold watched and wondered, a third candle joined the first two.

The beat was quick enough now that Hannah was chiming her finger cymbals once a second, and she no longer lowered her arm after each stroke. Instead, it remained lifted and outstretched before her.

When a fourth candle joined the pulsing rhythm, Leopold gained the distinct impression that Hannah's work was nearing completion. Surely, the addition of the fifth candle would complete her ritual.

Just then, a slight wind seemed to blow through the room, and its gusts also joined the timing of the music and candles. The red smoke that had drifted lazily about the room now took a shape demanded by the airflow, spinning as it was blown by each timed gust. Slowly, as if unwilling to kneel to the wind, the smoke coalesced into an air funnel that surrounded Hannah. It swirled in fits and starts, for though its motion never ceased, it accelerated each time the strange indoor wind blew.

The beat quickened further, and Leopold grew more nervous than before. Making no great effort to be quiet, while consequently working to avoid a loud interruption, the Toreador shuffled around the perimeter of the room so that he stood facing Hannah.

He hoped to at least make eye contact with her, but it was fruitless—the hood she wore hung low over her face, covering it almost to the tip of her nose.

The beat was so rapid now that Hannah's fingers chimed more than three times a second. Then, the fifth candle flared and a blinding flash flooded the room as all the candles spilled intense white light. Leopold's eyes were spared great trauma because they reflexively closed. Some part of him had known that the rapid cadence had built to its crescendo, though he could not explain why or how.

When Leopold urged his eyes to open, he found the chamber mostly dark again, though the steady light from the candles still provided sufficient illumination for a mortal to see, let alone a Kindred with heightened senses. Hannah remained in the center of the chamber, and her hand was yet outstretched, though she did not clash the cymbals again.

The red smoke still swirled, but it had coalesced greatly and now formed an air funnel only a couple of feet high and not that wide that extended from Hannah's uplifted hand. The smoke became denser and denser and the red transformed to ruby and that to the crimson of blood as the funnel compacted further, reducing slowly in size until Leopold could just barely make it out in the light spinning on Hannah's palm.

Throughout, Hannah stood completely still, presumably unable to see what was happening because her hood was still lowered.

When her outstretched hand suddenly snapped closed, Leopold jumped, startled by the movement after the hypnotic spinning of the smoke. As Leopold calmed himself, Hannah threw back her hood and regarded him, her eyes already set in place to stare directly into the depths of Leopold's.

Leopold continued to lock eyes with Hannah, though he did so nervously. Not hiding his uneasiness, he said, "I thought the Tremere did not share their secrets."

Hannah was silent and it was she who broke eye contact to examine the contents of her hand. The brief look Leopold gained revealed only that the smoke must have solidified into a physical object of some sort, and it was something that was still red.

He continued, "Your magic, I mean. I thought the Tremere did not allow others to learn their magic."

Hannah's gaunt, pale and emotionless face turned back to the Toreador. She said, "That is usually true."

"Then—" Leopold began.

"From what substance have the candles been fashioned?"

"I don't—"

"What was the order of the notes my cymbals rang?"

"I'm not—"

"What direction was I facing?"

This time, Leopold remained silent, and Hannah echoed this for a split-second.

Then she said, "You see? I have revealed nothing to you. Not yet, at least."

"What do you mean?"

Hannah took a moment to arrange her hood, smoothing it so it would lie flatter against her back.

She said, "Follow me into the next room, Cainite."

The statement was so matter-of-fact that it was something between a request and a command. Leopold followed. Something of the delicacy between coercion and force was in the use of the old term “Cainite.” Leopold rarely heard this term used, as “Kindred” was the preferred slang among the younger vampires he encountered more frequently. Leopold wondered if Hannah was really so old that such a term came to her naturally, or whether it was an affectation like that of some Kindred who imagined themselves power-brokers with rising influence despite their youth and general ignorance.

Not that he would call Hannah ignorant. To the contrary, he’d heard her called the All-Knowing before, and while he believed her to be only a few hundred years old, she was rumored to be within a hand’s digits in generations from Caine. Probably that was exaggeration, but Leopold, who was no real judge of such matters, suspected she could well be five or six generations removed from the supposed source of Kindred, or Cainite, blood.

Hannah stepped to one of the walls, and when she brushed her hands against its surface, the candles suddenly extinguished themselves. A moment later, the illuminated outline of a door was revealed where Leopold had not previously detected a door. Hannah’s thin frame was silhouetted in the light that poured through the doorway, but only for a moment as she stepped on.

Leopold stepped into a room that was in stark contrast to everything else he’d seen in the Tremere chantry. It sported the furnishings and character of an archetypical corporate office. There was a small wet bar; a large, flat-topped oak desk; aerial photos of golf courses hanging framed on the walls; two plush chairs that faced the desk with a small round table supporting a humidifier between them.

The ordinariness rattled Leopold more than any of the odd and arcane tableaux he’d encountered already this night. He felt slack-jawed as he staggered toward one of the two over-large chairs and took a seat. Hannah was seated in a leather executive chair behind the huge desk.

She placed the object in her left hand on the desk, and it was immediately recognizable to Leopold as a vial of blood. He unconsciously licked his lips, though he immediately regretted this display. The blood was so obviously thick, and its dark, dark crimson surely meant extraordinary flavor.

Hannah was impassive as she surveyed the Toreador. Leopold expected her to say something, but perhaps a full moment passed and she offered no conversation. So Leopold said, “You said that night you visited me in my workshop that there might be a way you could help me in the future.”

Hannah said flatly, “Indeed. There are doubtless many ways I could help you.”

Again, Leopold expected her to say more, but he didn’t let the conversation idle so long this time. Looking down at his lap, he said, “You’re probably right, though I’m sure you could name more ways than I could.” He looked up at that, with a slight grin on his face, but Hannah’s face was still an emotional blank.

Leopold continued. “But I’m hoping for one particular kind of help.”

Hannah said, “Of course. You seek the identity of your sire.”

Leopold was stunned. “Yes, that’s true. How could you possibly know?” Perhaps she was all knowing.

The Tremere sat straight-backed and rigid in her leather chair and seemed to take no enjoyment from the surprise she caused her guest. Again, though, she remained silent.

Leopold's concern was only heightened, and he asked, "Are there others who know of this uncertainty of mine as well?"

"It's unlikely that there are many."

That didn't reassure Leopold.

"I can help you, of course," Hannah said. Indicating the vial of deliciously dark blood on her desk, she said, "That's what this is for, after all."

Leopold imagined himself shrinking into his stuffed chair. Was he so transparent? Did the Tremere witch possess some powers of detection or mind reading that enabled her to predict him thus? Had he revealed something to her when she visited his studio, something he didn't recall, just as the kine woman with him would forget some of her time there? These thoughts and others raced through Leopold's mind. Imagining that she might even now be reading his thoughts, he tried to banish them and even replace them with thoughts of confidence.

She raised an eyebrow at him, which on her face seemed to the Toreador an almost stunning display of emotion. "But you must tell me something first."

"If I can," Leopold offered.

"Why should I help you?"

Her voice was so devoid of engagement that Leopold imagined his case closed already. There was nothing he could offer and she knew it, or she must know it if she knew so much else. He felt a hopelessness wash over him. The previous nights suddenly seemed enormously long. His sculpting of Victoria almost vanished on the horizon of his memory. But then he knew what to say.

"As I am clearly the one between us who knows so little, I propose that you tell me why you should help me."

Hannah's eyes narrowed to slits, contracting not like a human's but more like a snake's. She seemed to appraise the Toreador before her.

"Yes, there is perhaps one reason I might help you. You must promise to sculpt me—"

"But you know I cannot sculpt Kin... Cainites," Leopold interrupted. "We established that when you visited my work... shop... that... ni..." Leopold trailed off as Hannah's face registered more and more indications that she did not believe the Toreador's protest. Her left eyebrow raised, then she craned her neck forward a bit, and finally slitted her eyes in that serpent-like manner again, and Leopold cracked. Could she already know about his success earlier this night?

He said, "But I've done it once now, so perhaps I can do it again. I agree to try, but inability cannot be construed as failure."

"Agreed, but there is more to my price."

"Oh?"

Hannah stood and walked around the desk toward the Toreador. "The sculpture must be life-size and life-like. No artistic interpretations. It must also be full-figure, not merely a bust or a portrait."

Leopold said, "I can agree to all that."

"Finally," Hannah added, almost running her words over Leopold's as if unaware that he'd spoken, "it must be from memory. I will not model for the sculpture."

To Leopold, the Tremere's "will not" almost sounded like "cannot," but he couldn't say why he gained that impression.

Leopold pressed back in the large chair, for Hannah was practically standing on top of him now. He could tell that the robe she wore was very thick, for part of it draped across his knee.

He said, "That's a bit more difficult, and some life-like details are bound to be lost, but I'm sure I can execute that work with reasonable success."

Hannah stepped even closer, so that her left leg pressed into the seat of the chair between Leopold's spread legs. "Then I will model now, to guarantee more than a 'reasonable' success."

Like a snake shedding its skin, Hannah rolled her shoulders and her thick robe slid off her torso and splashed down to her knees, where it hung only because the chair cushion would not let it sink to the floor.

Beneath the robe, she was naked, and beyond the surprise of this sudden and presumably utterly uncharacteristic gesture of Hannah's, Leopold was startled by the fine features of her body. She was almost painfully thin, but such emaciation was considered beautiful by modern standards. Her skin, like that of many Kindred, was perfect and unmarred, but more than that her narrow waist was wonderfully fashioned and its lines tapered upward toward a stomach that gave way to precious, gem-like breasts, and downward widened slightly at her pelvis before sloping delicately along the length of her legs.

"Touch me," Hannah commanded.

Leopold, suddenly aware that as he drank in her body he had yet to look her in the face again, glanced upward. Some of the magic of her beauty was dispelled by her plain and unemotional face, but Leopold didn't need the suggestion again. He reached the fingertips of both hands toward the Tremere and traced them along the slight curves of her sides.

"No," she corrected, and Leopold quickly flinched in retreat. "More. You must memorize me not only with your eyes, but with your hands as well. Explore me, young Toreador, and think on this promise you've given. Commit my body to memory."

Her words offered that same ground between coercion and force suggested earlier, and Leopold wondered if the puritanical and rigid Hannah didn't offer something more than what met the eye. Perhaps as a mortal she had had secrets of more than a thaumaturgic nature.

Hannah took one of his hands in hers and splayed the fingers wide. Then she pressed his open hand on her naked thigh.

Leopold did as instructed, softly cupping his other hand as well as he did when smoothing over a nearly complete work in clay for the final time. He closed his eyes, rubbing, and exploring.

He was amazed that she was so soft. He'd heard that the skin of many elders became hard in order to protect the Kindred. And though he could feel the bones very close to Hannah's skin, her flesh nevertheless possessed a sensual sheen that was a pleasure to investigate.

He closed his eyes and transported his consciousness into his hands.



Monday, 21 June 1999, 4:12 AM
Service stairwell, High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

Rolph worked the corner of the putty knife expertly along the edge of the wooden door frame. The door's hinges and the padlock that ostensibly secured it were rusted but sound. No one on the museum staff used this particular door—a door that had not been marked on the building's original blueprints, yet which had served Rolph well on various occasions. The door itself, to be quite accurate, did not open. But, with appropriate pressure—a bit more than the typical kine might apply—frame and all would swing outward, allowing passage. It was a convenient route of access hidden practically in plain sight.

That was the problem. Rolph wasn't sure that Vogel would notice it. Vogel was Hesh's man, attending Victoria's Solstice party in Ruhadze's stead. Rolph and the Setite would transact their business just prior to midnight, and then the Setite needed to be spirited out of and away from the museum. The false door was to be part of Vogel's escape route.

"For Christ's sake," Emmett said from behind Rolph. "It seems obvious enough to me."

Rolph paused only briefly in his work, then continued with the putty knife, slightly enlarging the cracks that previously were almost invisible. "If he doesn't realize how it works," Rolph explained with forced patience, "he'll rip the entire door off, and I'll have to repair it all later—if someone else doesn't find it first."

"Hmph," Emmett snorted. He was pacing back and forth like a hideous, curmudgeonly metronome.

"I'm almost done."

"You might as well nail a giant stop sign to the door."

Rolph finished the bottom-most edge of the doorframe and slipped the putty knife into his pocket. He reached into another pocket and, with a satisfied grin, produced a strip of yellow police-line tape.

Emmett stared in disbelief. "You're not really..."

"One thing I have learned about the other clans," Rolph said, "is not to overestimate them." He turned and tacked the tape across the door. "Just because a tunnel or an escape route or a hiding place is as plain as day—if you'll excuse the expression—to you or to me, does *not* mean that one of the others would recognize it even if he fell into it."

"Hmph."

"I've dealt with Vogel before. He's bright enough... for a Setite. But if there's a lot of confusion, which there should be..." Rolph waved his hands, rolling them at the wrists to represent distraction, and then ended the gesture with an almost apologetic shrug. "Well, he might need a little pointer."

"How about a neon sign?" Emmett suggested sardonically.

"I will deal with Herr Vogel in my way," Rolph said, deciding it was pointless to debate with Emmett. "You deal with Don Giovanni in yours. Would you like to look over the gallery again, or the main elevator, or the ramp to the lobby?"

"Thank you, but no. You've been quite the thorough host. I've got a map of the place right here." Emmett tapped his head with a gnarled finger. "I know what I want to do. I'll fill in the others."

"Then we should—" Rolph came up short and pulled the suddenly vibrating pager from his pocket.

"Who is it?" Emmett asked suspiciously.

"News from Boston." Rolph squinted at the peculiar message. "The grave robber has traded shovels."

"*Christ*," Emmett hissed. "Benito has changed plans. No kidnapping in Atlanta, it looks like. Well, screw him. I'm not going to wait anymore. Let's get back. Now. I need to get on the horn to Calebros, and to Boston. Unless you have more decorating to do here...?"

Rolph ignored the jibe. His plan was still going smoothly, even if Emmett's was not. "No, I'm done."

"Gloat on your own time."

The two left the door and headed farther down the stairwell to one of several alternate exits. Rolph did not, of course, wish Emmett ill. After all, Emmett's task was far more vital to the clan than was Rolph's own. Rolph was settling an old debt, whereas Emmett needed Benito's information to settle a much more recent score. Still, Rolph did derive a certain perverse satisfaction from the turn of events and from the fact that his own operation was proceeding flawlessly.



Monday, 21 June 1999, 4:43 AM
Thirteenth floor, Buckhead Ritz-Carlton Hotel
Atlanta, Georgia

Three sharp knocks. At the sound, Sascha Vykos checked her pacing and looked up with more than a slight hint of annoyance. She carefully refolded the letter. It vanished into an inside pocket of the immaculate Chanel suit.

The door opened just far enough to allow Ravenna to slip through. He did not shut the door behind him but put his back against it, as if to keep it from opening further.

"I am sorry, Vykos. There is a... *gentleman* here who insists he must see you without delay." The ghoul managed to maintain just the proper tone of distaste, but his anxiety was obvious.

Vykos smiled at his discomfort. "And what is this gentleman's name?"

A look close to terror flitted across the ghoul's carefully controlled features. "My lady! I did not... one does not... What I mean to say is..."

It was apparent Vykos was not going to help him out of his predicament. Ravenna's voice fell to a conspiratorial whisper.

"He is an Assa..."

There was a sharp crack and Ravenna fell to the floor.

"Assassin is such an uncouth word," said the visitor, stepping over the inert body of the ghoul. "A thousand blessings upon you and your house. You may account this the first."

Vykos held her ground and studied the stranger. His motions were like dripping honey—fluid, tantalizing. His form was almost entirely concealed in a draping robe of unbleached linen. *An unusual garment for an assassin.* She had come to think that there must be some sort of unspoken dress code among those hired predators. All seemed to favor close-fitting garments that would not interfere with the necessities of combat or flight. She had already run through four or five ways her visitor's flowing garment might be turned to his disadvantage should it come to close fighting. It was quite likely, however, that those folds concealed a number of lethal ranged weapons which might render such speculation moot.

It was also her understanding that dressing entirely in black was something of a badge of office among practitioners of the second-oldest profession. This garment would shine even in dim moonlight, frustrating all efforts at stealth. Surely, not even an amateur would make such a mistake. No, it stood to reason that her guest was utterly unconcerned with concealing his approach. His words, his actions, even his dress, spoke of a healthy confidence in his own prowess. Vykos found this slightly irritating.

"Was that strictly necessary?" Vykos's tone betrayed only a businesslike displeasure—enough to make clear that she would not account the ghoul's death a service rendered.

Her guest turned up the palms of his hands and bowed his head slightly. His hands were long and elegant—the hands of a pianist, an artist, a surgeon. Their languid grace spoke of a barely suppressed energy. They fluttered gently like the wings of a delicate bird.

Vykos's eyes never left those hands.

"You might at least return him to the front room so that we will not have to look at him as we talk," Vykos continued. "I find it hard to believe that you are always so casual about disposal of bodies and the like. And bring in another chair as you come. My servants have hardly had a chance to unpack yet."

An ice-white smile stole across the visitor's chiseled ebony features. "I am not in the habit of concealing my handiwork. Unless, of course, you count the removal of witnesses. And you need not concern yourself for my comfort. I will stand. We are quite alone? You spoke of servants."

"Yes, we are *now*. I have, of course, sent my most valued associates away for the evening. Some of my guests have a reputation for being somewhat... ex-citable."

The stranger's voice became low and menacing, "And you do not fear for your safety? There are many in this city who would see you come to harm."

"Tonight, I am the safest person in all of Atlanta." Vykos purposefully turned her back to him and crossed to the cluttered desk. "Your masters are not so careless as to dispatch an agent to kill me when we still have unfulfilled business. Very unprofessional. Nor could they allow me to come to harm from a third party when suspicion would be sure to fall squarely upon themselves."

Vykos turned upon him and pressed on before he could interrupt. "No, I do not fear you, although you bring death into my house. Tonight, you are my guardian angel, my knight-protector. You will fight and even die to prevent me from coming to harm before you can conclude our business. Is it not so?"

"Tonight," again the Assamite flashed a predatory smile, "I am your insurance policy. But for tonight only, Lady."

From beneath his robes, he produced a burlap sack. With a sweep of his free arm, he cleared the clutter from the center of the desk and deposited his parcel with a thud.

Dramatic bastards, thought Vykos. But there was no choice but to play along at this point. She couldn't very well bring this business to completion otherwise. With a sigh of resignation, she opened the sack.

She recognized the familiar features immediately, from the reconnaissance photos. It was Hannah, the Tremere chantry leader. More precisely, it was her head. Hannah's hands had also been severed and were folded neatly beneath her chin. *Nice touch*, Vykos thought. Just the right blend of superstition and tradition. She was well aware that the Assamites' hatred of the warlocks was as ancient as that of her own clan.

Of course, she did not give him the satisfaction of expressing that admiration aloud.

"She's dead all right."

The Assamite tried his best not to look crestfallen at her matter-of-fact reaction.

Before he could respond, she continued—with perhaps a hint of malice—"Are you certain it's her?"

His pride pricked, he seemed about to make a retort. Then he checked visibly and composed himself. "Ah, now I see you are having a small jest at my expense. Surely, you are more than casually acquainted with... the deceased." The Assamite's tone was soft and formal, like that of a funeral director – couching an indelicate concept in the gentlest terms possible.

"I have never seen her before," Vykos answered coolly, pronouncing each word separately and distinctly. "And if I understand you correctly, I did not even arrive in this country until after her death."

“Have no concern on that account. All has been carried out in exactly the manner you have specified. As to the matter of the witch’s identity, there can be no doubt. If you will allow me...”

The Assamite absently knotted a fist in the hair of the severed head to steady it as he slid one of the lily-white hands from beneath its chin. He turned it over, palm up on the desk.

“The witch’s magic is still in her hands. The knife cannot sever it, the scythe cannot gather it in.” He recited the words with reverence, as if quoting some ancient scripture.

He caressed the hand gently, like a lover.

Under his touch, the network of delicate lines that crisscrossed the palm darkened, deepened. As he continued to brush the hand with his fingertips, the lines seemed to writhe and then curl up at the edges as if shrinking back from a flame.

As Vykos watched, the snaking lines knotted themselves into a series of complex and subtly unsettling sigils.

The Assamite drew back with a satisfied smile. The glyphs continued to twist and slide gratingly across one another. “Do you know these signs?”

Vykos said nothing, but her eyes never left the dance of arcane symbols.

“It is not given to me to interpret the sigils,” the Assamite continued. “But an adept could give them their proper names. Each sign is a unique magical signature—a lingering reminder of some foul enchantment that occupied the witch’s final days. Do you have need of such knowledge?”

Still staring at the hand, Vykos shook her head slowly. Then, as if coming back from a great distance, she replied, “No. No, it doesn’t matter now. With Hannah dead, the entire chantry will be...”

She changed gears suddenly, but without pause. “But where are my manners? I must not bore you with details of such trifling and personal difficulties. Really, you are much too indulgent of me. Now, what were you telling me about indisputable proof of Hannah’s identity?”

With a slight upward curl of his hand, the Assamite gestured toward the sigils.

“A fascinating exercise,” Vykos countered, “and let us assume for the moment that I believe unquestioningly your account of what I have just seen.” She held up a hand to forestall any protestations.

“But this still tells me only that the hand belonged to a Tremere witch. It does not tell me that it belonged specifically to Hannah.

“Appearances,” Vykos intoned, “can be fatally deceiving.” She sat down at the desk. As she spoke, her hands absently brushed aside a few wayward strands of Hannah’s hair that had drifted down over the pallid face. She ran both of her hands slowly downward, stroking the unresponsive flesh of cheek and throat.

When she again addressed her guest, her gaze never lifted from the death mask before her. “I have seen her, of course, but only in photographs.” Her fingertips came together at the nape of the neck. “Do you think her beautiful?”

The question seemed to take her guest by surprise. He snorted dismissively before regaining his composure. “Lady, these considerations, they have no place in my work.”

Vykos smiled. Her thumbs swung up, tenderly smoothing closed the eyelids.

"No, of course not." Her voice was soft, her eyes lowered. Her thumbs lingered upon Hannah's sealed eyes, pressing slightly as if to ensure they did not flutter open again. "But I was not asking a professional opinion. You surely had ample opportunity to see her, to study her. Would you say that she was beautiful?"

The assassin wheeled away from her and muttered a few syllables in a harsh and foreign tongue. "You will, perhaps, forgive me if I say that you are the most exasperating of clients. Of course, I observed the movements of the witch. How could I not do so? There is room neither for error, nor hesitation, nor mercy when dealing with her kind. She is there before you now. Judge for yourself whether she is beautiful!"

Vykos, apparently unmoved by his outburst, regarded the unmoving face before her with a critical eye. After some deliberation, she opened a desk drawer, extracted a silver hairbrush and began to brush Hannah's long auburn hair.

"Yes, but you saw her in the full flush of the blood—when she was yet 'alive'—when there was still movement and gesture, expression, emotion. These are the things that the photographs—and this little keepsake—cannot tell me."

He paced the room briskly and was a long while before answering. "Yes, I saw the witch living. I was, as you well know, the last person who might make such a claim." His gaze fixed on some imaginary point in the middle distance as if seeing, not for the first time, people and things that were no more.

"I felt the arch of her back as my hand closed around her waist. I saw the delicate throb in the line of her throat as the flowing hair pulled taut. I saw the lips part to form words of power that they would never complete. Yes, she was as beautiful in dying as she is in death."

Vykos smiled and continued her brushing, counting softly under her breath.

Her guest stirred uncomfortably but did not resume his pacing.

An uneasy silence ensued, filled only by the regular stroke of the brush. As if suddenly struck by a thought, Vykos looked up and fixed her gaze upon him. From beneath half-closed lids, she asked, "What then shall I call you, my sentimental assassin? You have not yet told me your name."

He cocked his head to one side and regarded her for a moment as if to determine whether she really expected an answer or if she were simply goading him further. There was a peculiar undertone to her question. Something sub-vocal, almost feline, certainly dangerous. It belied the innocent allure of her gaze. Without willing it, he slipped into a more defensive stance.

"Nor am I likely to. You may call me Parmenides."

"Ah, a philosopher then. I had nearly mistaken you for a poet." She continued to muse aloud. "You do not appear to be a Greek and you surely are not so wizened as to have walked among the luminaries of the School of Athens. You are, then, something of a classicist, a scholar... a romantic."

He almost visibly shrank from this last epithet and began to protest.

"No. Say nothing more of it. The conclusion follows inevitably from the premises. But have no fear, your secret shall remain safe with me." She picked up her brush and resumed her task, apparently forgetting him entirely.

He stared at her in open disbelief, but she seemed completely absorbed. Under her unrelenting brush, Hannah's hair came away in great tangled clumps. Soon the surface of the desk was covered, but still she did not pause.

“My lady, I believe we yet have business to discuss.”

Vykos still did not look up from her labor. The brush began to scrape gratingly across the exposed stretches of scalp now visible through the remaining patches of hair. The sound seemed to play directly upon the nerves without first traversing the intermediary of the ear.

The flesh began to blacken and bruise. After a long while, Vykos said absently, “You were endeavoring to prove that this is indeed Hannah, the Tremere witch and the leader of the Atlanta chantry. The more I subject this specimen to scrutiny, however, the less resemblance I see between the two.”

She set down her brush and pushed her chair back to study the results of her efforts. She nodded, satisfied.

“There is a certain... luster missing.” Vykos pinched the cheeks gently as if to bring up the color in them, but seemed disappointed at the result. “A certain defiance no longer apparent in this delicate line of jaw.” She illustrated with a slow caress of the index finger.

“And the eyes. Even in the photographs one could see that the witch’s eyes were set deep—as if shrinking from the things she had witnessed in the dark hours. These eyes bulge noticeably, and without any of the fire that is the legacy of the Tremere devilry.”

Vykos ground her thumbs into the sockets as if to set things aright. Parmenides made a noise of disapproval or disgust and turned away. “Enough. You know these signs for what they are, my Lady. They are the marks of the grave, of the Final Death, nothing more. If you continue along these lines, however, you will certainly mar the remains beyond all recognition.”

Vykos pushed back her chair and stood. Her voice was conciliatory. “Now you have gotten your feelings hurt again. Come here my young romantic, my *philosophe*. If you tell me that this is the witch, I will accept your pledge.” There was a scraping noise as she rotated the head on the desk to face him.

“Look upon her. Do you not find her beautiful?”

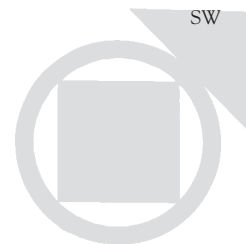
Almost against his will, he looked. The flowing auburn hair was gone entirely. The flesh of face and scalp was bruised to a uniform blackness. The line of jaw was set proudly, powerful and masculine. The cheeks had lost their full feminine roundness and drawn taut so that a hint of the skull was discernible beneath. The eyes had become wary—small, dark, recessed.

None of these individual changes, however, made the slightest impression upon the stunned Parmenides. He had fallen victim, instantly and completely, to the sum of these alarming alterations. The face that stared back at him was unmistakably his own.

Vykos’s voice, when it broke in upon him, came from directly behind him and very close. He could feel her breath upon his neck and ear. “...The reason I do not place my trust in photographs. Images may be altered.”

He felt her lips upon his throat and let his eyes fall closed.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 4:55 AM
Ansley Park
Atlanta, Georgia



“Enough.”

Though softly spoken, the word jolted Leopold back to the corporate office in which he sat. He rubbed his eyes and imagined he’d been sleeping, though he clearly recalled the prior moments when he saw Hannah, still exotic and naked before him. The Tremere dipped to retrieve her robe and secure it over her shoulders again.

She turned her back to the Toreador as she stepped toward her leather chair on the far side of the large desk. She smoothed the robe and sat facing Leopold, her face still as motionless and unanimated as deerskin stretched on a drying rack.

Leopold was in something akin to shock and found himself slow to recover. Hannah’s unveiling of herself was so entirely alien to what he expected of her that he didn’t know exactly how to react. Nor did he know what to say to her next. Professionally, as a sculptor, he was extremely impressed with her physique. When a mortal, and even until now as a Kindred, he had never had the opportunity to work with such a model. Anyone with a body like that was doing fashion work, not standing for arduous hours while an artist worked over clay or stone.

It struck him as hugely inappropriate to compliment her, though, so he simply said, “I sometimes enter a trance when I do my best sculpting. I believe I must have done the same just now in order to memorize the contour of your body as you requested.”

“You were quite thorough, indeed,” Hannah said, her impassive face not registering any innuendo or pleasure or distaste, or really anything at all.

All Leopold could say was, “The result will be better for it.”

Hannah returned to her silent staring, so Leopold took the initiative again. “So what exactly does that vial contain?”

Hannah glanced at the crimson-filled glass tube and said, “You may imagine it to be synthetic vitae. It has not been drawn directly from Kindred or kine, but it would fuel the former and transfuse into any of the latter without rejection.”

“And I—”

Hannah interrupted, acting as if she had never paused, “You will drink it tonight.”

Leopold didn’t like the sound of that. There was so much power in blood, and the Tremere were the supposed masters of tapping it for unthinkable uses. One such use might benefit Leopold if it addressed his question, but he also knew there was risk in imbibing blood. For instance, he’d been told that if a Kindred ever partook of another Kindred’s blood on a half dozen occasions, then the latter Kindred would gain control over the former with a sort of unshakable mind control.

Of course, he’d also heard it said that this happened after two such feedings. Or four. Or, the more times, the stronger the control. Lots of permutations, but it all came down to the basic fact that it was unwise to drink vitae—blood—offered by another Kindred, especially a Tremere whose Kindred existence was built on a foundation of shared blood.

“And afterwards?”

“It must remain in your system for a full day, so do not burn it through activity tonight. After that time, a simple ritual I can perform in but a moment at this coming night’s party will provide some information that will put me on the track of some helpful information.”

Leopold asked, “It will reveal the identity of my sire?”

“Perhaps.” Hannah’s lack of motion, and hence absence of any sort of body language, did not help Leopold guess whether this “perhaps” was a likely or remote possibility. He had little choice but to accept it either way, though, so he didn’t press any further.

“Very well, then, I’d best proceed as it seems that dawn is but an hour or so away, and I must yet return to my haven.”

Hannah pinched the vial between a thumb and forefinger and extended it over the plane of her desk. Leopold stood and accepted it.

He weighed it as he returned to his seat. The vial was heavy, so it must have been fashioned from lead glass, and the cap that stoppered it was a very dense cork that instantly reshaped itself after he pressed a fingernail along its edge.

He looked up at Hannah, expecting to find her as she was before, simply waiting patiently. Instead, she stared off into space to Leopold’s left. As the Toreador watched, the Tremere’s nose wriggled as if she was searching for a scent. Then her eyes briefly narrowed in that serpentine manner and she returned her attention to Leopold.

She snapped, “Proceed.” There was no mistaking this for anything but a command. It seemed the patience of his hostess was at an end.

So he drank. Leopold squeezed the cork and carefully pulled it out. With the pop of a champagne bottle, the cork slipped free. A single drop of the thick blood within splattered out as well, landing on Leopold’s wrist. It puckered up with impressive surface tension instead of running down his forearm, despite being a sizable drop.

A pleasing rich and earthy odor wafted from the vial, and Leopold found himself desiring the blood regardless of any future benefits that might accrue. Without looking again at Hannah, the Toreador quaffed the viscous liquid. He opened his throat as he had learned to do in order to catch every bit of the spray of blood from a mortal’s punctured artery.

The blood slipped satisfyingly down his throat and it was as flavorful as he’d imagined. Leopold felt a brief rush of hypersensitivity, as if his hearing and sight were suddenly more acute, but this faded almost instantly.

He looked at Hannah now as he replaced the empty vial atop the desk.

He asked, “So, there’s nothing else that needs be done tonight?”

“That completes our business for now, Toreador. We each have more services to perform for the other, but you understand that your price must be paid regardless of my ritual’s success or failure.”

“Yes,” said Leopold. “I understand, just as you surely likewise accept that I may be unable to execute the sculpture of another Kindred. I hope that I can do so, however, as I look forward to sculpting your likeness. Your *exact* likeness.”

Hannah said, “My servant awaits outside the door. He will escort you out—a journey I believe you’ll find somewhat simpler than your entrance.”

Leopold nodded, but as he turned to leave, the Toreador paused and looked squarely back at Hannah. He asked, "When you first visited me that night a year ago...?"

"Yes?" she asked to answer his pause.

"What did I do to the girl after you left?"

Hannah smiled, and that made Leopold visibly shiver, for she had never done that before, and he wished she wouldn't again because it was far, far more frightening than a thousand hours of her stoicism.

Leopold said, "I don't recall, but for some reason I'm certain you know."

"I do indeed possess that knowledge, young Cainite." She leveled her gaze directly into his eyes. "You got down on your hands and knees and begged for her forgiveness."

Leopold stood still for a moment, surprised that Hannah told him so bluntly, or even told him at all. And he was partly shocked that Hannah would be privy to what he understood should have been a private display, and partly ashamed for begging thus at all.

Leopold glanced at the floor and then back up at Hannah. "Did she grant it?" he asked.

Hannah's smile slowly eased from her lips. She darted a look over her shoulder and then returned her gaze to the Toreador. "I'll tell you that tomorrow night as well. Now be gone."

Again her tone left no room for dissension, and Leopold turned quickly on his heel and left, closing the carved oak door gently behind him.



part two:
Night
of Nights

the night of Monday, June 21
and Tuesday, June 22, 1999





Monday, 21 June 1999, 9:17 PM
Boston Financial Corporation
Boston, Massachusetts

A white panel van rolled up to the loading dock of the office building that housed the main offices of the Boston Financial Corporation, Ltd. The night manager of the security team came out to wave the driver away and inform him that it had to make deliveries in the morning. As the security officer left the building, however, a black-wrapped form stole inside quietly, catching the door with long, slim fingers and sliding almost like a liquid across the concrete piling that made up the dock's ingress.

The van's driver nodded, waved goodnight, and drove away.

And around the block, returning not quite two minutes afterward. Upon his return, he pulled the van up to the dock, parked it, and proceeded to jack a pallet out of the back.

The pallet contained six long, rectangular cases bound together by plastic shrink-wrap. The driver returned the jack to the van and drove away again, this time for good.

The quiet intruder crept through the dock's shadows, clinging as closely as possible to the walls. It made a wide circuit of the dock area, remaining out of sight and finally ducking around a corner, where it silently exited the building from a bay of normal-sized service doors. Taking care to tape the retainer lock down before letting the door close, it jogged spring-legged to the pallet of rectangular cases, where it proceeded to peel away the shrink-wrap with a long knife. It then opened three of the cases, from which swiftly emerged three similarly dressed shapes. Like bats or tattered cloaks they looked, a group of ragged, quiet skeletons, all tall and thin. Without so much as the grate of concrete across metal, they opened the taped door and swept inside, like trash blown in the wind.

Once inside, the shapes made a beeline for the service stairwell. Up and up they climbed, by turns bounding like rats and scuttling like insects. The wan fluorescent light glowed horrifically on their skin, some pallid, some greenish, some mottled and tight. They had decided to take the staircase because of its lack of evening traffic. Also, the stairwell had no security cameras—although they could easily have hidden from the living eyes of the building's night staff, the coarse machines would have caught their every movements—a pack of tatter-wrapped skeletons clambering unquestioned through the halls of the building. No, such sloppiness would have brought down the wrath of other Kindred, should this ruse ever come to light. The Masquerade, held so dear by the undead who wished to remain unnoticed among the mortals around them, was far more important than the abduction of Benito Giovanni. In the end, even Benito was a mere pawn of the game, while the Masquerade was a rule observed by all sensible Cainites. Especially the horrid and twisted members of Clan Nosferatu, who looked so much like the monsters that other Kindred pretended they weren't.

Their nails and talons clicked and scraped as they sped inexorably up the stairs, sounding like nothing so much as the chittering chelicerae of hungry insects. A flapping, stinking, hideous form they were, rolling amorously up the stairs in a scrabble of bent limbs and rail-thin appendages.

Four floors below the one occupied by their victim's office, the skeletal crew poured out from the stairwell into an empty office that was the receiving room of a civil engineer's consulting firm by day. Clearing the desk of papers and detritus, the Nosferatu clambered and clicked onto the top, where they pulled open a ceiling grate that concealed a ventilation shaft. Up the thin pipe they wriggled, using their shoulders and splayed feet to brace themselves against the sides of the tube. No normal man could have fit into the shaft, let alone undulated his body to negotiate his way upward. With the flick of a bare, prehensile foot, the last monster pulled shut the grate, leaving no evidence of their passing except for a wafting scent of rot in the office below.

Up for four floors they writhed, spilling out at their destination like a noxious puddle of body parts and wattled skin. Cloaking themselves with a suggested mental invisibility, they walked unchallenged past the desk of their victim's assistant. They pulled the door behind her open ever so slightly, allowing them a quick entry into the office beyond, while they went unnoticed by Benito Giovanni within, as he cursed at his telephones and flailed about in frustration.



Monday, 21 June 1999, 9:36 PM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

Victoria was delighted with herself. She savored the final few moments of her chauffeured ride by settling even more deeply into the downy-soft leather of the seats. It was high time she made an appropriate impression on the Kindred of the South, and she knew that tonight would be that time.

She had filled the vacancy of Toreador primogen earlier this year. A terrible disease of the dead—the so-called Blood Curse—had had the good taste to end the unlife of the vapid and witless Marlene, along with those of the majority of the Kindred in Atlanta, in 1998. She still needed a coming-out party, however, and this summer solstice celebration would serve wonderfully. It had been a delightful suggestion, one she gladly embraced, and she was demonstrating her thanks by actually inviting the handful of Atlantan Nosferatu to this party. The hideous Kindred were not normally welcome at Toreador affairs because of their often gruesome appearance.

There was difficulty planning the celebration on such short notice, but she appreciated that in such spontaneous implementation the event seemed stamped even more strongly as a Toreador affair. Her delight in this fact was not one of clan pride—though she would argue the merits of her clan against any other, and she expected she would be forced to do so this evening—but instead she was happy to take advantage of the Toreador stereotype. Victoria preferred “archetype,” but the result was the same: by making cunning use of others’ expectations of Toreador behavior, she was able to lull them regarding the ways in which she subtly strayed from such convention. If the spotlight of Toreador allowed the candlelight plots of Victoria Ash to flicker unnoticed, then Toreador conventions could be very valuable to her.

After all, who would imagine that a Toreador taking pleasure in the sumptuousness of the evening would really have an ulterior motive regarding the prince and the envoy of Jaroslav Pascek, the Brujah justicar, who would also attend? Victoria was not so dim as to fail to realize that there would be some who would suspect such underhanded play, but there was great difference in suspicions and proof. Victoria enjoyed providing room for plenty of the former, but opportunity for others to find little of the latter.

She stretched a slender arm toward the central control panel, her slender limb covered from her upper arm to the tips of her fingers in a silken glove that accentuated the poise and flair of this beautiful woman. Pressing a speaker button on the enormous central armrest, she lazily commanded, “Go by the front first. Slowly.”

Victoria kept the interior of the car dark as she observed the High Museum of Art on this final pass. The white structure rose four stories on a small rise in downtown Atlanta. The entire building appeared to be dark and empty for the night, but her party was well underway on the fourth floor.

Special spy lenses that looked like ordinary opera glasses allowed Victoria to penetrate the seemingly opaque glass set inside the High’s standard windows on that top floor. That special glass hid the party from mortal eyes, but not from her own,

though only when she used the special lens to pierce it. There was something technical regarding wavelengths of light and interference that she didn't quite understand, but what she did completely understand was that the glass was opaque to her naked eyes even when she utilized her very heightened sensory capabilities.

No doubt others possessed even greater abilities, but she was confident her spying method was foolproof. Her decision whether or not to utilize the glass had been decided by a simple coin toss, a far cruder means than she usually employed. Not everything could be put to an elaborate or elegant test. Not like the moves she might make tonight.

The glasses revealed approximately a dozen Kindred already present, which pleased Victoria. The number wasn't great, but considering how the Blood Curse had ravaged the ranks of local Kindred—Camarilla and Sabbat alike, thankfully—she was pleased nonetheless. In fact, if not for a number of out-of-town guests, despite the cancellation of some of the more interesting ones like Benito Giovanni, then this dozen or so might be all she could expect. Pathetic, yet that's what made Atlanta perfect for her.

She was the hostess of this party, but she damn well wasn't going to be early to meet every low-life Kindred who might drag himself in for a cultural experience. No, she would arrive so the Kindred would see her according to her own plan. Then, she could seek out those who deserved or at least required her special and personal attention, though she had not yet decided who had earned her "special" attention for this evening. Perhaps it would be one of the out-of-town visitors. Or perhaps there would be no such games tonight, if her plans were executed and especially if they blossomed to fruition.

As she tucked the lens away in an inconspicuous compartment, Victoria wondered if this little trick was technically against Kindred law. The High Museum was regarded as Elysium, and that meant no violence was allowed within the building, but the Toreador was unsure if this status meant her shenanigan was frowned upon as well. She suspected it was probably pushing matters too far, for while she perhaps did not break the letter of the law, the intent was certainly being subverted.

She doubted anyone would ever know, however, so that was the same as its being acceptable. Besides, how else did Kindred get ahead in this world but by guile? The brute power many Kindred possessed was too dangerous and more often than not caused lasting harm and possibly death to its user as well as the adversary. Guile, cunning, and deception were expected, and so long as a Kindred could operate without undue attention, then she might proceed with her plans.

That was the difficult part, of course. She would have to be careful, for instance, when she used her apparent opera glasses, but it was with them she could look through the dividers of glass that for others would provide an illusion of privacy.

She pressed the button again. "To the elevator now."

The car turned right at the next cross street and then shortly turned again on an even smaller street that ran behind the museum.

As the car slowed to navigate speed bumps at the entrance of an underground parking garage, Victoria checked herself in the mirror a final time. Her curled hair was perfect. For that matter, her face was too, but that part of her never changed. It was pleasingly rounded, with a narrow and interesting chin. Hers was not a noble face, but the face of the lovely servant girl whose beauty outshone her haughty, royal-blooded mistress.

She batted her green eyes and overlooked the slightly Asian appearance that had once troubled her. In this more cosmopolitan world on the verge of the twenty-first century, a subtle cast like hers only enhanced her beauty. Then she directed a little blood to flow into the flesh of her cheeks. She preferred the color of mortal women. The red that all Kindred knew was blood made mortals appear vivacious, and that was especially inviting to Kindred males.

Finally, she curled her fingertip through a ringlet of lustrous brown hair. Her own servant (this one not nearly as lovely as her haughty mistress) had succeeded in exactly reproducing the style of one of the statues displayed at her party. A statue of Helen, if the Toreador recalled correctly. Victoria grinned devilishly. Her hair seemed weightless in its curled suspension, for it hung above her shoulders but jostled down to kiss the silk of her faux-Grecian yet stylish dress when she moved. If Helen with this hair launched a thousand ships, then the vain Toreador suspected it would take a modern nation's armada to do her proper justice.

She let her eyes drop from the mirror, though she watched herself do this long enough to enjoy how demurely she executed it. For the remainder of the night, the eyes of others would speak to her of her beauty, for she was as gorgeous as ever even after over three hundred years on this Earth. Of course, the bulk of those years—349 to be exact—had been spent in this peculiar form of unlife that characterized the Kindred, in which she no longer aged as a kine might, but hers was timeless beauty that won her as many stares and as much wanton lust as it had those handful of centuries ago.

As a mortal, Victoria's splendid beauty had won her all that she needed. It was much more difficult to use sex to control a Kindred, as limp vampire males could prepare themselves only by means of special magical disciplines. She knew these means, of course, and could apply them, but something in the nature of the Kindred's instinct for survival overwrote the almost unendurable compulsion of mortals to copulate and procreate. Kindred were rewired to care only for themselves, for even a childe created through the Embrace seemed to hold no special place in a vampire's heart unless the vampire retained a great degree of human nature, or unless the childe reminded the more bestial vampire of something lost from an earlier, lesser lifetime.

But lust was still an easy sell. Most Kindred were very young—less than a hundred years old—and these were often still mortal in their minds. Their physiology would not react as Victoria wished, or cooperate as the vampires themselves often desired, or thought they desired, but their feeble brains were still wired for the copulation important to the kine. Thus they were often easy marks.

It was a game no different from the one she had played in her mortal youth. All her husbands had been older men. Their stings could not prick her, but oh, how they must have imagined it might have been as she cuddled her slender yet appropriately rounded body against their bony and broken shells at night!

They would have paid anything. In the end, they had all paid everything.

It became much more difficult to ply her schemes the higher she moved into the hierarchy of the Camarilla. The men who controlled the organization were ambitious and time had dulled their memory of the pleasures Victoria might provide them. And it was mostly men, for the changes that occurred in the mortal world by virtue of the succession of generations did not affect the Kindred world as quickly as that of the kine.

On the other hand, they were still male, and their brains were still wired in a way that could prompt them to strut like peacocks.

Hence events like this one tonight. Certainly, she needed to continue the usual exercises of discovering allies and ferreting out enemies. Regardless of her greater plan, Victoria needed to become a locus of Kindred society in Atlanta. Soon the Kindred would come to rely on her parties—and not the insipid or insane, or both, Bible-studies gatherings required by Prince Benison—as the excuse to gather and discuss strategies and debate activities. Once she controlled the forum, it would only be a matter of time before she controlled the content as well.

And now was the time to do it. It looked as if the Kindred population of this Southern city would recover enough to make it a worthwhile starting point. A Reconstruction of sorts was underway in the wake of the Blood Curse, and now was Victoria's opportunity to shape the protocols and traditions that would continue when the Kindred population doubled and tripled and grew beyond that again.

Victoria wiped the smirk from her face.

"Why didn't you tell me we had arrived?" she demanded.

There was no reply, of course. The chauffeur would be silly to do anything but accept the blame.

Victoria noted that her car was parked before the elevator doors in the High Museum's underground garage. How long it had idled there, she did not know. And while she was irritated at first, she decided to withhold punishment because the time likely did her good. It couldn't hurt to hold clear in her mind some of the many plot threads that wound through this evening. Doubtless, she did not know them all, but the ones in her control would hopefully be woven a bit tighter before the night was done. Perhaps even knotted.

A second later, the door nearest Victoria soundlessly swung open. The Toreador kicked one sandaled foot through the opening and slowly extended her hand as well. Her hand was immediately accepted by a strong grip as one of the doormen helped her out of the car. Like her driver, these were ghouls in her employ. Because they were still half mortal, they thankfully did not suffer any of the sexual retardation of the Kindred, which meant Victoria did not always have to work so hard. However, she paid them with blood and cash as well.

Without her blood, they would age and suffer all the weaknesses of the mortal form. Because they were not strong enough to take her blood from her, she had absolute control over them. It made the sex boring, but she refused them more than an iota of free will because their proximity and intimacy to her meant anything more was too dangerous. In this she took the lessons of the elder Kindred around her. Rarely were egalitarian vampires among those who long survived.

As her car pulled away, Victoria scanned the parking facilities. The amazingly wide variety of vehicles parked in the underground garage demonstrated in a snapshot the range of social strata of her guests. Her chauffeured Rolls silently backed into a space between two similarly ostentatious vehicles—one a great limo with driver waiting patiently within, and the other a sexy Dodge Viper for a Kindred of more solitary or adventurous nature. Only two of the off-road, or sports utility, vehicles so favored by the Brujah and Gangrel were evident. The Gangrel, who actually utilized the off-road

nature of the vehicles, were unlikely to have more than one or perhaps two representatives here. Victoria didn't mind if none made it. Likewise, Victoria doubted either of these SUVs belonged to a Brujah, unless one or more of that clan had decided to make use of the Elysium here to protect themselves against the retribution of Prince Benison, whom the Brujah had brutally attacked in the waning days of the Blood Curse last year. The few Brujah rumored to have survived the Curse were yet in exile among the anarchs of the city who were all being subjected to the prince's crackdowns.

Finally, nestled here and there about the garage were the pathetic vehicles of the neonates. These Kindred were so recently Embraced that they still possessed the automobiles of their mortal years. Either that, or museum employees had abandoned those sad clunkers.

"Send me up to the party," she said, pirouetting gracefully on her heel to face her ghouls and the elevator they managed.

"Of course, milady," said the one who had helped her from the car. That was Gerald, a handsome and muscular man-child from Canada, who held one elevator door open.

She asked, "Has Benison arrived yet?"

"No, milady."

"Julius?"

"No, milady."

Victoria nodded happily. She hadn't expected either of these major players to arrive so soon. It would have been difficult if one had arrived before her, and perhaps ruinous if both had. It was a chance she had taken.

She asked, "What about Benjamin?"

"He's here, milady."

"And Thelonious?"

"Yes, he too, milady."

She *was* surprised they were both here already. They were also major players, though not in the league of the other two. The fifth great power that would be in the gallery tonight was Eleanor, the prince's wife. She was a linchpin for Victoria's plans, but she and the prince would arrive simultaneously, so no further inquiry was required.

Victoria stepped in and the other ghoul, Samuel, a lithe and dark-complected Bostonian, stepped in behind her. As Victoria leaned against the mirror-glass at the back of the small enclosure, Samuel quickly stabbed the "4" button. The elevator doors closed and Kindred and ghoul began to rise.

Victoria sighed as she gave further consideration to the laughable automobiles of the neonates. They were so human still. So young and still playing such foolish games. Young Kindred were truly like mortal children. So undisciplined. So confident. So foolish. They felt the universe was at their fingertips because they were now a part of something previously unknown. A world unknown even to presidents and famous actors and men who had walked on the moon. But there was little they could do that would seriously impact the greater machinations of their elders. Despite their feeble attempts to gain power or wield influence, neonates inevitably found themselves outguessed and outplayed by those of Victoria's ilk—Kindred who spent less time relishing their position than taking advantage of it.

Yet she knew she was a fool as well. Many elders probably laughed at the petty games she and her contemporaries played. Vying to control a city as if that meant something. Cities, nations, entire cultures were but fascinating baubles for the oldest Kindred, the so-called Methuselahs and even their elders, the Antediluvians. These latter were the unknowable and probably mythical vampires of the third generation—Caine’s grandchildren.

From their perspective, Victoria’s generation and even those older than she were but playthings discarded when their usefulness was over. At least, such were the stories the elders had told when Victoria was herself a neonate. She had little reason to distrust such rumors, for as in mortal life you are always second best to someone no matter your area of excellence, in Kindred life there was also always another who knew more or possessed greater powers. Whether this theory was true or not, it was a mirror Victoria always used to look at herself. To second-guess herself. She played delicious games with those weaker than her, so why could she not herself be part of a greater power’s game?

Unhappily, she always admitted that she could be, and that was what drove her. Perhaps this very party was an event someone mightier than her had put in motion through her. It seemed natural to her because it suited her ends, but were her ends the means to another’s goal as well? Might a Methuselah or even an improbable Antediluvian have good reason to see Victoria claim greater power in Atlanta or the Camarilla? Victoria could only hope so, but at the same time she shuddered to think her careful plots, her deceptive double-crosses, her ruthless games were not her own.

And this was why it was good to be a Toreador. She could be fickle and mischievous without anyone looking more deeply than the blood that ran in her veins. Being Toreador was her excuse to be unpredictable, and she tried to keep herself guessing as well. Well, not unpredictable, for that was the role of the Malkavians, the madmen among the Kindred. As a Toreador, Victoria was allotted a certain leeway to rationalize changes of heart. So long as any change of direction she chose bore the signs of a whimsical carelessness, then Victoria could execute her plans with less scrutiny.

In fact, she was about to make a huge decision regarding her future this evening. She pushed herself off the wall of the elevator. The door was beginning to slide open, but Victoria already knew what she would see. There would be two portals, and each led to a different future.

As the doors began to open, Victoria hesitated at the brink of the elevator. Her big moment was approaching and she was suddenly apprehensive.

Samuel asked softly, “Did you forget something, milady?”

“No, no,” Victoria answered in a voice without its customary commanding tone. Despite the sanctuary of the elevator, this quiet exchange was overwhelmed by the music that drifted from beyond the lift. Victoria gained confidence from what she heard. It was Ravel’s *Bolero*, a piece first performed in 1929 or so, she couldn’t recall the exact year. Those were years when the Masquerade had been easiest to uphold because the times were fast and carefree in Paris, much like the ’60s in the United States. She felt emboldened as she recalled her successes of those distant evenings.

Chin high again, Victoria stepped out of the elevator and swiftly turned to face Samuel. Her voice more certain again, she said, “Quickly now, go back down and fetch the next guests. But remember, now is the time to create a pretext to wait until two

people are ready to be lifted to this floor. More than two is acceptable, as we discussed before, but a single guest would be disastrous.”

Samuel was suitably perplexed by this command, just as he and Gerald had been when Victoria first explained the procedure last night. However, she was certain he would perform this duty even without satisfactory explanations. This was all part of Victoria’s safeguards, and explanations would only cause others to believe her as mad a Malkavian hatter. Therefore, she kept the specifics of her odd behavior to herself and hurried Samuel along.

“Disastrous,” she remonstrated him again with a wagging finger as the elevator doors began to close at Samuel’s depression of the first-floor button. The vacuum of the elevator tube whooshed as Victoria turned to examine her handiwork.

Indeed, two pairs of enormous doors faced her. They were propped up as part of a temporary wall that divided a shallow entry area from the remainder of the gallery beyond. All of the huge doors were closed, and though the ceiling of the gallery beyond could be seen over their tops, they nevertheless fulfilled their function as entryways.

And that was the crux of it. Which door did each of her guests choose? More importantly, which door would the next guests select? For that would determine Victoria’s entryway, and *that* would have great consequences for the remainder of her evening and her life.

The doors on the left were by far the largest, and at over thirty feet high they taxed the altitude of the High’s upper ceiling. These monstrous doors were of beautifully sculpted bronze, and they displayed ten individual scenes in eight separate panels arranged in two columns of four, over which stretched a lintel divided by a central bearded figure flanked by two more scenes.

The fact that this central figure was biblically bearded, swathed in draping robes, and held aloft an engraved stone tablet, fixed his identity for even the densest of Western viewers as Moses.

Victoria knew, of course, that this was Henri de Triqueti’s *The Ten Commandments*, but she had little idea which of the ten scenes represented which of God’s commands. One notable exception was the second panel up on the left side, for this was the panel that allowed these mirror-opposite doors to fit another underlying theme of the displays in the gallery beyond the doors.

“Thou shalt not kill,” God said, but it took only a handful of humans to already be too many before Cain took matters into his own hands. For Kindred, though, Cain was “Caine,” and legend extolled him as the first of the Kindred, the reason Kindred were called such at all, for if Caine’s blood was passed to his progeny, and they passed their blood containing some of Caine’s to their progeny, and so on, then even Victoria Ash, six generations removed from her biblical ancestor, carried with her some of the First One’s blood. Even so diluted as it surely was within her, it was the source of her amazing powers, as well as the attendant curses over which some Kindred pouted but which Victoria had years ago decided to accept as part of this surpassingly grand existence.

All of this warbled through Victoria’s mind for two reasons. First, the scene on the gargantuan doors that illustrated the Sixth Commandment was in fact that of Abel’s death. In it, angels descended to transport Abel to Heaven while Caine was outcast. Second, because Victoria strongly held the fear that her actions were often not her own. If the blood she carried within her was so potent, then how else might that blood

hold her in thrall? If not in Caine's service, then what of one of his awesome progeny of the fifth or sixth generations whose blood she also carried?

And this fear was what made her game tonight so important. It was why the opposite of *The Ten Commandments* was so important.

Victoria turned slightly to the right and took in once again one of the most incredible works ever created by the hand of man. Since it too was sculpture, the man who fashioned the work could be none other than Auguste Rodin. Though shorter than the thirty-three feet of *The Ten Commandments*, Rodin's *The Gates of Hell* did not seem dwarfed despite its mere twenty-four-foot height.

This lack of diminishment was entirely due to the genius of the work, for it was a true masterpiece. The kind of creation Victoria sought but doubted she would ever achieve in the artwork she created.

This great door also possessed a lintel divided by a central figure. In an early, but already almost complete, form of Rodin's great *The Thinker* of later years, the figure was seated and leaning forward, his chin braced on the inwardly curled knuckles of his right hand, and his elbow supported by his left thigh. It was Dante, and he imagined the scenes of his *Inferno* on the door about him.

Standing upon the top of the door frame were three figures, essentially three views of the same man from different angles. Their heads were bowed together and their hands clasped in a moody and lethargic reenactment of the Three Musketeers.

Beyond these distinct trappings, the remainder of the door was indeed as if from Hell. Wells and troughs of barely discernible figures and scenes covered each of the doors, as well as the door frame. Within the turbulence was both the passion of creation as well as the pain.

Against the white walls and ceiling of the High Museum's gallery, the darkened bronze of the two sets of doors made them seem even more ominous. Their massiveness served only to heighten the impression that a decision of a serious nature was before the one who approached. And as a pair they created quite a contrast: *The Ten Commandments'* symmetrical design of panels and its generally clean sculpted lines against the blurred and difficult-to-comprehend *Gates*.

And Dante, in the pose of *The Thinker*, above the *Gates* made contemplation seem natural.

Victoria's plan was foolishly superstitious, but in order to believe that she was free of the invisible shackles of a power greater than herself—a Kindred greater than herself who might imagine the lovely Toreador a chess piece on his field of play—she rigorously applied randomness to much of what she did.

The pitter-patter of *Bolero* was gaining healthy momentum when she heard the rumble of the elevator and stepped away from the doors. Which door would her next guest use to enter the gallery beyond? Would he or she step through Heaven or Hell? The forthcoming answer would determine much about what Victoria did this evening; specifically, whether or not she should make her bid to become Prince of Atlanta in the place of an ousted Benison. The prince was not here yet, but his arrival was a certainty. Victoria's scheme to supplant him, or at least to move closer to the top, was risky, and she would only feel secure about implementing it if she could be certain that the idea was her own, and not one planted in her subconscious mind by another.

Perhaps there was no way to be certain, but Victoria always felt better if her plans survived random testing, such as the trials this very party faced. Like the idea of this party, plenty of plans did pass Victoria's test, but others did not. Numerous seemingly good ideas and opportunities had been lost or gone unrealized, but the Toreador felt no regret. Implementation of those schemes might have led to disaster. They might have been set into motion by others who used her merely as a pawn. Besides, there was nothing irreproducible about a good idea. When randomness bade that she not take some course of action, then another, sometimes better, option always presented itself. And she had an eternal lifetime to explore them all.

The whole matter was uproariously superstitious, and she understood that, but there was also a grace to Victoria's games which pleased her and suited her artistic sensibilities. Perhaps she was on the verge of becoming a great artist after all, for there was something in the chaos of her actions that was itself beautiful. After finding a comfortable pattern of her own in decades of randomness, Victoria was delighted to discover that the kine themselves were finding that chaos could be structured too. Most sciences eventually became arts, so perhaps this theory of chaos waited to be rendered into beautiful form by an undying mind that could attend to cycles no kine could hope to witness.

Or perhaps it was simply ridiculous. Victoria knew of Kindred who were mightier than she, but their number was not beyond counting, nor was their power beyond reckoning. Perhaps there were no Kindred greater than these. Perhaps the theories promoted by the Sabbat—that the Antediluvians were real and must be destroyed for any free will to exist among Kindred or kine—were groundless and Victoria's advance to power was slowed only by her simpleton games.

And there were evenings when she thought how improbable her eventual command over any number of Kindred was. How could she hope to rule when her plots were hatched under the auspices of chance events no more believable than the signs a Greek oracle once gained from the intestines of birds or sheep?

Finally, the elevator doors hushed open, and Victoria turned to see who would decide the fate of her latest plans. Her methods were crude in one light, but the Toreador always preferred to judge them in the light of what might be. Chances were that if she hid secrets from neonates, then someone held secrets from her, so she would circumvent their plans by proceeding only when her guile aligned with fate.

And Victoria laughed to herself when she saw whom chance delivered her.

First out of the elevator was Cyndy, the Toreador who had inherited the adjectives "vapid" and "witless" once Marlene passed on shortly before Victoria's arrival in Atlanta. Victoria reasoned that these titles primarily fell to the short and athletic little bitch because Marlene was Cyndy's sire, and misfits begot misfits, but they were also accurate enough no matter the exotic dancer's lineage.

Cyndy, who had apparently been speaking in a friendly manner to her fellow occupant, fell sullenly silent when she saw Victoria. Then she looked quickly away, but she did not resume her conversation.

The Toreador was indeed short of stature and supple in body. Her figure was lithe and she possessed some grace despite what any knowledgeable observer would note as a complete lack of formal dance training. Her face was attractive, if a bit too rounded and cute in that way of slightly overweight college girls—she was a bit too big really to catch

the male eye, but she looked fresh and young and that would catch a man's imagination. And because she was Kindred, she would always look so young.

Whatever potential she possessed, however, she threw away in her huffy willingness to be crude, as when she clutched her crotch when she walked past Victoria without a word.

Victoria allowed her deprecating chuckle to be faintly audible. To think that this upstart Embraced by Marlene on some careless night in the strip clubs and lingerie shops that formed her territory on Cheshire Bridge Road actually imagined *she* should have been named primogen of the Atlanta Toreador.

Victoria chuckled again, though this time sourly and silently. She had become Kindred and left London only a handful of years before the Black Death decimated that city, and she had been in the United States in the deep, dark sleep of rest and recovery known as Torpor during the years of terrible influenza earlier this century, but she realized with what randomness such plagues struck. How could this hussy of a Kindred—she barely deserved the title—have survived the Blood Curse when other, eminently more capable and deserving, Kindred had fallen to it? Not that Victoria regretted the loss of these others. In fact, she chuckled again—and this snort of laughter earned a baleful glare and forceful spit from Cyndy—because such randomness clearly worked in Victoria's favor this time.

The second occupant of the elevator, who emerged as Cyndy stomped past Victoria, was just as interesting. He was also a relative low-life in Atlanta, but he was at least an individual of some merit or talent. Victoria watched with further amusement as Leopold stepped slowly from the lift. This Toreador was an apolitical sort, but even he surely understood there was bad blood between Cyndy and his primogen. He kept to cover until the potential confrontation passed.

Victoria turned away from Leopold for a moment to watch Cyndy choose between the mammoth doors. Victoria noted with chagrin that the simpleton barely paused to absorb the wonder of the portals before her. Then Cyndy glanced back, apparently confused, but when she saw Victoria studying her, she huffed and stamped a foot as if these odd doors had been placed here solely to torment her. Victoria let a wan smile flicker across her lips, and Cyndy practically dove through Rodin's presumably more manageable-looking *Gates of Hell* after tugging open one of the great doors.

So she enters Hell, Victoria noted as she turned to face Leopold, who had taken one step more only because the elevator doors threatened to close upon him. When they did slide shut, the young Toreador paled and seemed to shrink away for want of a hiding place. Wise enough in her judgments of men—Leopold was so young a Kindred as to be practically kine in her mind—Victoria recognized some of Leopold's discomfort as an attraction to his primogen. She had noticed this on a past occasion as well, but before his evident desire had been more straightforward—an uncomplicated urging from the parts of his mind that retained some portion of physical need, perhaps.

As she thought on the matter, Victoria turned her head slightly to the side and raised her eyebrows a fraction—body language to invite the timid Toreador from his hole. She decided that there was definitely something different in Leopold's attraction now, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She would eventually, though, as she was very good at reading people, a talent she had possessed as a mortal but even more so now when her heightened senses detected so much for her to analyze.

Leopold attempted a friendly but not too personal smile as he approached Victoria. The latter's acute hearing read fear in the surprising fluttering of Leopold's heart, and it wasn't the stage fright that might normally disarm such an introvert. Victoria decided there was something more poignant to this fear. She also decided it wasn't a fear of Victoria herself.

She asked, "Are you all right, Leopold?"

Leopold's smile hung on his face a little too long. Realizing that, he wiped it away and said, "Yes, Ms. Ash. Just, ah... nervous about the, ah... premiere of my work tonight." The smile returned as Leopold unconsciously attempted to reinforce his lie.

"Of course, of course," Victoria graciously accepted. And then she reached forward to embrace him, which, as she anticipated, startled Leopold. His body went rigid, but he managed to relax as Victoria kissed him lightly on each cheek.

Still holding him, her face close to his own, with *Bolero* advancing toward its climatic notes, she said, "And it's a remarkable achievement, considering the short notice I provided. I apologize for that."

Leopold did not answer, but instead returned the hug. Victoria was greatly amused by his schoolboy ineptitude as he tried to use clumsiness as an excuse for holding her very close and placing his hands very low on her back.

Then she suddenly disengaged, which further startled Leopold. Victoria would have delighted in playing more games with the whelp, and his sculpture was indeed a respectable one, but she needed to attend to the matter of the doors before she embarked on any course of action this evening. Even if that course were as simple as the befuddling or seducing or embarrassing of a young Toreador.

She said, "But, please. Don't allow me to delay you. There may be Kindred even now admiring your sculpture. I hope I will have the opportunity to speak to you again later."

"You're not coming in as well?" Leopold asked.

"No, no, Leopold. I'm the hostess, so I'm greeting my guests. Now run along. I hear the elevator returning with more guests."

Leopold listened but could hear nothing except *Bolero*, which was achieving the peak of its enthusiasm. He stood so long that he blinked twice before nodding and walking toward the doors.

He immediately pulled up short. His mouth was agape when he turned to regard Victoria with disbelief. He jabbed each index finger in the direction of one set of doors and silently tried to elicit explanation from his elder.

Victoria just smiled and nodded before opening her own mouth slightly and pointing at it to help Leopold correct his unappealing expression. Then she waved the back of the fingers of her left hand to scoot him along. Leopold did a double take once more, but then he approached the doors without further encouragement.

Victoria watched him intently, for her plans now essentially hung on his shoulders. Cyndy had limited Leopold's ability to determine how Victoria would proceed this evening, but the final determination was the young Toreador's, for he was the second to choose an entrance.

Victoria ran the permutations of her eccentric rules through her mind. The fact that the two individuals who arrived on the elevator were of opposite sex and the same clan necessarily dashed an entire assortment of possibilities, so Victoria ignored those

and focused on those involving a male and a female who were both Toreador, and beyond that a male who entered after a female.

The rules were extremely complicated, but they were so thoroughly codified in Victoria's thinking that the complexity did not occur to her, just as the obscure rules of cricket did not befuddle a fan of that peculiar sport. And so Victoria did not imagine herself obsessive about the measures she took to protect herself from unwary cooperation with the plans of another.

She grew somewhat impatient with Leopold as he dawdled in his examination of the scenes depicted on the doors of Heaven. He seemed particularly engaged by one of the panels—the lowest one on the right standing door—but his body obscured it and Victoria frankly did not know the piece well enough to recall the Commandment depicted in that spot. She wanted to rush Leopold along, but she dared not do that. Hurrying him was only an option when he was not before either door, and if she did so now she might as well not have staged this elaborate game, as Leopold was likely to duck through the nearest door. In this case, Heaven would mean she would should cancel her plans, for it was the taller door and would be entered by the taller of the two, who was male, which meant Victoria should enter through Hell and cancel her plans.

However, if Leopold entered through Hell, then Victoria could not follow, and her entry through Heaven would mean her game was afoot. It seemed likely to her that that would be the case as Leopold examined Heaven first and would presumably enter through Hell after inspecting it too.

Satisfied with his appraisal of Heaven, at least for the moment, Leopold did indeed move to *The Gates of Hell*. Victoria grew a bit nervous and excited over the approaching moment. She sometimes wondered if she prepared these elaborate games not because of fear of being given direction by others but because she feared to give herself direction. She always rejected the notion, though, because she was not a timid person. Just cautious.

Victoria had not really heard the elevator before, especially over the final throes of Ravel's eighteen-minute-give-or-take masterpiece, but now Victoria did register the *cling* of its doors on the ground floor in the near absence of further music. It sounded as though some piece that made the Toreador vaguely call Beethoven to mind was beginning, but the early portion of the piece was very faint.

Leopold seemed just as curious about the near-formless masses that swirled across the face of the doors of Rodin's masterpiece as he had been of the starker images of Triqueti's. He even glanced back at Victoria another time to shake his head in awe and wonder.

He started to ask, "How did you acqui..." but trailed off when Victoria turned away and toward the elevator as if she had not heard him.

When she glanced back, Victoria murmured a quick, "What? Did you say something, Leopold?"

The younger Toreador waved the question away as if he realized he was pestering her. "Nothing. I'm sorry to keep you from your other guests." He then placed his hands on the doors and slowly moved them over the surface as if imagining it was suddenly forming under his fingertips. *Or perhaps he imagines what he would have done differently*, Victoria mused, as that reaction was often a great or even good artist's reaction to the work of a master. They saw not so much the work, but how the work differed from and therefore defined their own.

Having successfully deflected Leopold's question, Victoria now turned in earnest toward the approaching elevator. She was frustrated to be caught here actually greeting her guests. It was a formality better suited to receiving lines, not a small gathering of Kindred. Besides, if new guests arrived, then they would become complicating factors in her game, though the permutations that presented were also predetermined, of course. However, she would much rather the decision be a less complicated affair. It was just like reading the auguries of a lamb's bowels where too much blood—too much sign—might obscure the important facts evident in the intestines. The fewer guests the better.

Victoria smiled when she heard the elevator doors open on the third floor. Samuel was playing the delaying game as she had instructed, for not enough time had passed. Victoria had known that certain guests were beyond the ability of the ghouls to delay in the garage, so a few tactics like this were necessary.

Victoria turned again to watch Leopold more directly. She had not, of course, taken her eyes from him, but her gaze had been inconspicuous for a few moments. She wanted to strangle the young Toreador when he returned to the larger doors of Victoria's self-styled Heaven. He looked closely at the lowest right panel again, and rubbed it as he had Rodin's work, but then quickly stepped back to take in both gargantuan sets of doors.

Victoria did not know whether or not to be appalled by such apparent contemplation. He actually seemed to be choosing which door to use as an entrance, as if it mattered to him.

Victoria was curious about why he finally chose Hell, but he did indeed return to Rodin's work and slip out of the hallway after a brief struggle with the heavy door. She would have to inquire of him later, for now that his choice was made, she could freely discuss the doors with him, if not her true reasons for utilizing the doors.

When Victoria neared *The Ten Commandments*, she looked with interest at the panel that had most interested Leopold. She didn't like what she saw. The panel showed Naboth. He was dead—stoned to death because Ahab and Jezebel coveted his vineyard.

The Commandment came to her mind because she knew it well. It was one that had troubled Victoria during her mortal years.

Neither shalt thou desire thy neighbor's wife, neither shalt thou covet thy neighbor's house, his field, or his manservant, or maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or any thing that is thy neighbor's.

Victoria swallowed hard. All she did was covet the things of her neighbors.

Victoria tried vainly to make herself feel better rather than read this as a sign that she was being misled after all. For indeed, it was Naboth, not the covetous Ahab or Jezebel who was dead in the panel's depiction. And this was one of the more powerfully executed scenes on the door, so perhaps Leopold examined it merely for technical merits, not because he was attuned to anything greater than the feeble powers a young Kindred such as he might possess.

In the end, Victoria shrugged. She was committed to her choice and to her methods. If she superstitiously feared every sign she saw, then she would indeed be a timid person who must surely rely on the games to make decisions—not just safe decisions—for her.

Victoria Ash entered a Heaven where she found only demons.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 10:10 PM
Boston Financial Corporation
Boston, Massachusetts



Benito Giovanni reclined behind his mammoth desk of cherry wood. His phones were organized as always, and while two nights ago he had sat here in irritation that he was receiving phone calls, he was now equally upset at the lack of one.

Lorenzo Giovanni was normally very reliable. In fact, Benito had already put a good word in for the ghoul. Lorenzo desired the Embrace, of course, as did virtually all Giovanni who learned there was more to their very extended family than undreamed-of wealth. Benito might have to rescind that recommendation, though, if Lorenzo did not call soon, or at least have a very valid excuse for his tardiness.

There was only so much time Benito could carve from his family responsibilities in the last forty-eight hours to devote to a matter that was, after all, a personal issue; but after a long discussion about security issues with his cousin, Michael, Benito had contacted Lorenzo in Atlanta.

The ghoul was engaged in some secretive mission there for the family that Benito did not grasp—nor did he wish to if the family deemed he was not one who needed to know—but as one of the few permanent Giovanni in that sole bastion of civilization in the South, the ghoul still had time to fulfill the special requests of other family members. He was only a ghoul, but he was a formidable one, so Benito felt no qualms about sending him to spy on the festivities at the High Museum.

Spying was necessary, as there was no way Lorenzo might be invited, or even accept Benito's invitation in his place. The affair was for Kindred only, and while Benito could have made a stink if the Toreador bitch in charge, Victoria Ash, denied permission to Lorenzo, Benito also realized this would bring disfavor upon his family by his having pressed the matter at all.

And now Lorenzo was late—very late—reporting back to Benito. He wanted fresh information, not something as stale as the night after, for that might be too late to take actions if the damned neonate who held Benito's life in his hands was in fact spotted at the scene.

He tapped his finger impatiently on the phone that had rung so often two nights before. Still nothing. Benito clenched his fingers and smashed his fist onto the desk. He almost cried out in rage as well, but he reined in his emotions. He was under tremendous stress, and this was not a time to give the Beast an opening.

He slowly returned his attention to the financial documents on his desk. At first, the numbers swirled and didn't make any logical sense, but with concentration, Benito devoured the information they held.

He quickly lifted his head and looked to the right, toward the door to his office. Something, just a flash of shadow perhaps, had passed. Without hesitation, Benito hovered his finger a millimeter above an alarm button under his desk. Meanwhile, he watched carefully for any other sign of movement.

Even though there was none, he remained poised.

Benito spoke toward the empty spaces of the room. "Randall?"

And again, "Randall?"

The inhuman whisper that replied was barely audible, but a fractured, almost demonic echo, repeated the word. "Yes," came the secondary voice.

Benito demanded, "Was that you moving just now?"

The same dark echo replied, "Yes."

"For what purpose? I am not in a state to tolerate such activity."

"The shadows were speaking to me. So I conversed."

Benito remained irritated, but the wraith was bound here to provide protection, so it was best to heed it in times like this.

Benito said, not without a hint of sarcasm however, "And what do the shadows tell you?"

"Not much," the formless wraith said. Then added, "Yet."

Benito sighed, then said, "Well, heed whatever signs you must, but do so without disturbing me. I am wary, but I still have work to complete."

There was no reply, and Benito expected none. He resumed his work immediately upon completing his command.

More time passed, and Benito suddenly interrupted his work to knock the central cellular phone, the one connected to the Giovanni network, onto the floor. "Call, damn it!" he shouted at the face-down phone where it had landed on the plush rug covering a portion of the hardwood floor.

Benito stared at the phone for a moment, and then stood to retrieve it. He reached it in two strides, and as he bent to grasp it, Randall's inaudible whisper presaged a deep amplification sounding a warning. "The shadows are speaking!"

Startled as much by Randall's voice as the note of alarm it sounded, Benito squatted on the floor, balancing and preparing himself for whatever might come next.

"What does the shadow say?" he demanded.

Randall said, "It says it is too late. They are here."

Benito's eyes flared in fright, but he quickly gauged his distance to both the desk with the alarm button and to the nearest stand of samurai swords. The nearest stand held the blades supposedly wielded by the so-called Tiger Warrior, a samurai who had hunted and exterminated ninja more than a half century ago. *How appropriate*, he thought to himself, as he saw ninja-like figures, four of them, step from the shadows of the room.

The nearest seemed to peel off the wall behind Benito's desk and stood crouched between the Giovanni and the alarm button. Two others welled up like black blood oozing from weeping welts. One was by the couch, and the other by the door out of the office. The last one seemed to sprout from a rug near the center of the office like a vine viewed through time-lapse photography.

"Unbelievable," was all Benito could manage in the first instant. Then, he took the offensive, for these might indeed be mortal assassins, and if so, then his lack of response would be the only way they could defeat him.

"Randall!" he shouted. "Duel!"

Benito saw the figure near the door, the one with the best vantage, look quickly about the room. When the Tiger Warrior's katana leapt from the stand at the near edge of the couch, the figure at the door shouted a warning to his comrades, or at least that's

what Benito imagined he did. No actual words could be heard; instead, darkness issued from the figure's mouth and formed a sinister mockery of a comic book's dialogue balloon, though one filled with the almost invisible pulsing of darkness.

However that darkness disseminated information, it was not in time. Appearing to float in mid-air, but actually brandished by an invisible spirit of the dead brought back to Earth by Benito from a hellish existence, the Tiger Warrior's katana whistled through the air. The weapon's blade was honed to a perfect edge, and the scores of folds of its metal executed by its creator made it strong. Strong and sharp enough at least to divide an assassin's arm from his torso even though the wraith called Randall could barely summon enough strength to manipulate the blade, let alone drive it through a foe.

The target of the attack was the assassin at the near edge of the leather couch. However, the assassins were evidently well-trained, for the apparent leader at the door was the only one to react to the attack. He reached into the tangle of darkness that stretched like old spider webs from the shadows around the door to wrap and obscure much of his body. Benito's glance lingered long enough to glimpse a long-nailed hand as it emerged and flipped deftly in the direction of the Tiger Warrior's katana. A flash of metal sped in that direction—presumably a knife or shuriken—as the commander must imagine an invisible yet nonetheless corporeal opponent wielding the blade.

That split-second was all Benito could afford, though, because the other two assassins ignored their comrade's plight and pressed the attack directly at Benito. This meant it might well be a suicide mission, or else the foe in the center of the room would have turned to assist his nearer and now one-armed ally.

The Giovanni focused his attention on the assassin nearest him, the one behind the desk who posed a more immediate threat and who also blocked the route to the alarm. Michael and other members of the security force might well be dead and destroyed already, but no alarm was ringing, so Benito imagined his best hope was to activate it now.

When Benito turned, he locked gazes with his foe for the barest portion of a second. The assassin aborted his attack in order to turn his head and stave off the powerful mind-control Benito could exercise.

"So, you know I'm Kindred," Benito shouted angrily. Their knowledge didn't matter. That millisecond their eyes had met was enough.

Benito succinctly commanded, "Retreat!"

The defensive posture of the assassin was abandoned as he somersaulted to a dead stop before rolling backward without a pause. He did hesitate a moment near Benito's chair, but the assassin seemed unable to resist the Giovanni's command, and his flight carried him past the alarm button, which Benito promptly scrambled to reach.

Meanwhile, the assassin set upon by Randall was too slow reacting to the threat, as he too assumed he merely faced an opponent he could not see, not one he was also unable to touch. With his remaining arm he threw punches to every side and height around the floating weapon, looking to land a blow against his assailant. The efforts, of course, proved fruitless, and the assassin's astonishment left him open to another sweep of the hardened and honed blade. This time, the arc of the katana carried it through the neck of its victim. The ligament, muscle and bone there gave way with the same ease as had the victim's arm.

Benito caught sight of the bloodless decapitation as he hustled toward his desk. The lack of blood was bad news, for it meant the assassins were likely Kindred, and

Benito was not old enough or powerful enough to handle four Kindred even with the assistance of an intangible ghost. Although, it was now two on two if the effectiveness of Benito's order to "retreat" persisted.

As if driving that point home, the other assassin who had targeted Benito grasped him from behind as the Giovanni scurried toward his desk. Instead of resisting, as Benito assumed his opponent expected, he quickly turned to his assailant. He whirled and dropped, hoping his quick move would allow him an opportunity to gaze into this one's eyes as well.

However, the maneuver was only marginally successful. The assassin reacted well, so he did not stumble over Benito's prone body, but he did not avert his gaze in time, and Benito widened his own orbs as if that would make his hypnotic compulsion do its work even more easily.

But Benito was disoriented as he stared into the face of his foe. There was nothing familiar to grasp, no normal landmark of facial contour to guide his reflexive attempt to lock eyes. The assassin's face was shrouded in an unnatural darkness, and though he desperately tried to stare through this haze from a mere handful of feet away, Benito was unable to penetrate it. This bewilderment cost him as it had cost the assassin who counterattacked Randall—it opened the Giovanni to an attack he could not defend in time.

The assassin's clenched fist caught Benito on the very tip of his chin, and the Giovanni reeled backward so awkwardly that he could not even respond to break his fall. His large chair did that job for him, the thick arm of it savaging a bloody welt in Benito's back. Benito then flopped facedown onto the floor, and just as he tried to roll to right himself, the great weight of the assassin dropped onto his back, pushing him back into the thick shag of the rug.

The attacker then clutched at Benito's arms, trying to secure them by the wrist or forearm so they could be immobilized behind his back. The first was gained quickly, and Benito writhed like a snake to keep his right arm free.

From his vantage of the floor, Benito saw the decapitated head of the other assassin lying in front of the desk. Then there was a flash of metal and the Tiger Warrior's sword fell to the ground beside the head. Either Randall had abandoned the weapon or it had been taken from him. Benito lifted his head to scream a new command to the wraith, but he was then clutched by the hair on the back of his head, and a strong arm jammed his face into the floor. The rug softened the blow somewhat, but since the assassin maintained the pressure, Benito was effectively blinded.

Benito's right arm was still free because its capture had been abandoned in favor of his head, so the Giovanni reached toward his desk, groping blindly in hopes of reaching the alarm. His first random flailing connected with the edge of the desk, and he immediately realized he was too far away to reach the button.

His only hope was the strength of the blood he held within him. With the briefest concentration, Benito sparked the conversion of some of his blood stores into the capacity for tremendous physical strength. His vision clouded with red and he felt a tingling in all his extremities. Then Benito bucked like a wild stallion.

Despite the commanding grip he'd held, the assassin was thrown like an incapable cowboy. Benito did not pause for even an instant to survey the wreckage of his office. Instead, he immediately pressed the silent alarm button. Only then, with his augmented

strength still coursing through his body, did he examine the scene of the battle as he stepped backwards to put distance between himself and the assassin he'd flung off.

The leader was no longer near the door. Instead, he stood in the center of the office, straddling the headless corpse. His hands were thick with blood because he was using his own obviously prodigious strength to bend the wakizashi that was the companion to the Tiger Warrior's katana. Not with all the blood his body might hold could Benito generate the kind of strength required to bend so formidable an object—a sword crafted by a master metalsmith. Only the other wakizashi still rested in its display stand, which meant its katana companion was probably already warped beyond use. Nevertheless, that blade soon animated as Randall seized the sole remaining weapon.

The Kindred Benito had commanded to flee was nowhere in sight. He must have been a weak-minded fool to be affected so thoroughly. Perhaps these assassins were physically powerful but vulnerable to mental attacks.

The assassin Benito had escaped moments ago stood his ground, facing Benito from about fifteen feet away. The Giovanni realized he was simply waiting for his commander to dispense with the invisible threat before they both advanced to take him. But Benito hoped Randall could hold out until Michael Giovanni arrived.

The wraith's weapon arced toward the commander, who still seemed to literally drip with darkness as with a physical thing. Indeed, when he side-stepped to avoid the strike, the sword left the puddle of darkness trailing an inky track like an octopus might leave in its wake. And before weak-armed Randall could regroup for another strike, the commander pounced and clapped his hands on opposite sides of the flat of the blade. With a quick and powerful turn of his hips, the assassin wrenched the blade from its invisible wielder, promptly grasped each end, and bent it.

Benito wryly reminded himself to display much lighter weapons in the future—perhaps épées—so Randall might press an attack more effectively.

The commander surveyed the room briefly and then spoke in another puff of black. The second assassin nodded his head slightly while keeping an unflinching watch over Benito.

Benito said, "What do you want? My death will only guarantee the endless baying of hounds at your heels. The Giovanni family will not idly set aside my death."

The Giovanni hoped to gain some time, but the effort was in vain. The two assassins, presumably Kindred assassins, advanced. Benito cursed. Where was Michael? And did this attack have anything to do with Lorenzo, or Atlanta, or Chicago? Had other assassins gotten to Lorenzo and killed him too?

Then the commander cocked his ear toward the door, and Benito exhaled in relief. He imagined the assassin must hear assistance drawing near.

When the door caved in from the impact of a thunderous kick, Benito reacted immediately. He thought to use the distraction to rush past the commander and gain the safety of Michael and guards. But it was he who was surprised, for though he reacted first and seemed to gain an advantage for it, in mid-flight he realized the commander had simply decided to pay no heed to the disintegrating door and legions of guards behind him. Instead, he slyly waited and pounced on Benito as the Giovanni attempted to pass.

The assassin commander grabbed Benito around the waist and neck, and both holds quickly tightened so that the Giovanni worried he would be crushed to death before Michael might extricate him from this restraint. The grip grew no tighter, though, than

what was required to choke off Benito's windpipe and gain absolute purchase around his midriff. Considering the strength of the commander, there was no hope that Benito might slip away.

The remaining masked assassin was suddenly at the side of his commander, and once they turned to face the figures issuing through the doorway into the office, they stood perfectly still. The security guards efficiently lined the back wall of the office and trained their weapons on every available inch of the area. In addition to the rifles and pistols they brandished, they were outfitted with bulletproof vests, visored helmets, and gas masks. Benito knew another member of the security force waited in the hall, ready to lob in gas grenades if such was required.

Benito could not imagine what the assassins planned. They were severely outnumbered and outgunned. Even a Kindred as powerful as the one who held Benito could be felled by enough bullets. If not permanently, then for long enough for other means of permanent disposal to be arranged. Killing Benito now—which the Giovanni supposed his captor could do in an instant—would only make their death certain. So perhaps they would use him as a hostage.

As Benito's thoughts spun and spun, he realized that time was passing and nothing more was happening. No dialogue. No fighting. No recognition. In shocked disbelief, Benito regarded the line of security officers that stood with weapons.

They looked in every direction throughout the office. Some of them even seemed to make eye contact with Benito, but they looked right through him. With growing apprehension and then terror, Benito realized that none of the guards saw any of the three figures before them. Somehow, the assassins must have hidden themselves, and that was powerful magic indeed. It must have been by this same means that they circumvented the security measures in the first place.

Benito kicked his legs and batted his arms and tried to scream despite the cinch on his throat. He managed only a sputtering whisper, and neither that nor his wild gyrations drew a single glance.

Benito watched as the guards suddenly eyed the desk and trained their weapons upon it.

"Mr. Giovanni?" one of them asked.

The Giovanni ceased his struggling then, for he knew it was in vain. Through some means unknown to him, the assassins were cloaking themselves and him. But surely the security guards could see that the place was a wreck. That a struggle must have taken place. But if so, why did they delay to alert others?

It was then that Michael stepped into the office. Benito's cousin was a bit less distinctively Giovanni than himself, but the resemblance was undeniable. Michael was a bit too broad-shouldered, too rugged, too muscular. In short, he was a bit too quintessentially American, and that was because Michael's grandmother had married outside the family, a mistake for which Michael's father had spent his lifetime atoning so that his son might be welcomed back into the family and granted the greatest gifts the family could bestow. Michael's father was punished by knowing what it was he could never attain, but he'd been a strong-willed man—more Giovanni than his treacherous mother—and he used that knowledge not to rail at his own misfortune but to goad himself toward redemption.

Michael was Kindred, his family's debt repaid, but he was yet low in the hierarchy, so he merely commanded the security force. Nevertheless, like his father, he did what was required of him and he generally did it well. He obviously had the loyalty and respect of the men in his employ, for when he stepped into the room they remained relaxed and in position. Not one of them adopted a more effective stance or a more professional demeanor. They all obviously gave everything they had without concern for appearances.

"What's the situation here?" Michael asked.

One of the men replied, "Mr. Giovanni's office is secured, sir, with the possible exception of beneath the desk. We called out for him, but there was no reply."

Michael turned to look at the desk as well. He squinted his eyes for a moment and seem to concentrate his senses on it, staring with such force that he seemed to expect to peer through the solid wood construction. Benito knew his cousin possessed extraordinary senses, even a sixth sense of sorts, so if anyone could pierce the shroud obscuring these assassins, then it might be him. If he failed, then he was undone. And likely dead as well.

The assassin commander seemed to reach the same conclusion, for he shuffled from the center of the room toward the far wall where the couch stood. The other assassin followed carefully, seemingly placing his feet where the commander's trod as well.

The life-preserving instincts in Benito's mind demanded that he make a final effort to draw attention to himself, no matter how helpless the chances, but the Giovanni ignored them; he was too fascinated by the powerful forces at work now: the environment-piercing senses of Michael Giovanni versus the cloaking veil draped over the area by the assassins.

The assassins won handily, for though Benito's cousin seemed ill-at-ease, his powers were too feeble.

Michael Giovanni's intense gaze lingered on the desk for a moment more, and he said, "No one is there." Benito watched as the guards relaxed their weapons. But before the tension drained from their bodies, they were re-alerted, for Michael—eyes still fiery slits to illuminate the deepest shadow—continued a slow appraisal of the room. "Something..." he muttered.

When Michael's wary gaze passed over Benito, the captive Giovanni did give into his life-preserving instincts and he struggled mightily by kicking and twisting with as much energy as before. But the assassin choked and restrained him even more viciously, and in that second, Benito understood he was doomed. In the face of such power, nearly any Kindred would be, and Benito decided he could not mourn a death that drew the attention of one so mighty as this commander. It would be like a newborn gazelle expecting to live despite the determined predation of a healthy cheetah.

Finally, Michael stopped and said, "Damn alarm is driving me to distraction." The Giovanni made a slashing motion before his throat as he glanced into the hallway outside the office door. A few seconds later, Michael relaxed. Benito realized that, though the alarm was silent to most, it was only so to those who possessed senses as ordinary as his own, while Michael must hear it even in this room. Benito wondered if the assassins heard it, and he concluded they must.

Then Michael suddenly craned his head toward the ceiling again. "I said turn it off," he shouted testily through the open office door. "Don't play games with me now, Daniel."

A voice carried from the hallway, "I didn't reactivate it, sir. The schematic indicates that the alarm was activated from Mr. Benito's office again."

At that, the security guards immediately readied themselves once more. Benito even believed the assassins seemed troubled by the news. Benito was certainly confused.

Only Michael appeared unflapped, and he spoke in the direction of the desk. "Spirit, quit your haunting. Benito has never confirmed your existence to me, but I've always known you must be here. Quit these games now, or your master, who will be informed of your impudence as it is, will have no reason to show you mercy."

A pause, then Michael's eyes glanced toward the ceiling and back to the desk. "Good," he said. Then, to his men, he said, "Find Mr. Benito. Even a false alarm such as this must be investigated thoroughly."

Benito shook with helpless, hopeless rage. Randall clearly saw an opportunity to extricate himself from Benito's service. He wasn't doing anything contrary to Benito's commands, and because Benito's voice was choked off, no new orders could be given. Randall was therefore protected from the safeguards Benito had in place to punish the wraith. If the Giovanni ever escaped this predicament, then Randall would pay for this; but treachery in a crucial moment was the price of forcing spirits of the dead to aid you.

When the guards dispersed to investigate every corner of the office and the other rooms on the floor, the assassins slipped from the office and into the hall. They moved down the hall and passed a trio of men who crouched over computers and other instruments. Then they moved to the stairs, to the first floor, and finally out of the building.

Floating unseen amidst so much activity, Benito felt as a shade passing from life to death. Perhaps only as a wraith would Benito gain revenge on Randall.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 10:21 PM
Chandler Room, Omni Hotel at CNN Center
Atlanta, Georgia



If anything, Archbishop Polonia's announcement in the previous night's council meeting had only increased the intensity of the infighting among the Sabbat war councilors. There had already been no fewer than three casualties during the evening's proceedings and the pace did not appear to be slackening noticeably.

The grave news that Polonia had brought to the council was that all their plans had suddenly and irrevocably changed. Months of effort and sums of money that would have put many nations' gross national products to shame had been expended on positioning the Sabbat for a blood siege. Forces from as far afield as Miami, New York and, most startlingly, Madrid had moved stealthily into position. The forward agents had whittled away at the Camarilla's infrastructure, fueling the anarch revolt and jeopardizing the Masquerade. They had summoned the leading powers, advisors and specialists of two continents to attend this council of war. They had argued and threatened and eventually forged a strategy that would bring the city of Atlanta slowly and inexorably to her knees.

And now all of that effort was overturned in a single evening, in a single utterance. There would be no siege.

It had taken some time to quell the initial commotion (which bordered on total riot) that accompanied this pronouncement. Only then had Polonia been able to explain his enigmatic declaration.

"There will be no siege, gentlemen, because the battle for Atlanta will be decided by one single, irresistible assault. We will sack the city, smashing every last shard of resistance in an all-out offensive. That offensive, gentlemen, will take place tomorrow evening at precisely midnight."

The stunned silence that had met that pronouncement was a marked contrast to the unbridled chaos that reigned in the council chambers tonight. The news had had its chance to sink in, to work its transformations. Where last night's gathering had been a somber council of war, this night's assembly was a whooping war party waiting to be loosed that it might massacre its unsuspecting victims.

Polonia was not entirely pleased by this turn of events. For one thing, the unruly crowd was *rearranging* things, and not entirely to his satisfaction.

He had gone to some effort to ensure that everything was just so for this momentous meeting. He noticed the first of the glaring changes immediately upon entering the council chambers this evening. It seemed that for some inexplicable reason, someone or -ones must have broken into the hall for some early-morning mischief. The stolid circular conference table that had dominated the room—which he had brought in at considerable expense—was gone. Missing. A seven-hundred-pound table.

It had been replaced with a much more contemporary conference table. In Polonia's eyes, the immediate disadvantage of this arrangement was that the long rectangular

table had a distinct head and foot—a small fact that radically altered the rules of precedence for seating the assembled dignitaries. A small fact to which Polonia attributed at least one of the three—now four, he corrected himself—untimely deaths this evening.

To make matters worse, the table itself was made of an opaque black glass, polished to a mirror-like shine. This last property was causing not a few of the Lasombra some measure of ill-concealed discomfort. More than once, Polonia noted, his lieutenant Costello jerked back sharply as if stung, when his forearms accidentally came into contact with the table.

Polonia could see the already strained tempers beginning to grind together. Fortunately, the foul mood of his fellow Lasombra was somewhat offset by the capering of the Tzimisce. The fiends were in their element. Foraging parties burst in upon the assembly at odd intervals, bearing grisly trophies of their excursions into the city. These they hung up about the room until there were no fewer than a score of corpses dangling from the ceiling.

Some, like the young Toreador, were hanged by the neck. Others were inverted and slit to the sternum, their blood spilling into commandeered ice buckets. Others still were bent double and hauled up by ropes bound about their waists.

The rest of the room was in a similar state of utter disarray. Carefully drafted and numbered plans for the assault were strewn haphazardly about the table. Photo dossiers on important Camarilla targets had grown hopelessly mingled and many of the pictures had been pinned to the wall and then slashed into tatters. The carefully arranged place cards were swept to the floor to clear the way for impromptu bouts of arm-wrestling.

Presiding over this reign of chaos, the heady scent of blood filled the room. The guests poured generously, sloppily from cut-glass decanters brimming with that most common of all red wines. They passed silver trays of jellied candies that gave every sign of only recently having coagulated.

Polonia's nerves, however, were on edge and he did not give in to the temptations of these delicacies. Tonight it would be very easy to indulge himself, to drink deeply of the blood until it sang in his ears and formed a crimson film before his eyes. To allow the Beast within to test its tether.

But tonight he must remain vigilant—not only against the desperate Camarilla who would be fighting for their very unives, but also against his brothers in the Sabbat who would be looking to improve their lot through any means at their disposal.

For many, this would mean a grab for glory on the field of battle. Polonia did not doubt that many hunting trophies and keepsakes would be harvested this night—mementos that could be brought out as a diversion to while away some cruel and brutally short winter evening, decades hence.

For others, the assault would mark the culmination of their intrigues and plays for political power. In the unfolding of the final act, these powerbrokers would be bringing to bear all of their resources. And very few would scruple at crushing anyone so foolish as to stumble in upon their dark compacts.

And then there were always the opportunists, who knew full well that the assault would provide the perfect cover for the disappearance of a careless rival, or the entertaining of any of a host of other vices that even the Sabbat normally frowned upon.

Polonia found himself hoping that enough of the council would survive the remaining two hours before the assault to carry the project through to its completion.

Fortunately, the captains of the pivotal forces spearheading the attack were already dispatched and taking up their positions in the field around the High Museum of Art.

There had been a good deal of argument, of course, over which forces should have the honor of leading the attack and incidentally securing the lion's share of the glory—discussions to which Polonia attributed two more of the evening's fatalities.

Tonight's high-society gathering at the High would bring together all of the notable Camarilla leaders in the city under one roof. All the Sabbath had to do was bring down that roof.

Polonia was reflecting upon how this might be best accomplished, and watching an altercation that was probably casualty number five developing, when his attention was caught by the sound of the chamber's door opening. He was perhaps overly sensitive to this occurrence as he was presently seated with his back toward it.

The choice was his own, of course. This option was far preferable to the only other alternative: to have at least one of his fellow councilors seated between himself and the only means of egress from the chamber. Given the nature and disposition of his guests, Polonia had decided he would be better off at the mercy of whoever might be lurking *outside* the room.

The figure who entered was Polonia's own herald, who had been stationed directly outside the door. Polonia was not such a fool, after all, as to leave his back unguarded.

The herald bowed to his master and then, in answer to a questioning look, rolled his eyes upward. The gesture nearly dislodged one of the orbs that clung precariously to its sunken socket.

Inverting his axe, the herald rapped once sharply upon the floor. "The Lady Vykos, legate, nuncio and ambassador extraordinaire of His Eminence, the Cardinal Monçada."

He stepped aside as the elegantly attired figure swept forward. She was dressed in the style of a sixteenth-century noblewoman—the long flowing gown, the puffed sleeves cuffed midway up the forearm, the rigid tombstone-shaped collar that stood out well above her shoulders, razor-straight in the front and gently curving around to meet behind the nape of her neck.

Her looks were unexceptional. Her mouth was terse, slightly lined perhaps, with the telltale hint of cruelty barely discernible at the corners. Her large dark eyes were half closed in an affected languor, but they missed nothing. Her hair was piled high upon her head and bound in place with perfumed ribbons.

As the unremarkable lady entered the room, the assembled Tzimisce went absolutely berserk. A chorus of cries went up from the capering mob.

"The Blood Countess!"

"It is she, I tell you. Bathory!"

"The coat of arms. There! Embroidered on her collar."

"Yes, the dragon swallowing its own tail. It is she!"

"What are those maniacs going on about?" Sebastian leaned over to ask his master.

"Carefully," the venerable Borges exhaled the word rather than spoke it. "Tread lightly. I think they say that there is a serpent loosed among us."

"No, master, what they said was..." Sebastian suddenly fell silent. He knew full well that Borges's hearing far surpassed his own. Decades of living without the benefit of eyesight had fine-tuned his master's hearing to a level far beyond even what a Cainite might expect.

No, Borges had not misheard. He was, rather, supplying his protégé with additional information that might well prove necessary to Sebastian's well-being. If Borges said there was a viper in their midst, Sebastian was not about to leave his feet dangling within easy reach of the floor.

Borges was not unaware, of course, of the legendary and sadistic exploits of the Blood Countess. The name of Bathory itself was like a familiar and not altogether pleasant exhalation from the Old Country. The syllables were inexorably linked with dark tales of the methodical torture, maiming and murder of countless young women. What had begun with the taking out of a furious temper upon the serving maids of her estate, was then nourished by the devising of elaborate and ingenious punishments, and eventually culminated in a predilection for bathing in the rejuvenating blood of young maidens. By the time Bathory was finally brought to trial in 1610, her accusers had conservatively placed the total number of her victims at just about 650 souls.

It was much more likely that Vykos was deliberately exploiting this myth to her advantage rather than the alternative—that she was, in fact, the Tzimisce patron saint in the flesh.

Either way, this Vykos seemed intent on pushing the number of deaths attributable to the countess even higher. In her hand, she held a delicate silk handkerchief, which she used to carry a distasteful burden—the severed head of an Assamite.

With a casual shrug, she heaved the head onto the table, where it rolled some distance before coming to rest.

"Your pardon, my lords and ladies, for the lateness of my arrival. As you can see, I have been engaged in proving that there is no force—neither among the living nor the dead—that can deny us our victory here tonight. The head of the assassin that was sent against me is only the first gift I lay before you this night." Vykos unfastened the curious necklace she wore. It was shaped to resemble a pair of folded hands. The smallest finger of each hand was grossly elongated and stretched all the way back around to the nape of her neck, clasping to hold the necklace in place. Vykos tossed the necklace after the head. As all eyes turned to these dismembered offerings, no one failed to note the disturbing dance of arcane symbols upon the palm.

"The hands belong to Hannah," Vykos announced, "the Tremere chantry leader. As I said, no one will deny us."

Cries of "Bathory!" and "Death to the warlocks!" erupted from all around the table. Foremost among the company of gibbering Tzimisce, the Butcher of Prague viciously tore into the dangling corpses nearest him. His wicked claws, as sharp and efficient as shears, reaped a bountiful harvest of alabaster limbs. These he laid at the feet of the Lady like an offering.

Spurred on by his example, the fiends laid into the bodies surrounding them with reckless abandon. Most of their victims had been previously rendered inanimate and well beyond the reach of pain by the efforts of the hunting parties. No small portion of their grisly harvest, however, was commandeered from the fiends' fellow councilors in the excitement of the moment. The Tzimisce lined the path before her with dismembered arms and legs that had been slashed, sawed, torn and, in some cases, bitten off cleanly from their owners. She glided forward, never once losing her footing among the tangle of limbs and never once having to condescend to set her foot upon the floor.

The pathway thus created ran to a place of honor that had been cleared at the center of one of the long sides of the table. There, one enraptured Tzimisce had already crafted his body into the frame of an imposing throne. His fellows were throwing large, wet clumps of flesh upon this framework, much as a potter might throw clay onto the wheel.

The throne swelled in size, looming ever larger under their efforts.

Vykos ascended to the still-living throne amidst a scene of pandemonium that would have put to shame the best efforts of seven of the nine hells.

She raised her hand for silence, but it was not forthcoming.

She attempted to raise her voice above the clamor but her words were carried away by the enthusiasm of her devotees.

With a flutter of skirts, she stepped down from the rapidly ascending throne onto the conference table and strode boldly out into its center. This curious displacement of a person walking atop the table seemed to startle the cavorting fiends as no amount of shrieking or bloodletting ever could. All eyes were upon her.

“Thank you. Thank you all for your... affectionate welcome.”

She pressed on quickly as the clamor began to rise once again. “You are no doubt aware that only the space of a few short hours stands between us and the utter and devastating conquest of the city of Atlanta. Two nights ago you heard the venerable Borges relate to you tales of the glory of the pending Blood Siege. Last night, Polonia came to you with a compelling plan for launching a daring and decisive assault.

“But I say to you, that the conquest of Atlanta will be accomplished by neither siege nor assault.” She paused to let her words sink in. “Tonight, gentlemen, our forces will totally overrun the unsuspecting Camarilla. We have the advantage of them in numbers, tactics, power and surprise. Our single-minded devotion to the cause allows no room for failure.

“The Camarilla is weakened by attrition, civil disorder, anarch revolt, the exile of the Brujah, the absence of the Gangrel, and the unfortunate demise of the leader of the Tremere chantry.” Her lip curled into a grimace of a smile as she swept Hannah’s hands from the table with the side of one slippered foot.

“But it will not be a battle, gentlemen. It will be a rout, a glorious fire dance. It is one of the most ancient and glorious traditions of our people—it is party, ritual and wild bacchic revel. It is a time of steeling our courage and casting our prowess into the very faces of God, Cainite and man.”

Polonia sat well back in his chair in shocked silence. This shameful display was already well out of hand. He had hopelessly lost track of the current body count among the raging mayhem. He firmed his resolve. This Vykos must be stopped and stopped quickly, before her fanatic converts brought the entire council chamber crashing down around them.

Polonia knew that even his voice, from which many present were accustomed to receive commands in the midst of pitched conflict, was unlikely to shout down this frenzied mob of zealous Tzimisce. Doubtless, debate and negotiation were not what was called for here. This situation required a more brutal and decisive solution.

Fortunately, Polonia had prepared for just such an eventuality. Deliberately, he folded his hands before him on the table. He noted with mild distaste that its surface sent an uncomfortable crawling and stinging sensation up his arms, much as if he had unknowingly brushed a nest of fire ants.

Slowly, he twisted his episcopal ring around in one full circuit anti-clockwise.

Even Polonia had some difficulty following the exact sequence of events set into motion at this prearranged signal.

Vykos was caught up in the fervor of her own exhortations. “And it will not end here, gentlemen. Already, our advance forces are on the move. By week’s end we shall smash the Camarilla forces in...”

She was brought up short by the appearance of the hilt of a delicate silver knife protruding from between her shoulder blades. There was an audible gasp from the assembly, followed by cries of dismay and, almost immediately, of fury.

Vykos took one staggering step forward, and nearly pitched from the table into the press of her followers. Many nearby Lasombra cautiously edged away toward the shadowed recesses of the chamber.

A voice whispered in Polonia’s ear, the voice of the envoy from the shadow-walking ritual he had enacted only two short nights ago. “It is done, master. I am bidden to ask you to come among us again at your earliest convenience. We have much news to discuss and we now have a boon to ask of you in return.”

When Polonia did not object, the envoy pressed on. “Think upon your wretched servant and have pity. It would be callous indeed for you to stay away longer than it takes for this wound—which I have received in your service this night—to heal. I have suffered the touch of silver for your sake. Come to us soon.”

Polonia rubbed his temples and nodded. The voice was gone as quickly as it had come. He knew that no one else had overheard, that no one else could have overheard. What concerned him more at this moment was Vykos.

As he watched, Vykos slowly, painfully, turned to face her assailant. Her eye immediately fell upon Averros. Averros glanced quickly to one side and then the other. Finding himself alone, the sole source of her scrutiny, he raised a hand in protest.

“No, my lady. You are mistaken,” he began. The nearly crazed mob of Tzimisce surged toward him, drowning out his denials. It was as if the wave of fiends had fused into a vast entity animated by a single will. The amorphous horror seemed to fill the room. It boasted no fewer than twenty heads and some fifty arms. Some of these flailing appendages terminated in vicious claws, others in slimed tentacles, others still in gaping maws. Averros saw numerous weapons borne aloft by the churning waters. Among the flotsam and jetsam, jagged shards of shattered crystal decanters threatened. Numerous bludgeoning limbs that had lined Vykos’s path now loomed over him. Not a few chairs in various states of ruin rode the flood tide.

The irresistible wall of flesh and debris crashed over him. He felt himself going under, drawn down by a riptide that left him with the distinct impression of dozens of hands clutching at his legs and ankles, dragging him to his death. He may have screamed in horror as the surge of shapeless flesh closed over his head. But the insignificant sound was lost in the eternal roar of the surf.

Vox populi, vox dei. The voice of the people is the voice of God.

Vykos bent nearly double as if under a great burden. Seemingly, the additional weight of the delicate dagger upon her back was simply too much for her to bear. She staggered beneath her load and fell heavily to one knee.

The Tzimisce wave surged again, this time toward the table and their fallen lady. But it drew back hesitatingly from that shoreline, reluctant to touch their patron—as if by doing so they might undo the magic of her incarnation, dispel the vision. They could not endure the possibility that their salvation might prove as fleeting and insubstantial as a morning fog upon the beach.

As the tide withdrew, it deposited its latest victim upon the rocky shore. Vykos did not even look at the mangled body.

With a cry of undiluted agony, she rolled her shoulders as if to work some terrible kink out of them. As she did so, the haft of the silver knife also rolled. It crested her shoulder like the mast of a tall ship coming over the horizon. The blade's course was jarringly arrested as it ran painfully aground upon her collarbone. But it was enough. The fingers of her right hand closed over the finely wrought hilt and drew forth the blade. A fountain of blood arced toward the ceiling as Vykos slumped.

Polonia could no longer see her slight form over the swirling maelstrom of fanatics that pressed in upon her. He was aware that he was standing now, craning forward, although he could not remember rising to his feet.

Something was happening. There was some commotion there, but he could make out no details amidst the throng. Suddenly, from the very edge of the table nearest the fallen Vykos, a Tzimisce screamed. Polonia instinctively shrank from the hideous sound. The pitiful victim had been crushed, no doubt, between the weight of its fellows and the unyielding surface of the table.

But there was an undertone of uncertainty to Polonia's conjecture. He could not say with confidence that the howl was one of pain. Perhaps it was one of grief. It might well be that the mournful cry heralded the death of Vykos, the Lord have mercy upon her black heart.

It was all such a great waste, Polonia reflected. This Vykos had traveled thousands of miles to make her bid for power here at the most significant Sabbat gathering on this continent in over a century. She had played her hand boldly and with great dramatic flair. And she had very nearly pulled it off.

Polonia could not help thinking of what a fearsome adversary the dread Monçada must truly be to command the loyalties of such potent and unpredictable minions. He resolved to steer well clear of the machinations of the Cardinal Maledictus Sanguine for the foreseeable future. Perhaps a decade or so hence, Polonia might attempt to reestablish relations by inviting the cardinal to follow the fine precedent he had set here in Atlanta—to commit some forces to the siege of Buffalo or Atlantic City or some other logical extension of Polonia's domain.

Another shriek shattered the solemn silence of the council chamber. This time, Polonia was even less certain of the signs and omens present in the pregnant outcry. If he was not greatly mistaken, it sounded like a howl of shuddering ecstasy.

Surely not! They would not dare. Polonia fumed and began to shoulder his way forward through the throng, swinging his crosier before him in an attempt to clear the path. The shifting mob unconsciously resisted his efforts. It was like swimming through tar, or molasses, or quicksand.

"Halt! Desist immediately or suffer my extreme disfavor! You will not defile this council with your unclean hungers—with your foul diablerie. Stop, I command it!"

Suddenly the crowd seemed to part before him and he stumbled forward. The sight that greeted his eyes stopped him cold.

The body of Averros was there, on the floor. But it was not the body of Averros. It was twisted, contorted, torn from its original God-given shape. Now it resembled nothing more than a low marble altar.

The sickly pink marble was veined through with lines of palest blue. It was no stone that occurred naturally. More disturbingly, it seemed to pulse slowly and rhythmically. Crouched over a natural basin in the top of the altar was Vykos. The blood still seeped from the wound above her collarbone and drained softly into the nearly full basin below.

As Polonia watched, a Tzimisce staggered forward toward the basin. He picked up the delicate silver knife that rested beside the recessed basin, and made a deep, cross-shaped incision in his palm. Then, steadily meeting Vykos's eyes, he squeezed his fist over the basin.

A small stream of blood ran from his hand and down his wrist before abandoning itself to the fall. Vykos cupped her hands and dipped them into the font, drawing up a double handful of the mingled blood. She extended her hands before the young Tzimisce's enrapt face. "One blood," she recited softly, affectionately.

He was hers utterly. "One body," he replied solemnly. He drank deeply with closed eyes, in reverence and rapture. Taking her wrists gently, he licked her palm clean of blood.

The communicant bowed and withdrew, only to be immediately replaced by another.

Polonia got quickly to his feet, leaning heavily upon his crosier as he did so. The crowd did not seem to resist him at all on his journey back outward from the center of the mystery rite. He swung his crosier before him a few times, nonetheless, just for effect. He was anxious to escape any further pandemonium that was in store this night—the unbridled carnage that was now clearly beyond his meager power to prevent or even redirect.

As he none-too-gently brushed past his herald, he ordered, "Have my commanders attend upon me in my chambers. *All* of them," he added firmly, with a significant glance back over his shoulder.

As the doors of the council chamber thudded closed behind him, he could already pick out the first wild, bacchic strains of the fire dance.

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Victoria smiled as she closed the door of Heaven behind her. The black portent of the Tenth Commandment was forgotten at the sight of her party. It was glorious.

From her slightly elevated vantage atop the few steps on the gallery side of the doors of Heaven and Hell, Victoria took in the sight and scenes of her party. Statues and sculptures so grotesque that their assembled whole made the gallery seem the lair of a decadent and mad king. Vampires dressed in rags. Vampires dressed tactfully and expensively. Servants bearing trays of crystal flutes filled a hairsbreadth shy of the lip with rich ruby blood.

All of this was amidst of a veritable maze constructed from sheets of the same opaque, shatterproof glass that lined the outer windows of the High. The eight-foot-high and ten-foot-long sections of glass divided the gallery like crooked snakes. Here were long stretches interrupted only by a narrow portal. There were numerous broken sections that created a maze capable of hiding an individual no matter the direction from which one attempted to view him. Anyone not armed with lenses like those in Victoria's glasses, that is.

All this was spread before Victoria, and for a moment the scene seemed a choreographed dance. With Victoria's arrival, though, the rehearsal was over, and these dark and dangerous figures amidst the gothic and terrible set would begin to play games in earnest.

Or at least they had better, for Victoria played no other way, especially tonight, when the auspices were right and she planned a bold move to catapult her toward the princeship of Atlanta. The secondary ambition of becoming a powerbroker in this city—becoming an integral part of the new structure—was very secondary now that her entrance had been made through Heaven. She was an angel accepting a fall so she might rule this rabble.

The population of Kindred in Atlanta was still greatly diminished from its level prior to the Blood Curse, but the dozen or so Victoria expected within seemed a suitable lot. Even the sole Caitiff Victoria noted was dressed pleasingly, although like many other Kindred, Victoria harbored vague fears about these clanless vampires. This new breed of Caitiff was often not clanless for the traditional reason of a dead or missing sire who might otherwise claim the childe, but because they were too many generations removed from the source of Kindred power and their blood was too thin to support the kind of differentiation and power that a clan identity provided.

The Time of Thin Blood was one name Victoria had heard applied to the recent proliferation of Caitiff. But this one—Victoria believed her name was Stella—showed some class. She was a dainty little thing and sported little in the way of defining feminine attributes, which to Victoria meant Stella lacked voluptuousness, but the Caitiff was dressed in a tuxedo which granted her petite frame and short-cut hair a certain charming and sexual quality. Victoria determined to keep her eyes on that one.

It was such Kindred that populated the fourth floor of the High Museum of Art. The room seemed suddenly larger now that people were within it, for they suggested scale to the vaulting ceilings and the sometimes enormous sculptures spread across the room.

The room was long enough to justify the use of the opera glasses Victoria carried in a pocket sewn into her pseudo-Grecian garb. She did not utilize the special lenses of those glasses now, but she knew there were a handful more Kindred present than those she could see at the moment, so some must be tucked into the alcoves of glass.

These alcoves would allow the Kindred here some sense of privacy, for they would imagine themselves safely out of view for a few words with a friend or foe. And they would be thus protected from everyone but Victoria, who was a marvelous lip-reader.

Also set within some of these alcoves were the sculptures that were the artistic attraction of the evening. No Toreador party was possible without such pretension, and Victoria was worldly enough to understand a portion of it was pretense. But whether it was her variety of Kindred blood or an appreciation built over centuries of watching change that caused her to feel thusly, Victoria did hold a true respect for this art form. The profound conflict of time in sculpture was what attracted her. Each piece cast in bronze or carved from marble or granite was as eternal and enduring as the Kindred, yet the brief gestures and fleeting moments captured within the pieces were archetypically mortal.

For guests who could not appreciate the work, the sculptures would at least provide a semblance of an excuse to strike up a conversation on other matters entirely.

Where Victoria looked across the room, a hooded figure held his champagne flute aloft in a silent toast to Victoria. The Toreador knew this must be Rolph, an unfortunate yet noble-hearted member of the horribly disfigured Nosferatu clan, who had obviously accepted Victoria's invitation. Victoria regretted the invitation for a moment, for like most Toreador, she preferred beauty, and the hideous Nosferatu hardly passed that test. But she wanted the Nosferatu in her power bloc, and when it came to political allies, the information-grubbing Nosferatu were among the best to count as friends.

The robe Rolph wore was far from sumptuous, but Victoria expected that at minimum it did not smell of the sewers and underground the Nosferatu preferred to frequent. That was consolation enough for Victoria; she could expect no more.

She nodded back to him in acceptance of his appreciation. She could not see a face within the dark folds of Rolph's hood, but she imagined him smiling before he took a small sip of the fresh blood that thickly coated the crystal flute.

"Milady?"

Victoria absently took a flute of her own from a tray a servant offered. She looked to return Rolph's toast, but he was gone. Nosferatu had a way of doing that. They were masters of moving unseen. Their wretched ugliness demanded it, for otherwise their mere presence would shatter the Masquerade.

Victoria did another quick sweep of the room. She saw Cyndy trying to insinuate herself into the proximity of Javic, a Gangrel new to Atlanta who had requested and received permission to dwell here from Prince Benison. Javic was a Slav, and Victoria knew his story included something of the recent events in Bosnia, but she did not know whether this Kindred had been on the giving or receiving side or even whether he had been mortal or immortal at the time.

He carried himself confidently enough, so perhaps he was an elder. That plus his dark and rugged good looks was what must have set Cyndy after him, Victoria supposed. That and the mystery of him, for he was still practically a stranger. Like many Gangrel, or so Victoria believed, Javic appeared to prefer his own company to the virtual exclusion of all others, as he made no effort to entertain Cyndy. Victoria wasn't even certain where he dwelt, though Atlanta was green enough to support a clutch of Gangrel within as well as outside the city.

Cyndy noticed Victoria watching her and beyond that, looking at Javic. She made a dismissive gesture toward Victoria and tried to place herself between the Slav and her hostess. All she managed, though, was to draw Javic's attention to Victoria.

The Toreador allowed a coy but lingering smile to move her lips. Javic's expression did not change, but the fact that he held her gaze for longer than a glance was as good as a smile back. Besides, it infuriated Cyndy, who tried to take Javic by the arm and step him elsewhere. But that was too much for the Gangrel, and he shook her off so quickly and deftly that Cyndy almost fell. In fact, she would have, but Javic recovered before she did and saved her from a disgraceful collapse. His help was mechanical, though, and had nothing of the intimacy Cyndy might spend a long night trying to engender.

Victoria noted Leopold stepping into the hidden confines of a nearby alcove that contained a bronze enlargement of Jean-Jacques Feuchère's *Satan*, which Victoria had arranged to borrow from a Los Angeles museum. She thought she might not return it, but she wasn't sure what the ramifications of that would be. There was presumably a means to make the proper people out West forget it had been loaned, or at least to whom it had been loaned.

Victoria watched with amusement when Stella stepped in that direction as well. They would be hidden from plain view, but Victoria suspected nothing would pass between them that required the use of her opera glasses.



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Leopold sought the first cover he could find, a decision for which he ruefully chided himself when he realized he should have pushed farther into the room and away from the crowd of Kindred near the entrance.

But he was flustered. Stomaching Cyndy's whining and posturing on the elevator ride from the parking garage had made him so. He'd been first into the elevator, and though Cyndy was some distance off, the rude ghoul who operated the lift refused to take Leopold up and then return for Cyndy.

If ever there was a Toreador who gave the clan a bad name, then it was Cyndy. A poseur, and beyond that a poser. Her and her damnable strip joints. No wonder Victoria barely took notice of the girl.

To add to his discomfort, he was then thrust into the presence of Victoria Ash as soon as he stepped off the elevator, again at the rude behest of the ghoul. When Leopold noted Cyndy's reactions, then he knew Victoria must have been there waiting to greet her guests. Why he had thought it would be otherwise, he wasn't certain. It seemed Victoria ranked higher than most of her guests, so why not await them beyond the entrance?

The ghoul had insisted, however, so Leopold was forced to meet her with scant preparation. He was amazed that he had calmed himself so well, but even so he'd wanted to blurt out that he'd sculpted her. That she was the key to the unknowns that plagued him. But it would have been ridiculous, because in all likelihood, he was ridiculously wrong.

Leopold prayed that Hannah would have something to tell him. He shuddered to think of the Tremere's odd behavior the night before, but he could still feel her alabaster flesh beneath his fingertips. He suspected he'd never be able to look at her again without imagining that exchange, but perhaps that was as she wished it. The machinations of Kindred were largely beyond him, and those of the Tremere surely were, or at least this one Tremere.

Thankfully, it wasn't Cyndy who cornered him in an alcove of the strange glass that created borders and walls around the chamber. Instead, it was Stella, a clanless one, a Caitiff, whom Leopold would have welcomed had he not preferred privacy right now.

The Toreador had met Stella on three previous occasions—a high incidence rate for his normal pattern of fraternization with other Kindred. Leopold preferred to dwell on the last of those three times only, for the first two had been gruesome occasions. Regardless, when he saw the pretty young woman approach him, his thoughts flashed back briefly to all prior occasions.

The first was shortly after her Embrace, when some anarch whose system was flooded with drugs and alcohol must have forgotten he was Kindred, for he'd tried to rape Stella before he Embraced her out of frustration.

The second meeting had been much the same, though this time it was a mortal who had tried to be rough with her. In her fear she'd reverted to mortal patterns as well,

and she forgot that she was now the hunter and the hoodlum the prey. It was only when Leopold stumbled upon the attack during one of his tours of the narrow streets that ran perpendicular to Ponce that she'd unleashed some of her might on the thug. Leopold's cry snapped her out of that trance, and Stella had sucked the man dry. Leopold then helped her destroy the body, which fortunately turned out to be no one anyone else wanted to find.

The third time had been only a few months ago when the two Kindred discovered that they were both attending a showing of the black-and-white classic movie "Metropolis" at the Fabulous Fox Theater, which was only a few blocks down Peachtree from the High. Leopold went as much to see the interior of the Fox as to see the old science-fiction movie. The stars that seemed to twinkle on the ceiling of the theater would have been more interesting if Leopold's entire life wasn't spent under the nighttime sky, but the ornate decorations of the place—especially the Egyptian Ballroom with its hieroglyphic-inscribed ceiling—fired Leopold's imagination.

Leopold had seen Stella first, and he sat apart from her during the show—almost left altogether—because he didn't want to be a reminder of the previous encounters. However, after the movie, the Caitiff had approached Leopold as if he was a valued friend, not just a timely rescuer. So after seeing who could better feign drinking an espresso at a nearby coffee house, they returned to Leopold's home and talked for much of the night.

Leopold had tried to sculpt Stella's likeness, but she was one of his many failures. She'd been sympathetic; but more than that, she would have been an excellent model, for Leopold knew enough of the tragedy in her life to lend depth to any work she modeled.

Stella was a small woman, perhaps only four and half feet tall. Her hair short and attractively styled, she was just old enough to look mature and to possess little crinkles around her eyes, but youthful enough to pass for someone perhaps not even of drinking age. She'd been timeless as a mortal, and now as a Kindred she truly was.

Unless the Caitiff were not like other Kindred. It was claimed that the blood was getting even thinner now, but a Kindred like Stella used to be the lowest grade of vampire. The blood her sire had fed her was too weak to transfer much other than the trappings of vampirism—the need for blood, vulnerability to the sun, and a little more. No indication of clan was passed, though, and so she was clanless unless a primogen would claim her.

Leopold had thought about presenting her case to Victoria, but he shied away from that because he didn't want his discussions with Victoria to center on a different woman. It was damn foolish. He knew that, but it didn't change how he acted.

He thought Stella deserved to be a Toreador because she saw the world through artistic eyes. She'd made a poor living as a decent photographer as a mortal, and it was work she continued, though she now specialized in night photography for unavoidable reasons.

"Let's hope this sets things even," Stella said as she approached Leopold.

"What do you mean?"

Stella grimaced, the memories hurting her too, but she said, "Two bad encounters and then one good one. This will make a second good meeting, and things will be even."

The Toreador laughed. "Don't expect karma to be part of a Kindred's life, Stella."

She was close now, and Leopold hugged her. When she warmly returned his friendly gesture, Leopold reprimanded himself for thinking so horribly about her clanlessness. He admitted to himself that she was the kind of girl that would suit him if they could both still be kine and never have been exposed to so much more of the world than he wished he knew even now.

Stella's grimace was intact. "I don't expect anything out of Kindred life, Leo." She was the only person who called him that. The only one who had ever called him that who had not been immediately corrected. It was the name she'd cried that night after she'd drained every drop of red from the man who had assaulted her, and Leopold hadn't wished to make an issue of it then. For some reason, he continued to let it slide.

"Let's hope we get better than this guy got, at least," Leopold said, thumbing his hand at the two-and-a-half-foot-high bronze sculpture in the center of the alcove.

"It's the devil, I suppose," said Stella. "Seems like all the sculptures here tonight are rather demonic."

"As are the guests," Leopold suggested. "But, you're right. The piece is called *Satan* and was sculpted by a man named Feuchère. Look at him." Leopold pointed to the center of the work. "Satan, that is," he added.

The leathery-looking wings of the statue were partly unfolded so that they hid Satan's face. Inside this region of shadow, the horned and taloned plotter sat with his chin in a hand and his head cocked akimbo. And though the representation was that of a beast, the human qualities of the figure showed through and Stella felt a swelling of compassion as she gazed upon that face at Leopold's request.

Leopold said glumly, "It's the kind of work my condition should allow me to realize."

Stella gave him a sad look. "Your block is still stopping you from sculpting Kindred? I'm sorry, Leo."

Leopold was tempted to tell Stella about his recent success as the urge to share the news with someone friendly to him was great. Instead, he remained glumly silent, and he let that silence tell his lie for him.

They stood in silence for quite some time, and Stella used the opportunity to examine *Satan* more closely.

"You can do work at least this good," she said at last.

Leopold nodded, graciously accepting her praise.

Then he said, "Have you seen my new piece on display here tonight?"

Stella brightened, delighted to move the conversation onward and away from oppressive thoughts. "No. No, I haven't. I would be honored if you would show it to me."

Leopold took Stella's arm and moved to exit the alcove. Then he stopped and suddenly inquired, "You've not seen Hannah here tonight, have you?"

Stella said, "The Tremere? No I haven't. In fact, come to think of it, I don't believe any Tremere are here yet."

"Is that odd?"

"Oh, very," she said. "The Tremere are very political, and I can't imagine a gathering like this at which they did not have someone here early in order to spy on everyone else. I call them gadflies, which is what Rolph must be for the Nosferatu."

Leopold didn't know such things himself, but he trusted Stella to know. She was working hard to learn the ropes of Kindred society. Nothing else was working to her benefit, and her willingness to tackle such situations suggested to Leopold that she would find a way to overcome her clanless status, even if supposed friends like himself continued to be assholes.

Stella asked, "Did you need to see her for some reason? If so, I'd be careful. She drives hard and dangerous bargains. At least that's what I hear."

And then they both heard something more. A commotion just outside the alcove was drawing the attention of all the nearby Kindred, and Leopold and Stella stepped out just in time to catch a royal entrance.

Stella's mouth dropped and she stared at the emerging figures. Leopold, though, had other things on his mind, and he still needed a moment alone.

He whispered in Stella's ear, "I'll meet you at my sculpture later." She nodded slightly, so she at least heard him, though he wasn't certain if she listened too.



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The attention of many of the guests was suddenly drawn toward the center of the room. Victoria was grateful for something that gave her direction so she did not have to linger at the entrance any longer, or choose her own first conversation. There would be charges of favoritism if she chose poorly. Now fate had intervened, so any expectations of social niceties would be forgotten.

She approached the ruckus. Sipping from her red-filled flute, Victoria smiled at Clarice, a young Ventrue who stood nearby. The blood coated Victoria's lips and she carefully licked it off before saying, "Something interesting, I hope."

Clarice was polite, "There's much of interest here tonight, Ms. Ash."

"Victoria is fine," the Toreador corrected. "As a Ventrue you should learn that most Kindred prefer titles in keeping with their apparent age, not their actual age."

"That's odd," Clarice admitted. She was a tall and heavily built woman. By no means fat, she was full-figured, though she retained a degree of physical grace which Victoria appreciated because this rather plain woman needed something to compensate for her deficiencies. Clarice's drab, conservative clothing certainly did not alleviate her need.

Victoria disagreed, "It's not so strange really, if you consider the instinct for the Masquerade that many Kindred have accumulated for several centuries now. It seems a small thing perhaps, to avoid a scene where an older man calls a younger man "Sir" or "Mister" when they appear to be of the same station, but I suggest to you that it would seem less foreign to you if you lived in a climate where the existence of our kind was not forgotten or overlooked as it is today."

Clarice didn't have any means of responding to such a statement that carried so much authority. Nor was she seemingly prepared for the length of the retort. She could only salvage her Ventrue pride with a quip: "Your case appears sound to me, Victoria."

And then they reached Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's *Count Ugolino and Sons*. A small crowd of a half dozen Kindred besides Victoria and Clarice had gathered. A tall, slender man, whom Victoria imagined was the Setite she'd been convinced to invite, was among them. Javic, not yet free of Cyndy, stood aloof from the rest of the group, but he had been drawn by curiosity as well. The other three Kindred were the African-American Ventrue Benjamin, who was a close friend of the prince's wife Eleanor; the sole Brujah, Thelonious; and the center of attention, the Kindred known only as the General.

This was only the second time Victoria had seen this last Kindred. All she knew was the common knowledge: he was Malkavian; he was recently awakened from torpor, which he had evidently spent inside Stone Mountain, a huge chunk of granite east of Atlanta; and he had been witnessed by the Gangrel called Dusty stepping from the mountain.

In years past, or so Victoria had been told, Benison had been relatively loathe to accept new Kindred into Atlanta. The destruction brought by the Blood Curse changed all that, and indeed a majority of the Kindred in attendance thus far this evening were

either new to town, including Victoria herself, or even newly Embraced. The General was part of that group as well, but Benison doubtlessly would have granted him permission to remain regardless, since the prince too was Malkavian.

Such Kindred were invariably demented in some manner, though like many madmen they could often appear sane. Some, like the prophet of Gehenna named Anatole, hid their madness behind no such facade, and he and other Malkavians claimed their madness came from too often seeing the truth overlooked by other Kindred who still dwelt too much in the world of kine. In essence, Malkavians like Anatole insisted there was a Masquerade greater than the one perpetrated by Kindred on the kine. With her healthy fear of unseen powers, Victoria accepted this madness of the Malkavians as wisdom. Most others did not.

Because Malkavians intrigued her so, Victoria had made certain the General received an invitation to this party. She was delighted he had attended. Authentically delighted. Unlike some Kindred awakened from torpor—the deep sleep a Kindred slips into for as long as a century at a time—and especially ones waking now, when the last hundred or fifty or even twenty years had brought so much change to the world, the General seemed at ease with the new world and took little time to adapt. Either that, or he was powerful enough to overcome a deficit of knowledge.

Victoria and the others assembled watched the Malkavian with interest. His clothes already stripped from his body and strewn across the floor, the General clambered onto the podium that held Carpeaux's great work. His muscular and naked body was not unattractive, and though he sported a grand physique, Victoria saw nothing that particularly dazzled her. Her charms worked better when men were more impressive than this.

The General crouched at the feet of Count Ugolino, where he summoned a grotesquely inappropriate *tête d'expression* in conjunction with the four naked sons of the count who crouched, reclined, or fainted at his feet. His expression of comical happiness made Victoria shudder, for the son nearest his position held a plaster incarnation of fear and even terror upon his face. Completing the *tête d'expression*, the other sons displayed other emotions, none of them joyous, for the count above them was soon to devour them. The count himself sat above his sons, but his powerful body was hunched and his face twisted with madness, and he ripped at his face with fingers bent like claws.

The General was as wild-haired as when he had first presented himself to the prince and the council of primogen, though he no longer wore the uniform of the Confederate soldier he claimed to have stolen from the racks at a souvenir store in Stone Mountain Park, but which the prince greeted as a sign that the General had fought on his side and perhaps at his side in the War of Northern Aggression. At the time, the newcomer introduced himself only as the General, which of course led everyone to wonder if he had been one, though Benison did not recognize him. He refused to answer most questions put to him, and when the Brujah Primogen Thelonious demanded better answers, the General nonchalantly ripped the tongue from his own mouth and placed it on the table before the nonplussed council member.

Benison had laughed and granted the General permission to remain. If Benison needed another reason, an insult to his constant enemy the Brujah was reason enough.

With his tongue presumably regrown, the General now climbed to sit alongside the count, his butt cheeks wedged over the face of the fearful son he'd mocked a moment before. The Malkavian was in much better health than months before. In fact, his previously wasted frame now rippled with muscles so that he seemed a twin of the plaster Count. And as the Kindred spectators watched, the General literally became one with Count Ugolino. As some Kindred had the ability to sink into the earth—and clearly the General possessed that ability, if he had slept within Stone Mountain for the one hundred and thirty-plus years since the Civil War—he either became somewhat incorporeal or otherwise attuned to the structure of the plaster, and slipped within the Count. As this transition took place, the Count's expression of madness slowly shifted to the beaming jocularly preferred by the General.

Victoria tried to make sense of this potentially profound, potentially whimsical, potentially ridiculous gesture of the General's. She looked around and the others seemed at a loss too. All except Javic, for he stepped away from the scene shaking his head. He could have been dismissing the event as ridiculous, but something in his earnest refusal struck Victoria as knowing. Javic's irritation with Cyndy finally overcame him again, and he shook the Toreador from his arm with a swift jerk that sent Cyndy to the floor. This time, he did not catch her. Victoria would have laughed aloud and pressed her advantage over the young Toreador, but she did not wish to transform Cyndy from a passive to determined enemy. A prince needed friends, which was exactly what Benison largely lacked.

The only Brujah present, and likely one of only two that would be present throughout the night, was Thelonious. He seemed somewhat irritated by the General's performance, though perhaps it was only the General himself whom Thelonious opposed. Victoria found that funny, for the Brujah were usually in favor of any variety of disruption, especially if it might offend others. But then, Thelonious was an atypical Brujah, which perhaps explained why he had once been the only Brujah Prince Benison would recognize as an official member of Atlanta's Kindred. That, or it would have looked unseemly not to have at least a Brujah Primogen. Brujah typified the anarch movement among Kindred of the Camarilla. They were the rebels who wanted to see an end to the conservative, usually Ventrue, control of the organization, and they dressed as rebels will—in clothing that allows them to stand out prominently from those they oppose.

One of the reasons Thelonious was so atypical was his conservative dress. He favored modern suits and small, round-rimmed glasses. He was a young black man, one who was surprisingly soft-looking for a Brujah warrior, but Victoria had heard tales of how this man had fought Benison, and knew better than to be fooled by the large, doe-like eyes that seemed to make evident a meek and compassionate heart.

Tonight, however, Thelonious was arrayed in traditional African clothing. The loose-fitting robe was bright orange with colorful bands of pink, yellow and green swirling across and around it. He wore a small round hat on his head, and tonight he disdained the use of his usual eyeglasses. Coming back to this fact now, Victoria realized it was actually the first thing she had noticed, for without the glasses amplifying the gentle expression of his eyes, Thelonious seemed suddenly capable of ferocious glares. It was such a look of intense disfavor that he now bestowed upon the General.

Benjamin seemed very puzzled and extremely disturbed by the General's display. Victoria felt Benjamin was a very attractive man. In fact, he could have been a poster-boy for the successful modern African-American, which was why Victoria was surprised

Benison had accepted him into Atlanta even if he was supposedly an old acquaintance of the prince's wife, Eleanor, for what might the prince hate more than a successful black man, or black vampire? The truth was that Benjamin was Eleanor's childe, and Benison didn't know it. At least, not yet. Victoria's entrance through Heaven demanded that the prince no longer remain bereft of the truth. Thank Heaven, so to speak, for Hannah's amazing ability to deduce or somehow determine a given Kindred's sire.

Like Javic, the two black men departed as well, but they did so together. Victoria smiled. It was particularly important that these two speak to one another. Her plan called for an African-American alliance, and it would be best if these two started before Julius arrived to provide the final glue or impetus.

The scene flashed in her mind's eye. Benison killing Eleanor, Eleanor killing Benjamin, Julius killing Benison. If Benison could take Thelonious with him, then so much the better. She smiled at these thoughts.

Beside her, Clarice shuddered and said, "It's ghastly. Those children seem so unhappy and now... that smile."

Victoria glanced back to the sculpture. It seemed as though the General was going to remain within the Count. If so, she would have to remember he was there, because it wouldn't do to reveal any of her plots accidentally when no Kindred were apparent. The ghoulish smile beaming at the plaster children was indeed disconcerting, but much was this evening, which was perfect for Victoria. A little nervous tension would help her pot boil later. Besides, Victoria felt this party was an opportunity to reveal to everyone what fearless stuff she was made of. Did they expect impressionist paintings or classical nudes? Every piece on display tonight alluded to a terrible story, whether it was Satan's fall, the wicked Count's feast of children, or Caine's murder of Abel.

Victoria answered Clarice, "Perhaps the General is only displaying his own artwork for our amusement—his own interpretation of the count's terrible predicament."

"The count?"

"Come now, Clarice. Surely you know your Dante?"

The Ventrue smiled. "That book about Hell, you mean?"

"Yes," sighed Victoria. "Count Ugolino and his sons were imprisoned in a tower to starve to death, so, to save himself, the count devoured his children."

Clarice shuddered, and Victoria found she liked this large woman very little. The works on display separated the wheat from the chaff, and Clarice had been winnowed.

The Setite was clearly wheat, for when Victoria looked his way she saw a thin smile divide his face. He also noted Clarice's shivering reaction, and that apparently was what amused him. His eyes then darted to Victoria's, and the two regarded one another momentarily. Victoria was suddenly glad that Rolph had told her the Setite would be visiting the city. She smiled coquettishly at the tall, straight and narrow man. To that, the man's smile grew impossibly longer, as if his face might indeed split like a serpent's.

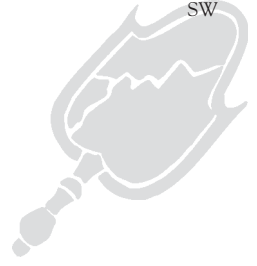
Then Clarice was on top of Victoria again, and the exchange ended.

"He really ate his children?" she asked nervously.

Victoria was perturbed by this incessant prattle. "Yes," she insisted firmly. "Just as we Kindred eat mortal children. Aren't the parallels between art and reality refreshing and engaging?" With that Victoria stepped away decisively.

She swept her gaze around the room to find the Setite again, but he was under cover somewhere. Victoria adjusted the brooch on her right shoulder that was all that held her Grecian gown on her body, then reached into that garment's pocket for her opera glasses. It was time not only to find the Setite, but also to see what else she was missing. Particularly the conversation between Thelonious and Benjamin Brown.

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The General had a sixth sense about ambushes.

Perhaps it was a result of centuries of experience. Or the equivalent of a mortal's entire lifespan—days *and* nights—spent engaged in actual battle. Or perhaps it was simply the result of having escaped them in the past.

The General had survived in the face of long odds many times before. Of course, the odds were not quite so long as kine historians would record and praise and believe. And in any event, surviving was a far different matter than winning, but such was the nature of the General's own peculiar sense of pleasure that he found something possibly only precisely described as arousing about the loss. Young men cut down around him. Their dreams flying on black wings just as their blood sought solace in the ground.

For years afterward he could wryly enjoy the difference between the heroic stories of the soldiers' last moments and the sullied truth to which he was witness. At Little Big Horn. At the Alamo. At Roanoke Island. At the fall of Constantinople.

And so, so long ago at Thermopylae where it all began, though the General would not admit that to himself now. Perhaps could not, for the less some Malkavians recalled of their Embraces the better. The terrors the Sabbath inflicted upon their newly spawned kind were rumored to be terrible, but what could possibly be more ruinous than the Embrace of a man devoid of sanity at the hands of one devoid of compassion? Not all Malkavian Embraces were so terrible, of course, but to call this one at least merely inhuman would play lightly with the facts.

As the General made a spectacle of himself, clambering naked up the immense sculpture of *Count Ugolino and Sons*, he wondered at his sanity. Not just because an ambush seemed so unlikely here tonight, though the nerves in his recently regrown tongue tingled with the likelihood of conflict, but because he seemed so in control of himself just now. His actions premeditated and directed. His purpose of finding safety while still remaining within the probable confines of the likely struggle so clear.

And *that* was what made him absolutely certain that death would be his dance partner in the chamber of art tonight. Nothing gave him a greater thrill than seeing others struggle for life, with the exception of seeing others struggle for life and fail. That moment, when defeat and death registered on the faces of the doomed, was so absolute a reflection of the General's own soul that he craved to view it. Better to view it without than to contemplate it within. That moment when a being—mortal or vampiric—entered a slow-motion state as the last ticks of their life's clock slipped away. Only then, during that internally infinite moment, could time properly be given to contemplation of what was being lost.

That preternatural awareness was the same sort that fueled the General's premeditated search for safety. He could already feel a noose constricting around the High Museum. It choked the vigor and energy from the assemblage and made the sights and sounds crisper and brighter.

The General could not ignore these signs.



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Victoria was the last to slip away from *Count Ugolino and His Sons*. The General was presumably still within the statue, because the new expression of delight remained. She glanced again at that face and once more sought significance in it. Was this another message concerning her mission tonight? In the end, she accepted it merely as the means by which two of her hopeful threesome came together, not that either of those men would be able to withhold their accusations for long.

She was much humored to discover the two black men—one Brujah, considered the clan of rebels, and one Ventruue, thought of as the clan of aristocrats, usually a volatile mixture but one brought together by a mutual disregard for Prince Benison—pondering the implications of the General's mad display.

She watched the two men through her opera glasses from a position safe from discovery. The migration away from the General and the disruption the Malkavian's display had caused in the first place granted Victoria time and cover enough to slip into a special cubicle she had prepared during set-up and construction. It was a small area about five feet by five feet, and perhaps eight feet high, that was surrounded by the opaque glass utilized throughout the larger chamber. Entry was quick and easy via one of the glass planes that doubled as a sliding door.

The potentially most important touch was the trapdoor on the floor. She expected to use the interior of the cubicle to safely view those outside it, but in case she feared discovery, Victoria could always slip down through the floor and then lock the trapdoor from beneath.

Now inside the small but ample area, Victoria could freely use her special glasses to pierce the shadow of the glass and view anyone attending the party who had not taken other precautions to remain unseen. On that count, Victoria was especially wary of Rolph, as even among Nosferatu Rolph was considered a master of his art. Victoria tried to keep an eye on Rolph, not with the expectation of actually seeing anything interesting, but more to deduce his actions by his physical omission. That is, when he disappeared, it was possible that he was still at the party, but attending to his or his clan's goals more stealthily.

For the moment, though, Victoria was only concerned with Thelonious and Benjamin. These two men, along with the Brujah Archon Julius, figured intimately into her plans. The bright orange robe Thelonious wore was the first object to come into view in the Toreador's opera glasses, and she adjusted the zoom and focus so she could clearly see the sides of both men's faces. Lip reading was difficult, but hardly impossible.

Benjamin was saying, "Perhaps it's that robe you're wearing, Thelonious. It brings out the shaman in you."

"If I were wearing my business suit, then I wouldn't try to find messages in the General's odd display?"

The two men eyed each warily and with a hint of threat as well. It was no wonder, as each thought the other had recently posed a threat. But Victoria knew they would speak despite her faked messages, especially when those threats came the night before Elysium presented the opportunity to inquire about or face down those threats.

Benjamin shrugged his shoulders and said, "Maybe. Maybe not. The madman's behavior seems like nothing more than a Malkavian's warped sensibilities being put in the open for our amusement."

Thelonious shook his head. "That's just it. Why would he wish to entertain us?"

"It is a party."

"That doesn't matter to a Malkavian. It may be a party in this world, but not in the dark interiors of his addled mind. No, whether his performance actually means anything to us or not, I guarantee that it means something to the General."

Victoria grew frustrated with this small talk. Either the two men knew one another better than Victoria realized—and that would probably only further her plans, so it didn't concern her at all—or they were staging this small talk. Staging it to pass real messages by code, perhaps. None of that seemed right, and by widening the view her glasses allowed so she could read their body language as well as their lips, Victoria decided that they were both anxious to be about the business of an earnest discussion, but neither seemed certain how the other would receive a frank statement.

Victoria mouthed the words she hoped Benjamin would say. And either her powers had grown more than she imagined possible or Benjamin took the plunge on his own, because the Ventrue glanced about them and motioned Thelonious deeper into the alcove formed by the glass panes.

The Brujah squinted his eyes fiercely at the Ventrue, but he accepted the invitation and also said something Victoria missed. She quickly zoomed in on the pair so only their heads were displayed in the magnified field of the glasses. She caught more of the conversation.

Benjamin said, "I'm surprised you're here tonight, Thelonious."

The Brujah's mild face grew a touch more hostile and he prepared to bark something, but the Ventrue cut him off.

"Obviously, you're not frightened of the prince. If I wished to insult you, then I would not do it so crudely. I am not a centuries-old Confederate soldier." It wasn't necessary, but Benjamin emphasized his obvious reference by a tilt of the head and a raised eyebrow. Thelonious and Victoria both understood he referred to Benison, not the General.

Thelonious's features smoothed again, and the Brujah actually grinned, though only briefly. In her cubicle some distance away, Victoria smiled as she continued to eavesdrop. The real conversation was beginning.

Benjamin continued, "I don't respond to blackmail."

Thelonious cocked his head at this. He was caught a bit off-guard, but then he snapped, "Nor do I."

It was Benjamin's turn to be taken aback.

This was great fun and very revealing for Victoria, for she knew the basis upon which both of these men spoke. If everything worked according to plan, then these would be her remaining rivals in Atlanta, so any clue to their methods was a boon to her future.

The Ventrue said, "But you expect others to be swayed by such strong-arm tactics? I must say I'm disappointed, Thelonious. I thought you were less typically Brujah."

Thelonious chuckled, "Typically Brujah'? How typically Ventrue."

"Nevertheless, I remain disturbed by your tactics."

The Brujah said, "Our difference, then, is that I'm not surprised by your tactics."

Benjamin gritted his teeth and said, "Is there something unusual about using the protection of Elysium to confront you? Elysium may be a concept invented by and for elders more than anarchs, but your presence here tonight, in spite of the prince's efforts against you, reveals your faith in this convention as well."

"No, there's no shame in Elysium. The integrity of your offer, on the hand, is disputable."

"My offer? Is that how you wish to view the matter? Your letter didn't give me any indication—"

"My letter?" Thelonious interrupted.

"Yes, your let—"

Thelonious interrupted again, "You mean your—"

"Stop interrupting me!" Benjamin hissed. But then he recovered as Thelonious's words registered. "Mine?"

And at the same time, the Ventrue and the Brujah took their eyes off one another and looked around, and looked out the open end of the alcove. Victoria imagined they could be brothers, they were acting so similarly. She wasn't sure yet whether that was to her advantage or not.

She continued to watch them, safe from their dread gazes. Or so she hoped. And so it seemed.

They reappraised one another when their eyes locked again.

Thelonious said, "I take it you didn't send—"

"No, and nor did you?"

The Brujah asked, "So who then?"

"I don't know," admitted the Ventrue. "Nor do I know whether this trick was meant to unite or divide us."

Thelonious seemed puzzled. "To divide us, I presume."

Benjamin pointed out, "On the eve of an affair at Elysium? Might we not possibly have a discussion and revelation exactly like the one we're having now?"

Victoria grinned in appreciation. Perhaps Benjamin was the deeper thinker.

Thelonious nodded his agreement.

Gasps suddenly rang out from Kindred near the entrance of the party chamber, and Victoria reflexively turned to look that way. The great doors of Heaven and Hell were swinging open simultaneously. Such was the clamor caused by the four great doors opening at once, that everyone near the entrance turned to behold the source of the commotion.

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Backlit by the light from the outer chamber, which outshone the diffuse light spread by the spotlights focused on the sculptures, the figure in the open doors crafted by Rodin was revealed in silhouette to be a woman, or at least it was a thin-boned person with pleats of piled hair and outfitted in a great hoop dress. The outline of the man backlit as he stood in the open doorway of *The Ten Commandments* should have been dwarfed by the awesome creation, and though the man was truly not a giant and stood only some few inches over six feet tall, J. Benison Hodge, *Prince* J. Benison Hodge, projected so powerful an aura that no mere portal could overwhelm him.

Victoria cursed. A few moments more and she might have learned much of how her unknowing allies would proceed. As it was, she took advantage of the commotion to slip back out of her hidden room and move toward the doors.

The drama of the arrival rippled through the ranks of the assembled Kindred. As both the prince and his wife stepped forward, Victoria found that she needed to steady herself against the dizziness that tickled her head. Both these Kindred were such potent presences—the prince powerful and commanding, his wife lovely and radiant with something other than physical beauty—that her struggle to attend to them both was impossible. They each demanded—no, deserved—her full attention. And even though Victoria knew the instinct to deify them both thus was an effect they purposefully created with their Kindred powers, it was hard to resist.

Finally recovering for a moment, she looked around and to her amusement saw that she was resisting far better than most. Clarice and Cyndy were particularly obsequious as they practically threw themselves on the floor in an attempt to show proper respect and worship for these two godlings. Others, like Javic, Rolph and even Thelonious, showed the strain of resisting. Most interesting to Victoria was the Setite's response. He seemed not to flinch or quiver, and perhaps straightened himself to appear even taller.

When Eleanor revealed herself completely by gliding into the direct light, Victoria shuddered. The Toreador did not like to admit she possessed an enemy so much her equal, and even superior. Perhaps Eleanor was not quite as beautiful as Victoria, but the Toreador knew any actual physical shortcomings—and they were few indeed, for the woman was delicately crafted and boasted exquisite qualities that left men speechless, such as her milky pale skin, her glittering green eyes, her high, regal cheekbones—were more than compensated by phenomenal control over many of the disciplines of Kindred power that Victoria too possessed.

Where Victoria might use her beauty to snare even wary men, Eleanor could enhance her beauty to enrapture men, and even women, who considered her their enemy. In fact, Victoria wondered how it was that she herself remained safe from this insidious effect she'd personally witnessed infecting Kindred whose hatred for the prince's wife was well known to Victoria.

For in truth, no one could hate the prince and not also despise Eleanor. She was obviously an equal partner in the relationship, and that meant she ruled equally, though the prince was known to make rash decisions over which Eleanor presumably had no sway or council. They were so patently opposite yet so perfectly suited for one another: He a cunning American land-owner with ambitions of royalty, and she a noblewoman with ambitions of power. Both had achieved their dreams, and both were fantastically powerful.

When the prince strode full into the light, by contrast, there were no revelations beyond what the silhouette impression had conveyed. He was powerfully built with a bull chest and long, thick arms and legs. His hair was long and auburn, and he wore a full beard that with his generous mustache and bushy eyebrows swamped his face. He was very forthcoming when the conversation concerned himself, so Victoria had learned some time ago that he was Embraced when in his mid-thirties, yet the touches of gray in his hair, his receding hairline and a barrel-chested body just slightly relenting to a thick waist revealed to Victoria that he must have lived a hard life as a Confederate soldier those many years ago.

Nevertheless, as now, there could be great kindness in his face. When he smiled thusly and had good color in his face, he seemed like a Kris Kringle before age had brought snow-white hair. Victoria doubted there were any present who had not also seen their prince fully in the grip of his great and sudden rage. Victoria momentarily pictured an enraged Benison in her mind, but the image was too terrible, so she instead dwelt upon the beneficence of the present incarnation of the man.

As those two impressive individuals continued their slow entrance into the room, a pair of Caitiffs that Victoria barely recognized as Grant and Fingers had the misfortune of stepping into view through the still-open doorway of *The Gates of Hell*. While the two men seemed strong and capable individuals, they looked so ordinary and feeble in the radiance of their Elders that their intrigued gawking was comical.

Thelonious was the first to laugh, but then he was probably looking for any legitimate excuse to embarrass the prince. Prince Benison's eyes flew wide in shock and hatred, and Victoria wilted before the heat of the very transformation she had denied in her imagination only an instant before. The collision of reality and her thoughts made the prince's terrible rage even more frightening.

The color rushed from Benison's face, revealing a whole host of scars across his forehead and eyes. His cheeks fell in, his eyes seemed to shrivel into their sockets, and his massively bearded jaw clamped with great force. The effect was that of seeing a humble, kindly man suddenly transformed into something more akin to the prince's true existence—something that sought revenge from beyond the grave.

"You dare!" he exclaimed loudly. One of his large hands curled into a sledgehammer fist that pounded once, then twice into the open palm of the other hand. "You dare show yourself before me!" he continued. It was not a question, but a statement, pronouncement of doom.

Victoria was delighted to hear it, for it meant the prince was indeed on the edge this evening, probably anxious because Julius would be present, and that would make her work simpler.

Despite himself, Thelonious shrank at the challenge. He was frozen in his tracks like doomed prey, and the prince's swift verbal assault seemed certain prelude to annihilation.

Until Victoria intervened. She stepped close to Benison and said, “Great prince, please do not forget that the law of Elysium holds sway here because you yourself have declared it to be so.”

Benison glowered at her, and it took every ounce of Victoria’s will and the fortification of the desire to see her plans to fruition to withstand the incendiary presence of the prince.

“I revoke my declaration,” he snarled.

Victoria took a half-step back. She needed to keep the peace until all the elements were present, and Julius, the justicar’s envoy, had not yet arrived. On the other hand, she did not wish to put herself in the path of the prince’s anger, and she did not desire him to feel that she played any part greater than that required of a concerned primogen and the hostess of this party to stay his hand.

Victoria looked to Eleanor for help, but the prince’s so-called wife had her deadly gaze full upon Thelonious as well. There was no alliance between *this* Ventrue—the Ventrue primogen—and the Brujah primogen. Some Kindred suggested that it was her hatred of the clan that prompted Benison’s savage attacks.

As the Toreador considered what to do next, she saw the two Caitiff slip around the angry scene and join the crowd of spectators. It might be that the prince had not seen them earlier and would not know where he might seek revenge for Thelonious’s laughter.

Then Victoria stepped close to the prince again and whispered so only he and others of extraordinary auditory abilities might hear her. She said, “Please, great prince, I worry for your safety on this night that Julius, the Brujah archon, visits. But, of course, you know best how to handle such tricky and political situations.”

More quickly than she had imagined the prince might register her words, his face transformed again. The rage and hate did not melt away, but instantly evaporated, and the prince wore an expression of magnanimity. The look was too exaggerated to be real, and everyone knew it. Such serenity did not sit well on the prince’s face, and not for the first time Victoria imagined that he must truly be mad, must truly bear the scars of the Malkavian clan, to change his emotional clothes so quickly and easily.

Then the prince looked at Thelonious as he somehow grinned a bit more broadly. The Brujah involuntarily recoiled a step and Victoria saw him shiver. *Benison must have put a little mojo into that look*, she thought.

Then the prince stepped toward Eleanor and put his left arm around her. His right arm lifted skyward and with a flourish he declared their presence again.

Benison said, “Let us enjoy the shortest night of the year, and let us find that every moment tonight carries the weight of two on any other.”

Champagne glasses tinked and chimed and there were mutters of “hear, hear” and “cheers”, and though the moment of the solstice had passed some hours before, as the time neared half past eleven and the crowd pushed toward the rear of the gallery, the party was officially on.

Victoria helped usher everyone away from the entrance and then stayed to make sure the servants would be quick to supply the far end of the gallery. When she turned to join the guests, Victoria saw that Eleanor was waiting for her.

The Toreador primogen approached her Ventrue counterpart. When she neared, Eleanor gave Victoria a hug in greeting. Or rather, the Ventrue made it plain she was favoring Victoria with a hug.

When the Kindred separated, Eleanor said, "This looks like a wonderful party, my dear. You must be very satisfied." Her face was animated with all the false sincerity she could muster, which was enough to fool and flatter anyone but one as perceptive as Victoria.

Victoria wanted to gut the bitch right here, but she knew she had to be careful. On the other hand, too much care might alert Eleanor as much as a blatant warning, so she had to play along with the Ventrue's double-entendre politics.

"Well, thank you, Eleanor. Such compliments certainly mean something when they come from you. But I'm not really satisfied yet. Why, I'd say the entertainment and fun has really yet even to begin. My only regret is that I dressed in this Grecian style, when Roman would have been so much more suitable."

Eleanor narrowed her eyes. She too knew Julius's background as a gladiator in ancient Rome.

Then the Ventrue said, "It is certainly quite a cast of characters you'll have on hand tonight."

"Oh, indeed," Victoria agreed. "But all of them, those from out of town too, have been strictly informed of the High's Elysium status. I'm sure no one would even consider breaking the prince's peace."

Eleanor bit her bottom lip. "Of course not. The prince is a vengeful Kindred, and it's not wise to cross him."

"It's true that no one is safe when opposed by the weight of Camarilla law," Victoria admitted, obviously less concerned now about Elysium than other recent events in Atlanta, such as the dubious crackdown on the anarchs and the Brujah in particular.

When Eleanor was silent for a moment, Victoria continued, "Atlanta used to be such a backwater that the Camarilla probably cared little what happened here. But our prince has done an excellent job of drawing attention to us all."

"Oh, he has done a fine job, hasn't he? The Olympics, of course, were a splendid coup."

Victoria brightened with feigned realization. "That's right, maybe my Grecian clothing is appropriate after all."

The edge of Eleanor's lip trembled, and the Ventrue had clearly had enough. "I'd best rejoin my husband," she said as she turned her back on any farewell Victoria might offer. But after a few steps she turned right back.

"You know," the Ventrue said, "it will be good to have a Camarilla representative here tonight. I find the long memory of the organization to be simply amazing, and I'm led to believe we'll all have some interesting surprises tonight."

Victoria didn't have a response. Her eyes just blinked a few times in rapid succession. Eleanor smiled and walked away, alternating her thumb up and down in the style of a Roman Emperor. After several repetitions, all barely but completely within Victoria's view, the Ventrue decided on thumbs down and she half turned her head to flutter her eyelids at Victoria one more time.

The Toreador was stunned. Eleanor had allowed Victoria to steamroll her in that conversation in order to make that last blow even more unexpected and telling. More than that, she was worried about what Julius might know, because there were a couple of well-concealed secrets of her past that were best left buried.

Victoria had expected to be on the offensive all night, and this sudden twist made her fear her own defenses were inadequate.

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The gesture was virtually frictionless: nearly poreless, alabaster skin stroking smooth, cool marble. His hand gliding to a stop, Vogel gently and methodically clasped the wrist of the sculpture, his attention so fixed on this simple act that it became meditative.

Vogel stood thus for many moments. As his fingertips resumed their fluttering along a forearm of one of the sculpture's figures, Vogel lost his thoughts in the display of emotion captured in the marble expressions of the grieving parents. The son's head cradled in the lap of the seated father. The childless mother—for now one was dead and the other exiled—collapsed on the ground beside her limp son, clutching his arm, burying her head in his shoulder. Her anguish was acute, almost cruel in its portrayal, while the father's questioning eyes gazed up, looking for the God he knew with certainty did exist.

Transfixed though he was, Vogel noted two things: first, the lighting for this sculpture was too diffuse, failing to reveal the detail of Canova's chisel marks completely; and second, someone was approaching him from behind. Whoever drew near stopped, though whether loitering to speak with Vogel or lingering in courtesy of Vogel's presumed reverie, the Kindred did not know.

Not willing to disengage wholly from his appreciation of the sculpture, Vogel hoped to dismiss the need to converse with a mutter of small talk that might encourage the uninterested to leave him uninterrupted. "There is no marble smoother than Canova's." As was his habit, to annoy those fond of stereotypes and to encourage those drawn to legend, Vogel drew his "s" out a bit, so his "sssmoother" had something of a hiss.

He was answered mirthfully, "Nor any skin so ripe for plucking by the serpent fangs." A woman's voice—he recognized it immediately from the charming laughter he'd heard earlier: Vogel's hostess, Victoria Ash.

Vogel gathered himself, allowing the emotional residue of his interaction with the beautiful sculpture to drain away. Turning, he said, "Good evening, Ms. Ash. Were you observing, expecting me to nip Eve's marble flesh and double the caterwauling of the kine as their descent from God hastens?"

"My, my, Vogel. I do believe this piece has you in a philosophical frame of mind." Victoria Ash stood before Vogel. As a peacock could outshine an emu, then surely the most beloved of mortal models would be lonely for lack of admirers when Victoria Ash was nearby. Her features were as perfect as only those of a beautiful Kindred could be—the perfection Antonio Canova had reserved for the mythical subjects of his sculpture: Eve, Psyche, Venus, or even the magnificent Head of Helen elsewhere in this room, which Vogel instantly realized was Victoria's guise of the evening.

With exaggeration so lavish as to border on embarrassing, Vogel's eyes traveled up and down Victoria's slender yet sumptuous frame, which was clothed in a silken and sleeveless variation of a classic Greek robe. Then Vogel mock-bowed and recited:

*In this beloved marble view
Above the works and thoughts of Man
What nature could, but would not, do,
And beauty and Canova can!
Beyond imagination's power
Beyond the Bard's defeated art
With immortality her dower
Behold the Helen of the heart.*

An enchanted smile warmed Victoria's face, though Vogel knew it was deceit no greater or less than he could expect from any Kindred with whom he spoke this evening.

Victoria stepped closer, whispering, "I would not have recognized that bit of Byron's before planning this little display for tonight." To emphasize how "little" her display was, Victoria gracefully fanned her hands to her sides to indicate the extent of the huge chamber. Meanwhile, she elegantly stretched her neck—revealing a marvelous profile—to absorb the scene along with her guest.

Naturally, Vogel looked about as well, though he took a half step backward, since his instincts found his hostess's proximity a little too cozy.

The entire top floor of Atlanta's High Museum of Art had indeed been transformed into a neoclassicist's dream. Vogel knew that the quality, let alone history, or rather historical impossibility, of most of the pieces on display was lost on the hollow-eyed and cheerless crowd that formed the majority of Victoria's guests.

There were many more Kindred here now than earlier. The crowd was beginning to differentiate with the arrival of a less couth element of the Camarilla society. No longer were the only guests those interested in political maneuvering. Some of the Kindred were actually examining the sculpture rather than the minute facial ticks of a debate opponent, though Vogel noted the specifics of one such examination of the artwork—a black-leather-clad idiot was sniffing the hindquarters of Adriano Cecioni's *Dog Defecating*.

The works of art were amazing, but no less so than the fine ringlets of dark hair arranged on Victoria's head in perfect duplication of Canova's Helen. Vogel didn't know Victoria's true age, but her stunning hair framed a face that could be that of a woman in her mid-twenties. She was slightly rounder than the athletic good looks held in vogue by modern American women, but she surely came from a time well before this century, and hers was a classical beauty sure to please no matter the trend of the decade or day. There was a bit of a Mediterranean hue to her, but Vogel couldn't be sure if that guess was overly influenced by her similarity to Helen of Troy. Perhaps it was the hint of Asia in her eyes.

Victoria caught him looking. "Am I a dancing cobra to transfix so easily another serpent?"

Vogel's response was witty and quick. "I have no doubt that you could deceive as proficiently as the serpent who claimed Eve, but if we are to remain on this theme of my Setite clan, then I will admit the snake-like coils of your hair do indeed mesmerize me."

However, my fascination with the Eve of this *Mourning the Dead Abel* has nothing to do with cold-blooded kinship. The available knowledge claims the piece was never executed in marble from the terracotta bozzetto Canova prepared."

Victoria's response was enthusiastic. "Delightful!" she exclaimed. "Perhaps my innuendo of snakes was misguided. Perhaps I should treat you as an honorary Toreador, so extensive is your knowledge of these masterpieces. But of course, the knowledge to which you refer is merely *mortal* knowledge, and we are both clearly in a position to possess much more than that."

"That is true, Ms. Ash."

"Please, just Victoria is fine, or for tonight 'Helen,' if you prefer, and it seems that you might as I noted earlier that you were quite taken by the bust and now quite by my own...resemblance to it."

Vegel smiled sourly at Victoria's stutter. "That is true as well, 'Helen.'"

Victoria did not acknowledge her guest's expression, but only said, "How is it that you come by such knowledge of art masterpieces?"

Vegel stepped away from the sculpture as he answered the Toreador. It made him uncomfortable to have such a trifling conversation so near the heart-rending anguish that was Adam and Eve's for their son Abel. Especially since Vegel had been warned before that such were the reverberations of the black essence of the first murder, that Caine himself—if he indeed still wandered the Earth—was connected to every portrayal of it and even the mere mention of the event was a clarion call to him. According to the stories Vegel heard, many were the neonate fools who tempted this legend, and enough were the unfortunates who were dead soon after to give superstitious credence to the legend's veracity.

If Victoria noticed his discomfort, then she made no sign of it.

Vegel answered, "In the service of my master, of course."

"Hesha?" Victoria asked, though she clearly knew the answer.

"Yes."

"I was so looking forward to meeting him," Victoria pouted, a behavior splendidly suited to her attire and grooming.

Vegel nodded, and then smiled as he said, "Is that why you treated your guests to Clesinger's scandalous *Woman Bitten by a Snake*? Is it poison or is it ecstasy which makes her writhe so?"

"You're dreadful, Vegel," said Victoria. "But why is it that Hesha would require his progeny to be so mindful of art like dear Auguste's *Woman*? While it is a piece of no small notoriety, and perhaps some innovation for its time, it surely has no special value to a treasure-hunter such as Hesha. If nothing else, then surely its age must be a deterrent. I mean, it's only 150 years old!"

Vegel casually explained, "It is a new piece, 'Helen,' but Hesha desires we be aware of the old and the new. Besides, though 150 years is youthfully refreshing to us, it is quite an ancient age for the new money of the United States. I'm certain there must be a information-age millionaire loaded with silicon dollars who is eager to reveal none-too-subtly to his guests via his new sculpture that he is a hearty man of sexual appetite and not merely a cerebral gentleman of meek physique and diminutive manhood."

“You’re very funny, Vegel,” Victoria said, smiling. The smile seemed more genuine this time, but that only served to help Vegel maintain his wariness. She continued, “It’s no wonder Hesha’s wealth is rumored to be so vast. With huntsmen as able as you flushing out the game, he need only scheme the means to obtain it.”

Vegel said, “If I seem a show-off, though, it is because you have struck upon a particular fancy of mine—the heads of Helen.”

Victoria raised an eyebrow as invitation for him to continue, but Vegel demurred at first.

Still shaking his head, Vegel continued to resist, “No, no, the explanations really reveal much too much about me. I must decline in general, only to say that her divine smile, so finely wrought by Canova, communicates the very essence of self-knowledge. This Helen clearly knows something about herself, her world, and the others who inhabit it, that the others have yet to discover for themselves.”

“Perhaps, then, dear Vegel, you should keep the head I have on display tonight. A memento of the evening, shall we say?”

Vegel’s back shuddered from a chill wrought by Victoria’s face. Her surprising offer was imparted while reproducing exactly the impossible smile of the Head of Helen. It was so perfectly performed that it seemed entirely natural for the moment. Precisely set were the lips wherein the smile was virtually nonexistent but for the slightest cast of the eyes that lent the curious illusion of a smile.

Flustered though he was, and realizing for the first time that he was far, far out of his league when dealing with Victoria Ash, Vegel managed to stumble haltingly forward with the conversation. “A totally unforeseen and unreservedly generous offer, Victoria, but I must decline. Not least of all because I already possess a copy, but properly so as well. You clearly deserve the piece more than I have ever imagined I might.”

“Thank you,” Victoria said sincerely. “I believe I would have regretted my gift had you accepted. Funny how a piece that has simply served its place as part of my collection could suddenly come to mean something more to me. Thanks go to you, Vegel, for that gift.”

Something or someone caught Vegel’s attention and he glanced left before returning his gaze to Victoria, though it was not a distraction that escaped her attention.

Vegel said, “As I stated, you clearly deserve it, and now your bust deserves you. However, I fear that as delightful as I find your company, I should remind you that you have other guests here tonight as well. More than a handful of them have cast me baleful gazes for distracting you for so long, so for my sake, perhaps I could encourage you to bless them with your radiant smile.”

“Yes, yes,” agreed Victoria. “I’m certain we both have other business to attend to tonight. However, I don’t regret this time spent with one who was previously a stranger to me. I hope I’ll hear from you again, Vegel.”

Intrigued, Vegel asked, “Pray tell me, on what pretext, ‘Helen’?”

Victoria answered, “Why to examine Helen’s bust, of course. Or to bring word of any treasures not fit for Hesha that might on the contrary make a fine contribution to my own collection.”

Motioning toward the previously unknown Canova, Vegel said, “Perhaps we should trade positions. I will put my knowledge of art and art history to use as a vain Toreador

poseur, and you can put your treasure-hunting wiles to work as a slippery and conniving Setite who pretends many friends but truly has only one if allowed to count himself."

Victoria didn't appear to find such a rude comment surprising, or if she did she hid it with silence.

So Vegel continued, "Therefore, I bid my snake-charmers adieu." Turning to the anguished marble woman, Vegel continued, "Lovely Eve, save us all an inordinate amount of trouble and forgive Caine his transgression."

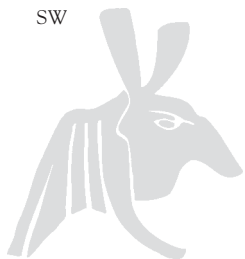
Then Vegel stepped close to his hostess and whispered to her, "Do not give up your innuendo of serpents, lovely 'Helen.' Though I suspect it will serve you better with mortals than an immortal snake such as myself."

With that, Vegel quickly turned on his heel and strode away. As he did so, the Setite noted with chagrin that the poor lighting from earlier seemed to have been corrected, which was impossible unless the reason for the problem was unassociated with electricity and light bulbs. That made Vegel very uncomfortable.

But Victoria summoned his thoughts back to the moment. A petulant lip pouting at Vegel's back, the Toreador was quick with a parting quip: "Mortals do not interest me, Vegel, and neither do ordinary snakes." Looking back to catch these words, Vegel imagined Victoria as a day-dreaming schoolgirl as she delicately curled a bobbing ringlet around a sleek finger, and then with a deft toss of her neck flicked a kiss at Vegel's receding back.

Vegel wondered what magic she had wrought when he felt the kiss's sensual warmth melt on his neck. How could she have guessed that her sophomoric humor and innuendo would be effective on one as seemingly cultured and intellectual as himself? More than anything else—with the definite exception of the mimicked smile that still haunted Vegel with its aftershocks—that was what Vegel found most frightening.

Such fear be damned, though, for Vegel was hastening to meet his Nosferatu contact—the only reason he had accepted the invitation to this party on Hesha's behalf in the first place.



Monday, 21 June 1999, 11:38 PM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

The proliferation of corpses of Abel on this top floor of the High Museum of Art disturbed Vogel. He was too superstitious to chuckle along with the majority of the Kindred in attendance at the vulgar indecency of the displays.

After Vogel left Victoria Ash at Antonio Canova's *Mourning the Dead Abel*, he was passing an apparently freshly carved sculpture when he realized it was another death scene of Abel. And this was yet prior to his planned rendezvous with the Nosferatu Rolph at the side of Dupré's *The Dead Abel*, so Vogel knew at least one other sculpted corpse awaited him.

Just as much as the mass grave of Abels was disturbing, Vogel was realizing more fully the great danger of Victoria Ash. She was clearly, and more importantly, easily, seducing him. Not since his long-gone days as a mortal had his lust been so out of his control. The curse of her effect on him was that, even while he understood intellectually that she was clawing her way to his heart, the sensation was too delicious to resist. Few were the dangers to the Kindred greater than nostalgia, and reliving so vividly the forgotten tangibles of desire was invigorating and irresistible.

Slackening his pace before he passed the newly carved Abel, Vogel warily rubbed his neck where the Toreador's kiss had massaged him. Was it magic, or merely the flush of lust that warmed his neck?

The new Abel was monstrous for reasons entirely opposite to the *verismo* of Dupré's work which Vogel would soon behold again (for he first viewed it years ago when it was first moved to the Louvre). Where Dupré's Abel was horrifically rendered in absolutely realistic detail, the carving before him now was a shocking caricature.

Vogel normally preferred to view new works with an unfettered access, but he found himself slowly absorbing the details of this strange piece despite the presence of another viewer. Fortunately, the slender Kindred was quiet. In any event, Vogel paid but passing attention to him, instead focusing his concentration on the sculpture before him.

His analysis was annoyingly interrupted when the stranger said, "A piece of garbage, don't you think?"

Curtly, Vogel said, "I'm yet undecided. I'll draw my own conclusions after ample viewing."

Vogel caught a glimpse of the other Kindred sneering, glaring down the length of his too-long nose as Vogel turned his back to him and continued his observation. The Setite sensed the other shuffling back a handful of paces, but the gesture was clearly one of irritation meant to draw attention to himself, instead of one of courtesy to allow the clearer access Vogel preferred.

The most startling aspect of this death scene was the anatomy of the two figures. The limbs of both Caine and Abel were soft and fleshy, and the torsos possessed little definition. Also, the heads were overly large—much too ponderous for the frames of

the figures' bodies. As the sculpture was carved from a textureless black stone, this purposeful disproportion was enhanced.

The implement of death was a knotted rope of sorts, and the means strangulation, so this felling of Abel was a bloodless one—presumably not the sort that in reality had occurred.

The expressions were intriguing, and were well executed; so much so that Vogel was surprised he did not recognize the piece or even the artist. Abel's face was lit with a cheery bliss without even a hint of resignation. Clearly, he anticipated the journey to heaven. Vogel wondered if there wasn't something to that. Yes, this was the first murder, but was it not also the first death? Abel was the first of God's likenesses to stand beside Him in heaven. Or was this prior to mankind's admittance to heaven? Vogel was unsure of this specific of Christianity.

This intriguing premise made Caine's face even more decipherable, for the murderer's expression was one of resolution and determination but with an upper lip that was slightly wrinkled to denote some amount of distaste. The sculpture told Vogel a story of Caine slaying Abel at the latter's request.

Pacing back to the front of the piece, so the other Kindred was behind him again, Vogel noted the bronze plaque with the imprinted title of *Abel Condemns Caine*, which potentially confirmed the Setite's interpretation of the piece. From this vantage, Vogel could also see that the "rope" was in fact an umbilical cord still attached to Caine's belly. That revelation made it ridiculously clear that the brothers were not misshapen at all, but were actually infants.

Vogel wrestled with how this discovery affected his interpretation of the piece.

From behind, he heard, "I shouldn't have made them children, should I?"

Vogel groaned inwardly and lied, "I admit that aspect of the work was initially confusing, but in light of the title I find it entirely appropriate, and more than that, a very novel approach."

Rarely did he enjoy discussing a piece with its creator, especially one so clearly stalking those who approached his work and fishing for comments. Even in the rare cases when Vogel's appreciation for a piece was not immediately soured because of the personality of the creator, though the piece itself might be extraordinary, he preferred to be on equal ground when discussing a work with another. When that conversation was with the creator, Vogel's interpretation could only be accurate or even reasonable if it had much in common with the creator's own interpretation of his work. It was difficult to argue with a self-proclaimed expert. Artists could not be experts on their work for everyone, for much of art was in the eye of the beholder.

The Setite turned toward the artist as he continued, hoping his lie would extinguish the other's need to discuss the sculpture, "You must be the artist. I am Vogel, a collector of antiquities."

"Not interested in new work, then," said the thin man, his tentative smile dripping away to a frown. "My name is Leopold, and yes, the work is mine."

Face to face with him now, Vogel took a moment to examine the artist. Though a Kindred, and presumably a Toreador, or else Victoria Ash would not allow his piece admittance here (for though flawed, the work was too good to make a mockery of him in the event Ash allowed the showing with the intent to embarrass him), Leopold had

the look of a starving artist. He was thin, drooping, haggard and unkempt as only a person who generally cares little for his appearance but who tries to tidy himself prior to an evening like this, could be. Vogel noted a gleam in the artist's eyes, though, that told him this Toreador was an authentic creator. The gleam could be madness, but often that light was the same as the one that guided inspired artistic work.

Vogel was tempted to reveal his lie to the artist, but there was much more pressing business tonight than even a remarkable potential talent. So, eliminating any tone of engagement or interest from his voice, Vogel said, "It is a fine piece. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Leopold seemed barely attentive to what Vogel was saying, and staring at the piece, he muttered, "These harder substances still don't respond well for me. Perhaps I should try something more malleable, like wood. Can you imagine this in wood? The umbilical could be so much more dynamic! I just couldn't impart any energy...through...the...stone...."

But Vogel was gone. He didn't turn even as the artist's words trailed indelicately into silence. The Setite did not wish to meet the Toreador's sad eyes.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 11:46 PM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York



The desk was a wreck. Dusty, dirty, scarred, paint-smeared, neglected, its dovetails were falling to pieces, and the patent mechanisms that had made it “state of the art” before the term was invented had been broken for years. The center lock had, at some long-forgotten date, been sawn through and removed completely. The three side drawers had their locks, but so filthy were the mechanisms that even their right keys could never shut them again. Not that she had the right keys; she wasn’t sure, in fact, that the wood around the locks would have survived the experiment. The cabinet side squeaked and rasped when opened, and the swinging table inside sang like a dying elephant if she dared make it emerge.

She wrung a cut-up cotton T-shirt nearly dry of the warm water and wood soap, and began to lift the grime from the desktop. There was too much grit on the surface to risk wiping the rag across it, even along the grain, so she pressed the wet rag flat, and picked the dust up through sheer water tension and the knit of the cloth.

With infinite care, she removed the drawers. The center drawer and one of the side three shimmied in her hands; they would have to be trued-up and pinned solid again. The one cut for storing stationery had been repaired before, horrendously. She shook her head at the huge blobs of wood glue that lined the joints. The fourth drawer, unexpectedly, was sturdy, and all the slats and dividers missing from the others were sliding around inside it. Three were original to the desk, and she smiled over the thin sheets of wood like a child over a crackerjack prize.

She opened the cabinet side, pulled the table up and out—with a noise, this time, less like an elephant and more like a broken merry-go-round—and crawled half beneath it. She put the bucket and duster aside for the moment, and dug in her hip pocket for a flashlight.

A voice erupted gently behind her, clearing its throat. “Is this,” said the voice, “for sale here?”

Startled, the woman dropped the flashlight to the dusty boards. She pulled her head and shoulders out of the cabinet’s maw, and looked up with dark-amber eyes. The store was dark, the workroom lamps were facing the wrong way, and the man was standing still further shadowed, in the calm, low light of the stairway leading to the owners’ offices.

“No.” She slid the grimy bandanna from her long, straight, chestnut hair, embarrassed. “Maybe.” With the cleaner side of the kerchief, she wiped the dust from her face and squinted into the landing. “It could be, I guess,” she went on, leaning against the comforting bulk of the thing. “It’s mine. I’m afraid it’s hardly Rutherford House quality...”

“I’m not really looking to buy. I was just curious...” The man’s tone left the conversation open.

“I went to a sale with Amy Rutherford and saw it in the odd lot. When she bargained for the pieces she wanted, we brought it in as part of a package deal.”

“Why?” And, somehow, the voice was genuinely interested, and she found herself talking on.

“Um...because it wasn’t worth anything, really. Because we were really interested in some early Marathi— sorry, some early Indian brassworks. And of course, if the dealer knew that they were what Amy was after, he might have double-checked his appraisal. As it was, we paid a few dollars too many for the desk, and picked up his ‘souvenirs’ for pennies. There’s one in the niche behind you,” she said, gesturing to a display on his right.

“But why all this?” One elegant hand pointed toward the bucket, the cleaners, and the drop cloths.

She smiled, and gestured vaguely with the bandanna. “Because I like it.”

The man walked out of the stairwell and into the workroom. He was tall and straight, wearing a charcoal-gray suit that could make a tuxedo look casual—or denim overdressed. He was bald or shaved, but the bones of his skull were beautifully shaped. He wasn’t handsome; he didn’t have to be; he was complete, and perfectly sculpted, and his dark skin gleamed like candlelit mahogany. He walked into the workroom with the polite diffidence of a guest, picked up the nearest of the glaring lamps, and turned it to shine on the old desk.

“It’s good. It’s not a bad piece. Why do you say it isn’t worth anything?”

“The pull-out,” she replied, tapping on the swinging table. “It’s built to conveniently store and conceal your typewriter, circa 1920. Patent pending. The estate thought they might be able to sell it to an office-supply place. But hardly anyone wants desks without file drawers, and no one, but no one, uses manual typewriters anymore. Some fool would have taken out the poor creature’s guts and drilled holes through him to convert him to the computer age.” She stroked the beaded edge of the desktop, murmuring, “And I couldn’t let that happen to him.”

“To him?”

The woman half-blushed, and put on a more businesslike face. “Sorry. I’m just a little animist. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“You might give me the honor of an introduction.”

“Oh.” She wiped off her right hand, and gave it to him. Her grip was firm, warm, and confident; his was strong, cool, and dry. “Elizabeth Dimitros. I’m on staff here.”

“I’m Hesha Ruhadze. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The same.” She paused, trying to place him. Late visitors weren’t uncommon, but she’d never seen this customer before. “Were you here to see Amy?”

“Agnes,” he said, naming the senior partner. “She was saving an alabaster figure for me.”

“The Old Kingdom ushebti?”

“Yes. You saw it?”

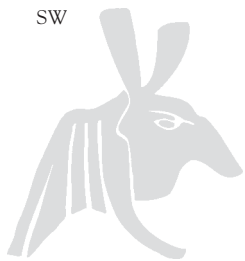
Elizabeth nodded. “I helped authenticate it. It was the best piece the Rutherfords had, this side of the Atlantic.” She looked at him, curiously. “Are you interested in Egyptian art?” She stepped out of her sneakers and left them on the drop cloth. With her stocking foot, she touched a power strip, and the blazing workroom lamps flickered out. With her clean hand, she turned up the dimmers that controlled the display system.

The main floor of Rutherford House glowed softly in the lights. The walls of the gallery were the color and texture of eggshell, curved and molded to provide shelves

and niches for the treasures they held. The artifacts—few of them were young enough to be merely antique—were masterfully displayed. There was harmony, and tradition, and a feel for Anglican upper-class aesthetics. But there was also a contrast in the groupings that spoke of a more modern hand, one that understood the shock of Zen and the unmindfully disciplined dash of Chinese calligraphy. Ruhadze followed her across the thick, soft carpet to a shelf draped in velvet a shade darker than the walls. A slender collar of lapis and gold beads lay in the hollow.

“This is terribly common of course,” she said, “compared to your latest acquisition, but the ibis inlaid in the clasp is the finest carving of the—”

Elizabeth never finished her description, because at that very moment, her customer collapsed.



Monday, 21 June 1999, 11:47 PM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

The scene seemed one from an early Hollywood monster movie: a dark-clad and hooded figure crouched beside the nearly naked form of a man. Monstrous facial features were not readily discernible because of the hood, but backlighting silhouetted a knotted and crooked nose and a much too sharp and long chin from within the hood as the head pivoted slowly about.

Vegel imagined the copse of elegant white birch trees that would complete the eerie scene. Their slender white trunks could be giant, bleached bones jutting skyward, visible at night with even the barest hint of moonlight.

But there were no trees. Nor was there a corpse. However, there was a monster: Rolph of clan Nosferatu, the Kindred whom Vegel had expressly journeyed to Atlanta to meet.

Rolph indeed crouched as if poised over a corpse—another one of Abel. This was Giovanni Dupré's Abel, *The Dead Abel*. It was not a romantic interpretation of the dead man. His arms were akimbo, his eyes rolled back in his head, and his mouth gaping open. Some missing fingers and fingertips were not to the design of the sculptor—those losses had occurred in the century and a half since the piece was completed.

As for Rolph, there was little to see because of the robe, though Vegel knew him immediately from past acquaintanceship. There was no mistaking the bulbous nose crooked hard to the left, or the chin so long and pointed it seemed a horn grew beneath the Nosferatu's thin lower lip. These were features no hood could hide.

Rolph was average height, perhaps a couple of inches shorter than Vegel's six feet, though he remained crouched even after he noted Vegel approaching. The voluminous brown robe draped the floor around the Nosferatu, so Vegel could not determine how he was dressed beneath.

Rolph spoke first. "Greetings, Vegel. I've watched you make the rounds and wondered when you would settle down to the real business of your trip."

Vegel replied, "Hello, Rolph." Then, after a few more paces that brought him to a comfortable distance as the Nosferatu finally stood up, Vegel defended himself, "My instructions were to meet at *The Dead Abel* as midnight approached but before it neared. If armed with more precise instructions, I would have happily satisfied you more fully."

"No matter," Rolph said. "You are here in plenty of time. I wondered if perhaps you were addled by the confusing quantity of Abels strewn about this chamber, though I saw, in fact, that you were distracted earlier by living, or at least nearly living, concerns in the form of our redoubtable hostess."

Vegel was embarrassed by this accusation, but there was little he could do to refute it, so he lied while at the same time stabbing back at Rolph. "Yes, we conversed for some time. I feel she may be of immense help in locating important artifacts which Hesha seeks."

"I see," Rolph said. "Perhaps it's time then that we got down to business."

"Of course," replied Vogel, pleased to be past pleasantries, for he disliked small talk, and small talk with Nosferatu most of all. He didn't trust members of this clan, though they in general and Rolph in particular had provided assistance in his endeavors. The defining ugliness of the clan tricked one into believing that everything about a Nosferatu was just as visible. They often exaggerated this with a rudeness of the sort Rolph had displayed when he mentioned Victoria Ash.

They also pretended to be transparent in their schemes. Vogel knew from experience that they could be the wiliest of Camarilla vampires. The Ventrue might claim to be masters of deceit, as their arena was anything political, but this claim was one the Nosferatu granted the Camarilla's leaders in a move that even further obfuscated the achievements of the Nosferatu clan.

Rolph said contritely, "I'm sorry to drag you into this den of thieves, but it was honestly my only means of providing some material that Hesha has long sought."

Vogel did not inquire about the privacy of their conversation even though it unfolded in plain view in the gallery. This was a detail Rolph had surely covered, and if the Nosferatu had not—that is, if Rolph wanted this conversation to be overheard—then there was nothing Vogel could do about it. He could speak to some other Setites in a hissing whisper that no one outside the clan could translate even if they could hear it, but he doubted the secret of that tongue was known even by the prowling Nosferatu.

Rolph continued, "However, I know your risk will be worth it, for tonight, Clan Nosferatu would like to repay an old debt to Hesha. What I give you should even matter regarding the Bombay affair some centuries ago. This incident was before either of our times, but I guarantee that your master will know of what I speak."

Vogel said, "Very well. I will relay notice of the debt repayment and whatever information or material you hereafter provide to my master. If he deems the matter unfair or unsettled, then I am certain he will contact your masters. But if no direct payment is demanded of me, then I will gladly entertain whatever you reveal next."

"Understood," Rolph said. The Nosferatu then took a few steps to the side so that Dupré's sculpture was no longer behind him. The move afforded Vogel an unimpeded view of the piece.

"What I offer tonight, friend Vogel, is an artifact greatly desired and long sought by your master. I offer none other than the Eye of Hazimel."

Vogel couldn't help but be caught by surprise. Whatever had happened in Bombay long ago must have placed some important elders among the Nosferatu in Hesha's deep debt, for the Eye of Hazimel might be *the* Evil Eye, the artifact that served as the basis for all the silly posturing of gypsies and superstitious simpletons. That there was usually truth at the heart of such legends was something Vogel had learned early in his service of Hesha.

"It is much too late to hide my surprise, Rolph, so I will admit my shock. If what you offer is truly the Eye of Hazimel, then I of course will take your information to Hesha so he may pursue the item wherever it rests."

"Pursuit is not necessary," Rolph laughed. "The Eye is here in this statue of Abel." Rolph waved his hand at the plaster corpse at their feet.

Vogel said in surprise, "So it belongs to Victoria Ash?"

Rolph explained, “Certainly not. At least not in any real sense, for it’s virtually certain that the lovely Ms. Ash does not even realize the Eye resides within her sculpture, if in fact she’s aware of the Eye’s existence at all.”

Suddenly feeling odd about examining the sculpture too closely, for fear his gaze would be a tell-tale heart, Vegel nevertheless thoroughly examined the piece, though he did so without moving from his present location. He remained dubious. His best detection techniques—powers that had once located slightly enchanted jade earrings sealed somewhere in a five-mile expanse of the Great Wall of China, and then when they were embedded some forty feet above the ground—did not note the presence of the puniest magical bauble anywhere within the plaster Abel. And the Eye of Hazimel, especially if it was *the* Evil Eye, would probably have registered to Vegel so long as Vegel approached within several dozen paces even if the Setite weren’t actively searching for it.

So Vegel asked, “Can you explain then why everyone seems oblivious to its presence?”

“Certainly,” smiled Rolph. “In its present state, the Eye is undetectable.”

Vegel inaudibly groaned. As if that explained anything. Though it did explain something. *In its present state...*

Rolph continued, “That’s why it’s unlikely that Ms. Ash realizes she possesses this item. It’s also why it’s necessary to give you this gift at so public a locale where we have access to this sculpture, or for that matter, why we arranged for you to be invited to this celebration in the first place.”

Nodding so Rolph knew he was listening, Vegel scanned the large open chamber. If he was to take possession of so potent an artifact, then it was crucial he know who was about. For the Eye might be undetectable in its present state, but what about when it was removed from the sculpture? At least Vegel hoped it *could* be removed. There was little chance of him slipping away from the party with a plaster corpse tucked under his arm, and that was assuming he had Hesha’s strength and could lift Dupré’s masterpiece at all.

Vegel noted several details of importance as he examined his surroundings. First, he was pleased to confirm that this display of *The Dead Abel* was on the periphery of the chamber. No clusters of Kindred stood between him and a nearby emergency exit.

Second, he was relieved to see that Hannah, the Tremere chantry leader, was still absent. If any of the Kindred of the city were capable of detecting the Eye, then it would be her. And the Setite knew that she would discard her own two eyes without a second thought in order to possess this single, ancient one.

Third, he was disconcerted to catch Victoria Ash glancing at him so that their eyes locked briefly before he glanced past her—with difficulty.

Finally, Vegel was alarmed to note that the huge bronze clock set over the windows looking down to Peachtree Street in front of the Museum was but a handful of tick-tocks from midnight. While no midnight timetable had been absolutely set, Vegel’s impression was that midnight was something of a deadline for this exchange.

“If I may, I have a number of questions,” Vegel said.

Rolph glanced at the same clock Vegel had checked seconds before. “Certainly, but our time is short, so let’s be brief and relevant.”

Without allowing much pause, Vegel said, “Why midnight?”

“Because we have arranged an escape route for you. If the route is to serve its purpose, you must be passing through that emergency-exit door at precisely one minute before midnight.”

Vegel briefly nodded, then asked, “Will the Eye be detectable once removed from the sculpture?”

“Not for some time. Certainly enough time for you to make your escape. So long as it resides in an inanimate object it may not be detected, even by its progenitor. Actually, especially by its progenitor, but presumably others who use the same methods as well.”

Slowly dredging up memories of the legends of the Eye, Vegel asked, “And if placed within an animate being?”

“It will come to life in the empty socket of an animate being.”

Hoping to glean some information he did not possess but the Nosferatu might, Vegel ventured, “For this purpose, is a vampire considered an ‘animate’ being?”

“Most certainly. The Eye comes from one of our kind, after all. Quickly now, last question.”

Vegel thought for a moment. He didn’t like the idea of others providing an escape route for him. Frankly, he was even nervous when that task was left to Heshu. There had been no trouble, of course—who would dare cross swords with his master?—but leaving such serious business as his existence and a precious artifact in the hands of Rolph, even if he was a sometimes ally apparently repaying an ancient debt, made him nervous.

Brandishing a cell phone he withdrew from his dress coat’s breast pocket, Vegel asked, “Why your escape route? Why should I not accept the Eye and then summon my chauffeur to depart as I arrived? After all, if the Eye will remain undetectable—”

Rolph’s face discolored with impatience, then it flushed with what Vegel could only interpret as confusion. Rolph recomposed himself, glanced at the clock, looked at Vegel earnestly and said, “Listen and listen closely, for after I answer I will hand you the Eye and direct you to leave immediately via the emergency door nearest us on the wall—an instruction I strongly advise you to heed. Please do call your chauffeur, but let him arrive and depart again as a decoy. I promise that you will not see him again.”

Rolph looked intently into Vegel’s eyes for a moment after these pronouncements. Vegel understood the gesture held no intent to subjugate his will, as some Kindred were capable of doing, but was instead merely a check to see if the sincerity of this message was impressed upon the Setite. With a slow nod, Vegel indicated his understanding.

“Good,” said Rolph.

Moving quickly, Rolph threw his hands skyward, and with his fingers spread so it seemed his hand might split as if quartered by horses, he drew back the large hood to reveal a face as disgusting as Vegel recalled. The Nosferatu cared little about Vegel’s reaction, and in fact did not notice it at all. He seemed as unconcerned with everyone else in the galleries as well.

Indeed, as Vegel looked around, briefly taking his attention off Rolph, he saw that Rolph’s sudden and exaggerated movements had drawn absolutely no attention. In fact, everyone seemed to be pointedly looking *away* from the two of them.

Vegel took great pleasure in being at the epicenter of the Nosferatu’s power. The abilities of various Kindred never ceased to amaze him. He might be able to find a jade earring in China’s Great Wall, but Rolph could effectively make himself, and apparently others too, vanish.

The Setite's enjoyment was cut short as he watched in awe as Rolph retrieved the Eye of Hazimel. Bending down over the sculpture of Abel, the Nosferatu vigorously rubbed together the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He used his left hand to steady his weight against Abel's chest, and then stabbed his fingers toward Abel's left eye. Vogel instinctively flinched in expectation of plaster debris raining from the point of impact, but instead Rolph's fingers plunged and disappeared into the pupilless orb as if it were deep, inky water.

Rolph squirmed and turned about, his wrist spinning back and forth in wild gyrations as if the Nosferatu were attempting to grasp something elusive within the sculpture's eye or head. Rolph's hand and arm were suddenly seized with an almost violent rigidity, and he looked up to smile a pained grin at Vogel.

Vogel then followed the Nosferatu's gaze back to the bronze clock, and though Vogel turned back to watch Abel's head and the Kindred fingers extended within it, Rolph's attention remained focused on the clock. It was counting down toward 11:59 PM. As the seconds ticked away, Rolph remained frozen. Until he looked back up at Vogel.

"Ready?" asked the Nosferatu.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 11:55 PM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



At least Stella sang the appropriate praises for his sculpture. Leopold respected her opinion, and he knew she had a discerning eye that had been trained through photography, but he didn't trust compliments from someone he regarded as a friend. It was too easy for a friend to like his work, and too hard for a friend to criticize honestly. Leopold could never understand the usefulness of artist retreats or communes. The same person could not be a good critic and a good friend, so both of these endeavors were doomed to failure.

He'd left her still examining his *Abel Condemns Caine*. Some distance away now, he leaned into one of the glass walls that crisscrossed and divided the gallery. He tapped it sharply a few times and ended up admitting to himself that he should accept Stella's compliments. He was just upset about his exchange with the Setite, and that had fouled his mood.

As if he wasn't upset enough! He smacked his forehead against the glass in frustration. Then, in embarrassment, he looked around to see if anyone noticed his petulant display. At first he thought himself safe, but then he noticed a lone figure sitting beneath a large sculpture of a male figure as yet unexamined by Leopold.

The Kindred at the foot of the sculpture had a feral look. His hair was long and matted, and his face wasn't completely human. It was too pointy, like a dog's head maybe. Leopold suspected this was a Gangrel, which meant he was probably either Javic or the one who lived north of Atlanta who was called Dusty. From the Kindred's haggard appearance, Leopold suspected this was the latter.

Whoever he was, he looked directly at Leopold but gave no indication of greeting or recognition as Leopold stared back. His gaze made Leopold uncomfortable, though, so the Toreador moved to a spot out of view from everyone.

The delay had not stemmed his frustration, and he smacked his head on the glass again. This time he did it so forcefully that his ears rang.

Still no Hannah! He cursed. Why wasn't she here? Apparently he wasn't the only one who had noticed or been surprised, for he'd overheard two other mentions of the Tremere. Surely, though, no one had such pressing business with her as he did.

He wondered if he had misunderstood her, but he clearly recalled her saying the final step of the process would be some simple magic she would use to do something. Analyze the reaction of the blood in his body, he supposed.

What if it had all been a trick? Leopold shivered at the thought. What if he was bound to her by blood now, and she didn't need to be here because she was seeing through his eyes or maybe even controlling some of his actions from her mansion?

It sounded ridiculous to the Toreador, but he'd heard so many unbelievable things in the past couple of years that he was unwilling to throw out any idea, no matter how absurd.

So, if there was to be no Hannah, Leopold thought about what to do next. Maybe he should go to the Tremere chantry and see for himself what delayed or kept her? He

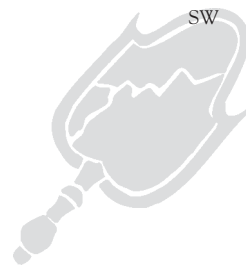
didn't think that was a good idea. If she was avoiding him, or if she had other reasons to not be here, then she would probably think little of another visit.

Or maybe he should just confront Victoria? Just ask her directly, "Are you my sire?" But that was stupid.

On the other hand, maybe he could just speak to her. Even if she didn't know anything about his past, Victoria was still his primogen. That hardly made her his senator—someone obligated to represent him and help him—but perhaps she would help. Maybe she knew secrets of Toreador blood that would allow her to guess his sire. The idea of sharing his blood with her was very appealing, though Leopold shook his head at his infantile infatuation with the woman.

Regardless, he would speak to her. She was the hostess, after all, and he had yet to speak to her within the gallery itself.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 11:57 PM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



From within the sculpture of the cannibal Count Ugolino—the count who devoured his children—the General beamed a smile at the crowd he entertained and that would soon itself be consumed.

It was supposedly a celebration of the Summer Solstice, an ironic holiday for a Kindred to commemorate, but such infantile humor did not easily desert the recently dead. Victoria Ash, the party's hostess, was not new among the Kindred, but she was a Toreador, and in her kind this variety of foolishness persisted even longer. Or so they made it seem, at least, and the General usually sided with the "at least" viewpoint, especially so in the case of Ms. Ash. She was an adept Kindred, the General concluded.

Nevertheless, he relished seeing her lovely face paralyzed with anguish. Aye, her most of all, he decided, although for no good reason.

For over an hour now, he had watched Victoria speak with guest after guest—first a truly young Ventrue, then an encounter with the Brujah primogen and the Malkavian prince, then an intriguing Setite—and the General had changed his mind. He sometimes liked to pick a hero, and tonight his would be Victoria Ash. Oh, certainly she would be harmed, but the General decided, she would escape. He wasn't entirely sure of the rationale for this change of heart, but it was something in which he'd indulged in the past. Lone survivors could be as interesting as mass slaughter.

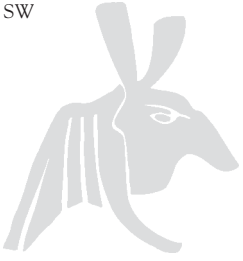
The General laughed, and the marble mouth of the count cracked a bit. He wondered if this sentiment suggested there was something noble still in him.

He purposefully soured his thought and face.

He hoped it meant nothing of the sort. However, his mind was made up, and, short of sacrificing himself to the slaughter too, Victoria Ash would escape this night. If he leapt from his hiding place and waded through the inevitable conflict for his own salvation, then he would make certain she was ushered to the same safety he sought.

Until then, the General watched the Kindred play their meaningless games. "Meaningless" not because their activity was as a whole purposeless, but simply because anything these Kindred did this night would be for naught. The sole exception was departure, and the General had noted with interest when the Setite with whom Victoria had spoken and a Nosferatu the General knew as Rolph both left the party slightly before midnight.

With their departure, he braced himself then for a reckoning within this chamber. But even as he readied himself, he knew that the time was not quite yet. However, the urgency of Vegel and Rolph's departure confused him. Perhaps it was simply his anticipation making him edgy. One would think that centuries would bring patience. Especially centuries often spent in torpor.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:00 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

“Ready.”

With the slimy, sucking sound of a wet plunger releasing its vacuum, Rolph slowly withdrew his hand from the sculpture. Luminosity as if from a 1000-watt darklight blinded Vogel, but he was still able to see the shadow of something oblong and pulsating clamped between the Nosferatu’s thumb and forefinger.

As if he held something dangerous or hot or precious—or perhaps all three—Rolph carefully extended the object toward Vogel and slowly lowered it onto the Setite’s outstretched palm. Dollops of coagulated goo dripped off the object and onto Vogel’s palm before the cold, moist object itself settled into his hand.

Vogel closed his hand and felt the spongy but smooth and surprisingly heavy object, and that blocked some of the flooding light, though his hand was not large enough to surround the Eye completely. His vision partially restored, Vogel looked anxiously about, but he found that none of these astounding events had yet drawn the attention of others. While he stood bathed in the unearthly light of an ancient Kindred’s eyeball, the other Kindred continued their debates of petty politics. It made Vogel laugh.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:00 AM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York



Hesha swayed, suddenly disoriented. There was a bright flash inside his own eyes, and the echo of a waking mind, just beyond his own—with shock he thought he recognized the sensation. *The Eye? Active?* He strained to catch hold of the traces, throwing all his energy into the effort. His body, neglected, began to buckle.

“Sir?” Elizabeth Dimitros said. “Sir!”

He found himself falling against the wall, and the woman sprang to keep his head from cracking open on the shelf. He ignored her completely, and concentrated on following the emanations.

“Are you all right?” Her arms wrestled with the weight of him. She braced her knee behind his back, and turned his unresisting body over. His eyes were closed. “Lie down.” He felt her raise his legs and prop them up on something hard, and then a soft, yielding cushion was placed beneath his head. Her hands fluttered at his cheeks and forehead, and he could feel her leave. He was glad; even the slightest distraction made focusing more difficult.

For an instant, the vague and slippery phenomenon held steady in his mental grasp: It was the Eye, he had no doubt now. Somewhere in the world it had been...freed. He had the statue with him in New York; that last-minute decision to bring it with him had been irrational, but thank Set for the omens that brought him to do so. He must go to it as quickly as possible.

A quilted blanket, smelling slightly of attics and moving vans, was spread across him, and his would-be nurse reached for his wrist to take a pulse.

Hesha motioned her away. “I’m all right.” He sat up, accepting help he didn’t need. Outwardly, he was grateful, and with half a thought spun an effortlessly plausible lie to explain his fall. His inner self was well-masked and racing with questions, analyzing the brief flash of clarity he’d achieved. Elizabeth kept a doubtful watch on him, but his steps were steady and his manner as polished as before the ‘faint.’ He drew his appreciation to a slow close and checked his watch.

“I really must be getting back to my hotel now,” he said. “Thank you again, Mrs. Dimitros.”

“Miss,” she said, casually. “But call me Liz; everyone does.”

He looked into her face thoughtfully. For a moment the mask was set aside and the problem of the Eye left alone. There was a question still unanswered here; the tiny puzzle charmed and tempted him.

“Would you mind,” he began, “being Elizabeth to me? I’d hate to blend in with the common herd.”

Elizabeth laughed, and her business face dropped away entirely. “Please.”

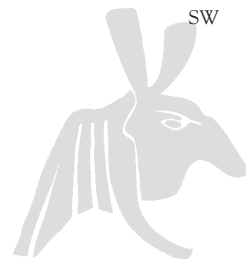
“Would you mind,” he asked, “putting that necklace aside for me to look at the next time I come?”

“Of course.”

“And would you mind,” he said again, “having dinner with me Thursday night?”

“I wouldn’t mind at all,” she said, laughing in surprise. And after he had gone, and the front door was locked behind him, it was some time before she remembered that the bucket, the rag, and the desk were still waiting.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:01 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



Vegel's mirth was short-lived, for Rolph tugged him by the sleeve and then pushed him toward red emergency-exit door. "Go, and don't worry about the alarm," said the Nosferatu, whose skin gained an even less appealing pallor in the purplish light.

Vegel didn't hesitate. He did not run headlong toward the door, though, for he wasn't certain if the cloaking Rolph provided extended beyond the Nosferatu's immediate proximity. Still, the door was but a half moment away, and Vegel achieved it without drawing any attention to himself or the potent orb within his grasp.

As the heavy emergency door crept shut behind him and sealed to a sturdy close, Vegel did hear the clanging of an alarm erupt. Before him were alternating flights of stairs going down only. He did not delay. The rataplan of his feet skipping down the metal steps could surely draw no more attention than the fire alarm.

Vegel was relatively athletic and he had the unnatural vigor of all Kindred, so his progress down the stairs was very rapid. He still clutched the Eye in his right hand, and several paces into his descent, the purplish light faded. At the same time, the Eye briefly throbbed more rapidly than before, but then that subsided as well.

After descending four flights of stairs, two floors of the museum, Vegel came to a landing where the yellow tape used to mark police lines was stretched across the frame of what appeared to be an old service access door. More flights of stairs toward ground level beckoned Vegel, but he suspected the Nosferatu's escape route continued through this door. Otherwise Rolph would have removed the tape to avoid just this kind of confusion.

The door was severely rusted and a worn padlock bound it to an old wooden frame. Even if the door resisted efforts to force it open, Vegel felt certain the frame would splinter and allow access. That tactic, of course, would reveal his route if he was being followed, so he decided there must be a less forceful approach to the problem.

And there was. Upon closer examination, Vegel realized that the disintegrating wooden frame was in fact cracked along its entire length. Vegel applied careful and diligent pressure and discovered that the entire structure—door, frame and everything—could swing open as a unit.

It opened just enough to allow the Kindred to squeeze through, though his effort was rewarded with a handful of splinters, a couple of which penetrated his clothes. They might have cut his flesh as well, but Vegel's skin was tougher than any mortal's and it turned aside the toothpick shafts.

Only emergency lights illuminated the area behind the access door. Vegel first made sure there was no immediate danger, then he turned to press the wooden frame back into place. With a quiet pop it settled back into position, and from the other side it must have appeared as unused as Vegel had first imagined it moments ago.

The small area he was within consisted of a catwalk surrounding what was presumably an old elevator shaft. The odor of old grease told Vegel this was not any shaft presently in use.

At one point on the catwalks, ladders offered access to levels both higher and lower than Vogel's present one. The Setite assumed he should continue downward. He quickly secured the Eye alongside his phone inside the breast pocket of his dress coat, and then he swung off the catwalk and slid down the ladder with his feet and hands pressed hard against the outside of the vertical bars.

He dropped the last couple of feet to another catwalk—the ground floor, he guessed—and then performed the same maneuver to reach the basement-level catwalk. The shaft continued down, but the retired elevator was parked in that recess, so Vogel moved toward an access door behind him.

He paused a moment, though, and turned off his cell phone. He couldn't risk its ringer betraying his position. Then he tried the door.

It was locked, so Vogel looked around again. As he did so, he patted his chest to make certain the Eye was still with him, though the gesture was really a double-check since the artifact seemed to be growing cold, and the almost painful icy freeze could be felt through his coat and shirt.

It then seemed to Vogel that a hatch on top of the elevator shell was slightly propped open. He stepped to the edge of the catwalk and leapt down four or five feet to land near the hatch. Indeed, it was ajar, so Vogel folded it open.

The emergency lighting in the shaft didn't illuminate the interior of the old elevator very well, but Vogel thought he could see enough to believe the elevator was empty. Cursing this convoluted Nosferatu escape route, Vogel clambered and squeezed through the hatchway and dropped to the floor of the elevator.

Pausing in the silence and darkness for a moment, Vogel couldn't help but recall Rolph's words: *I promise that you will not see him again.*

What was going to happen to his driver? Was his death necessary for some reason, or was he going to be caught in some larger incident? This thought of danger above caused Vogel to worry suddenly about Victoria Ash. The brief impulse to return to her aid was startling in its clarity and strength, but Vogel resisted that calling, though he did strongly hope nothing untoward happened to her or affected even so much as one of her delicate ringlets.

Vogel shook his head vigorously to clear it, startled by his lapse.

There didn't seem to be any way out of the elevator other than the hatch above him, but he quickly tried to pry apart the doors. They glided apart as if well-oiled and maintained, and Vogel suspected such was the case.

Beyond the open doors, Vogel found a well-lit and more modern passageway. He was amazed the Nosferatu would share such a secret entrance to this Elysium with him, but the mere fact that he'd been shown this one meant there must be another, even better, egress elsewhere.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:04 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



There was no fanfare. No dramatic thundering-open of doors. No declarations or pronouncements. Nothing but the impressive specimen of a Kindred himself, and Victoria believed she was the only one who noticed him enter. It would have taken a commotion to draw any attention, because all the Kindred on the fourth floor of the High Museum had abandoned the entrance in favor of the recesses of the gallery where they formed into cliques.

Victoria couldn't say what brought her to the entrance. Just a nagging sense that something was about to happen. Maybe it was because Rolph had disappeared for a time, but then suddenly reappeared a moment ago to bid adieu for the evening. The Nosferatu offered no explanation, and the haste of his departure left her no chance to inquire.

The Toreador took a deep breath, for the endgame of the plot she'd put in motion—and was keeping in motion by virtue of her entrance via Heaven—was about to begin. She watched the newcomer enter, and when he looked at her and smiled after briefly surveying the lay of the chamber, she extended her hands in greeting.

He moved like a cat down the couple of steps that descended from the platform where the doors stood. He was upon her in a heartbeat, quickly closing a remarkable distance without visibly rushing. The effect was almost vertiginous, and Victoria felt her head swim. He accepted her hands in his and made a token bow to her with the nod of his head.

Julius was a brute of a man who helped the Brujah justicar administer Camarilla justice. Victoria liked the look of this archon. A large black man, Julius's face was square cut and his hair was long and dreadlocked. His was a handsome and strong face, and Victoria had the odd desire to trace her fingers along the purplish scars on his face. One lined his right cheek and stretched over his eye to his forehead. Another reached from above his left ear to almost the exact midpoint of his square chin.

He was dressed in baggy red pants and a tight-fitting black turtleneck, across which draped an antique bandolier. The twelve small brass cases along the length of the leather belt evidently contained something, for they rattled as the large man walked. Strapped to Julius's back in a cross-pattern were the broadswords for which he was so well known. They were surely not the swords he'd actually swung in the arenas of Rome when he'd fought there nearly two thousand years ago, but both were inscribed with Latin phrases that Victoria could not read.

Even though Victoria severely doubted the veracity of the stories that told of Julius as a gladiator in Roman arenas, there was no doubting that he was clearly a dangerous man. Regardless, Victoria knew if the law of Elysium was to be broken tonight, Julius would find his hands amply full in a conflict with Prince Benison.

Victoria was disappointed the Brujah did not wear any symbols of the Black Panthers, an organization Julius supposedly helped in its infancy. It was apparently his work in Chicago in 1968 that had proved to the Brujah elite (of which Julius surely would have been one if he was two thousand years old, or even a thousand) that Julius was interested in taking an active hand in the business of the clan again.

Nevertheless, Victoria licked her lips. A militant black Brujah. Ah, the fireworks tonight might be splendid if Julius did indeed take the opportunity of this evening to pressure the ex-Confederate prince regarding his harsh actions against the anarchs of the city.

And Julius might have a Ventrue as an ally as well in the form of Benjamin, who was also rumored to have civil rights concerns. Victoria had done what she could to put these pieces into place, including surreptitiously revealing to the Brujah justicar that Benison allowed unchecked creation and admission to Atlanta society of all kinds of Kindred—except Brujah. General, a Malkavian, had been recently admitted. Javic, the Gangrel refugee from Bosnia, was admitted. Clarice and Cyndy were both Embraced in Atlanta and admitted to Kindred society.

And most of all, even during the time when the city was full and recognized citizenship was not granted because he supposedly feared overpopulating the city, Prince Benison had “allowed” his wife to Embrace Benjamin and so a new Ventrue was admitted to the city. Or at least Victoria could claim he’d allowed it. He didn’t know about the deed, so he would either have to lie and claim it was done with permission, or he would have to punish Eleanor for her flaunting of the rules and probably his trust too. Either way, his position was weakened.

“Welcome, noble archon, to glorious Atlanta and my own poor party.”

Julius twisted his lips. “I speak and act bluntly, so I won’t battle you for humble pie. I apologize if this upsets your Toreador sensibilities, Victoria; but your party looks very nice, although my opinion of Atlanta is distinctly less than yours.”

Victoria smiled and said, “It sure takes you a lot of words to speak bluntly. Are you certain you were not an author of Latin epics instead of the creator of great stories within the confines of the arena?”

Julius grunted, “Your flowery speech rubbed off on me, is all.”

“I’m certain the prince will remind you,” Victoria began, “so let me do it first, that this is Elysium and no weapons are allowed herein.”

Julius just shook his head. “This noble archon keeps his weapons. Disagreements can be taken to my master.”

Victoria asked, “And is the disagreement between Benison and Thelonious going to be taken to Pascek as well?”

“Perhaps,” said Julius. A sly twinkle lit his eye, and he continued, “If matters progress that far.”

The Toreador shook her head with well-acted sadness, “It seems as though matters have already progressed too far. Benison’s pronouncement regarding the clanless Kindred pre-dates my arrival, so this is not a new subject. It seems the Camarilla elders have let this progress for some time and for some distance.”

Julius said, “The prince stretched his authority when he demanded that all clanless Kindred formally join a clan.”

“Stretched but didn’t exceed...”

“Perhaps,” said Julius. “Although the stretching itself then gives credence to the position the anarchs took, which was a refusal to submit to such heavy-handed demands.”

“And so it has persisted for over a year. Why intervene now?”

Julius looked Victoria in the eye and said, “Surface-to-air missiles get attention.”

Victoria looked at Julius to gauge this response. “But the missiles were fired by the Brujah, or the anarchs, if you wish to be less specific.”

Julius smiled. “True. My information tells me, though, that Thelonious acquired those missiles via a contact secretly arranged by the prince.”

“That does change things,” admitted Victoria. Inwardly, Victoria cursed. Eleanor had been right. Julius did have the goods on her, or at least he seemed to. The Toreador had been hoping for the last hour that the Ventrue’s words were mere groundless mischievousness. However, Julius didn’t give even a subtle hint that he was aware that the suggestion for Benison to provide those weapons to the anarchs had come from Victoria herself. By means of an unsigned letter, of course, but despite her precautions against discovery—including not writing it herself, of course—perhaps Eleanor had traced it back to Victoria.

“You object to this intervention in Atlanta?”

“Certainly not,” Victoria assured the archon. She smiled her warmest and added, “It’s time for Atlanta to move into a new era, I believe.”

Julius chuckled, “You do, eh?”

Victoria said nothing more on these matters, and changed the subject. “May I introduce you around?”

“No,” Julius said flatly.

“Ah, now I see what you mean about plain-speaking. Styling yourself a bit after Lear’s Earl of Kent, perhaps.”

As Victoria spoke, she saw her ghoul Samuel enter through the doors of Hell. He noticed her immediately, and he saw she did likewise, so he attempted to look relaxed. However, the Toreador saw that Samuel was anxious to speak with her. Not an emergency, perhaps, but something troubled the ghoul.

Meanwhile, Julius just looked at her blankly, clearly not understanding her Shakespearean reference. In a moment he said, “Whatever. Just forget that I’m here. I’m going to make myself at home for a moment over by that demon,” he thumbed his hand toward Feuchère’s *Satan*, “and then introduce myself to some people. I’ll see Prince Benison later, I imagine.”

Victoria said, “As you wish, noble archon. *Satan* is a fine work that could understandably occupy a great deal of time. One might even get lost in its examination, causing oversights of etiquette for which no blame could truly be placed.”

Julius chuckled softly. “You’re a bright girl, Victoria.” Then he walked into the empty alcove, his bandolier rattling ominously, where he momentarily made a show of investigating the sculpture before looking back up at Victoria and smiling again. Then he lifted his hand and made a motion of tipping a glass to his lips. He waved her on.

Victoria did walk away, relieved that even when he gave his “bright girl” comment, Julius did not suggest any knowledge of Victoria’s underhanded ploys. She waved her hand at Samuel and the ghoul descended the steps and approached his mistress.

Meanwhile, Victoria redirected the second server she saw to deliver a flute of blood to the archon. The first server was not the sharpest of the servants on hand, so she waited for a better candidate. She supposed the servant could deliver a drink, but she would need one to receive instructions about when and how he should make note of the Brujah’s presence.

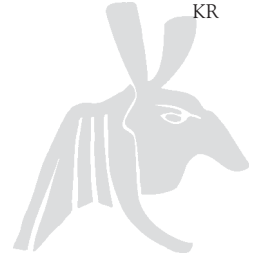
Benison would go wild with anger when he learned the archon was present and had not introduced himself. It was a slight of courtesy upon which he might seize to press the Brujah, but Julius was clearly calculating the results, probably hoping that in his anger Benison would make a larger blunder.

Julius's gamble seemed to Victoria a fine one. It also made her a little nervous, because she planned to put herself in the position of instigating the fight. She had all the right tools at hand, but now Julius was doing this work for her. That worried Victoria because now it didn't matter whether she'd stepped through Heaven or Hell, for her plan was going to be executed without her prompting.

She calmed herself immediately. Perhaps she was rationalizing her control of the situation, but she convinced herself that if she'd entered through Hell and therefore been on a path to scrap or at least delay her plans, then she could have interfered with Julius's intentions by alerting Benison immediately so no slight would be given.

She was still in control of her own destiny.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:06 AM
Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York



A black sedan pulled up to Hesha at the curb as soon as he left Rutherford House. The rear right door opened for him automatically, and he slid into the sleek passenger compartment without hesitation.

The car was custom made for him. Its rear windows and the privacy panel were tinted; with the panel raised and the tint made black, the back seat was proof against the noonday sun. It held a laptop and a compact office; it had phone, fax, a modem, and scramblers for security of all kinds. It was bulletproof, by the driver's insistence—Hesha's own plans were laid to avoid firefights, rather than to protect against them, but he respected the fears of his retainer.

"To Greenwich, Thompson, as fast as you can."

Hesha picked up his phone and dialed the number of his ally, Vogel. The younger Setite was in the position of junior partner in Hesha's quest for the Eye. He would be eager to hear that the Eye was on the move, and as mystified as Hesha that someone else had gotten to the artifact before them...the phone rang for the sixth time, and Hesha began to worry...Vogel would be needed in Baltimore immediately. Hesha was glad he'd sent a full team to Atlanta for this Toreador lunacy; having a Cessna waiting would...the phone rang for the eighth time...the ninth...

The phone company informed him that the cellular number he had reached was not responding; the subscriber might be away from his phone or outside the range of their calling area.

Hesha flicked open the laptop and brought up a list of numbers. He punched one into the phone.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:07 AM
Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia

"This isn't right!" Caldwell sputtered through clenched teeth.

Antonio Vallejo barely suppressed his rage. "The attack must go forward, Señor Commander."

On the other side of Peachtree Street, the main thoroughfare of downtown Atlanta, stood the High Museum of Art, a distinctive rounded structure built around the circular well of the interior lobby. Aside from the handful of cars that had arrived earlier, including two limousines and a Rolls Royce, there was no evidence of the gathering that Vallejo knew to be occurring there on the fourth floor—a gathering of the Camarilla vampires of the city, come together to fawn and gawk over mortal sculpture, come together to deceive themselves, to pretend that they were somehow still human. Come together, unknowingly, to meet their final deaths in a hellish conflagration of violence.

If, that was, Caldwell would pull his head out of his ass and give the preliminary orders so the attack could go forward.

"It is a simple order, Señor Commander."

Commander Caldwell obviously felt otherwise. In his agitation, he paced among the preternatural shadows that concealed the two from view; he ran his fingertips along his scalp, up and down, a thumb above each ear, pinkies together along the crest of his bald head. As he rubbed his stark, white scalp, his fingers left furrows in their wake—slight furrows of skin, barely noticeable at first, but as Vallejo watched and as Caldwell's agitation increased, the furrows deepened until they became gullies that must have, of necessity from their depth, delved into the substance of the commander's cranium itself. Yet he continued his pacing and his stroking, seemingly unconcerned by, in fact unaware of, the deformity he wrought upon himself.

Tzimisce, thought Vallejo. He was reminded again—as if he could ever forget!—why the mere mention of the clan evoked such unease in his heart. They at least, unlike the Camarilla pretenders, retained few pretensions to humanity. But perhaps the fiends had taken their transformation, their transcendence, many of them would claim, a bit too far.

Not that Vallejo had any doubts about where his own eternal soul was eventually headed. But these *Tzimisce*, these fiends...

May the Virgin help us if they ever gain control of the Sabbath, Vallejo thought, then cringed at the inadvertent piety. Ostensibly, he had left behind the religious trappings that had so bound his mortal life, but like a penitent having allowed his confession to have lapsed for quite some time—two and a half centuries, to be precise—he didn't like to press his luck by drawing the attention of the Holy Mother. Such a misstep was as sure an indication of Vallejo's own agitation as was the self-disfigurement of the *Tzimisce*'s.

Vallejo chastised himself for such laxity. A time of battle was the most important instance for discipline. Thus Caldwell's recalcitrance was that much more galling.

"The attack cannot go forward until you draw in your patrols, Señor Commander," Vallejo said.

Caldwell abruptly ceased his pacing, shoved a stubby finger toward Vallejo, and bared his obvious fangs as he spoke: "Somebody has screwed up the orders. This *can't* be right."

Vallejo was dumbfounded, so foreign to his frame of reference was this assertion—an order not acceptable to a subordinate? Nothing of Vallejo's centuries of training at the hand of Cardinal Monçada in Madrid had prepared him for this. As a squadron leader of the cardinal's hand-chosen legionnaires, the most elite, highly trained military force the Sabbat possessed, Vallejo *knew* that a soldier's job was to execute his orders, not to question them.

But this New Worlder, this American, was unwilling or unable to see that basic truth. It was more than the predictable and natural resentment of a Tzimisce against the more astute and politically dominant Clan Lasombra, Vallejo realized, since the "objectionable" orders had come from another Tzimisce, Councilor Vykos. No, this insubordination rose from Old-World efficiency trampling on New-World sensibilities. The offensive about to be launched had been conceived of by Cardinal Monçada and was to be implemented by Councilor Vykos. Certainly Caldwell and others, in seeing designs they had bungled for decades carried out by perceived interlopers from across the sea, suffered from wounded pride. But to endanger the entire operation, to place at risk the ascendancy of the Sabbat on this continent, was unthinkable, unconscionable!

And yet it was happening.

Caldwell recommenced his pacing. His aide, a slightly built, not overly defaced Tzimisce, who appeared quite unhappy to find himself near the epicenter of a burgeoning dispute, skulked farther into the shadows. The attack was to have gone ahead at midnight. It was already unnecessarily delayed and seemed likely to be delayed additionally, judging from Caldwell's manner.

"This ain't *right*," Caldwell said again. "I'm not letting all the credit for this attack go to damned..." he stopped suddenly, seeming to remember Vallejo's presence.

"...To damned foreigners?" Vallejo offered, allowing a certain level of menace to creep into his voice.

The American glared at his fellow commander and groped for perhaps a less inflammatory choice of terms than he'd started to utter: "To...to *others*," he spit out at last.

"Sir," said Vallejo, forcing the use of a formal, clipped tone so as not to vent his growing ire, "your patrols ensure that our victory will be complete. None of those people will escape us, and no one from the outside will be able to interfere."

"I want a piece of the action!" bellowed Caldwell.

Vallejo flinched. Now, incredibly, beyond becoming an obstacle to the mission by his refusal to carry out simple orders, Caldwell was, by way of his fulminations, risking discovery of two of the three point-of-contact commanders for the assault.

"*Lower your voice!*" Vallejo barked forcefully, but without imprudent volume. In dealing with the American, Vallejo felt compelled to revise his estimation of his fellow commander. There might be a touch of Old World-New World rivalry at work, but the root of the conflict was a lack of professionalism on the westerner's part. Vallejo had dealt with bores on both sides of the Atlantic, any of whom might have balked as Caldwell did now. Caldwell happened to have the added impediment of being an idiot. All of this led Vallejo to one unavoidable conclusion.

If he shouts again, I will kill him.

It would be well deserved. Failing another outburst, however, Vallejo believed that the political situation, with which he tried to keep respectfully uninvolved, was too fragile for him to take direct action against this pompous fool.

“My patrols should be part of the attack,” Caldwell insisted, slamming his fist against his other palm.

“Give the order, or step aside for someone who will...someone who *can*,” said Vallejo.

Caldwell bristled at the suggestion that he was not up to the task at hand. Again, he pointed at Vallejo. The Tzimisce’s finger, trembling with rage, almost touched the Spaniard’s nose. Vallejo, for his part, resisted the temptation to grab that finger, to bend it back until it snapped, and to keep bending until it came completely free of the hand. Caldwell’s aide did his best to slink even farther into the shadows.

“I won’t take that from you,” Caldwell threatened, his voice rising very close to the level that Vallejo had decided would require drastic action.

Vallejo, however, stood at perfect attention. Only his steeled nerves kept him from striking out. He was in the awkward position of trying to convince a Tzimisce commander to carry out an order from a Tzimisce superior, and while Vallejo was by far the most seasoned combat veteran on the scene, the Council had made clear that all three commanders—Vallejo, Caldwell, and Bolon—were considered equal in rank. All this was running through Vallejo’s mind as he stared at the quivering finger of this incompetent windbag.

“I won’t take that from you,” Caldwell repeated more quietly.

“Take?” asked an icy-calm voice from behind Caldwell.

He turned to see, less than a foot away, Councilor Sascha Vykos. Caldwell involuntarily took a step back.

Vykos was tall and slender. As was the custom of the Tzimisce, Vykos had altered her appearance, the very formation of her bones and skin, although not so much as the battalion of battle ghouls, those walking masses of destructive musculature, that she directed through Commander Bolon. Her high forehead was folded upward and back, a symmetrical feathering of flesh. At least it was tonight, at this moment.

Over the years, Vallejo had seen Vykos on numerous occasions back in Madrid. Though physical appearance was fairly malleable for the Tzimisce fiends, she more so than most of her clan reinvented herself as often as a mortal woman might change hairstyles. Yet this ever-variable appearance, as Vallejo well knew, though definitely disconcerting, was less disturbing than the casual air of cruelty that clung to her no matter what twisted guise she chose, and whether she was knee-deep in dismembered corpses or sipping vitae from fluted crystal.

This was the woman, the creature, that Caldwell faced. This was the will he had flouted in his refusal to set into motion the first phase of the night’s attack.

“There’s nothing for you to take, Commander,” said Vykos. “Your job is to give—to give the orders that were entrusted to you.”

“Councilor Vykos,” he said with a short, jerky bow. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Indeed,” she purred like a large predatory cat as she edged even closer to the disgruntled and increasingly uncomfortable commander. “I had not planned to venture so close to what I presumed, in my ignorance, would be a field of battle.”

Caldwell flinched at the rebuke. The lion's share of his indignation seemed to have deserted him, or at least to have been tempered, now that he stood face to face with the superior to whose orders he took such exception. Her gentle tones and tight, insincere smile took the starch from him.

"Something's wrong. There's been some...misunderstanding," Caldwell told her. "What I got can't be the orders you gave. Somebody screwed 'em up, didn't tell us right."

Vykos stared fixedly at the commander. She responded neither in word nor expression to what he said.

"My patrols are ordered to stand by," he continued, "to sit back and just watch the assault." His dander rose again somewhat as he reminded himself of the indignities that had been heaped upon him. "My boys can kill as good as anybody. A lot of them are *Tzimisce*," he emphasized to his clanmate. "They deserve a piece of the action. And some of the others...some of them are here to fight against their own clans."

Vallejo casually spat at this mention of the *antitribu*, those Cainites who had indeed broken with their clans, disavowed their blood and defied their elders. Vallejo could summon no respect for them. *Cannon fodder. Nothing more.*

His spittle striking the pavement sounded like a thunderclap in the tense silence of the shadows. The insult was not lost upon Commander Caldwell, but he had more urgent problems at the moment.

"I know you couldn't have ordered us just to sit and watch," Caldwell said. "You wouldn't do that. My boys deserve a piece of the action. So do I. This is all a trick.... Somebody changed the orders."

"Hmm." Vykos leaned forward and sniffed near Caldwell's left ear, then his right. The commander seemed totally unsure of what to make of this, but he held his ground and persisted in making his case with only minimal stuttering. "My patrols...*our* *Tzimisce*, and the others...are...I mean, you know, they deserve a piece...."

Vallejo, completely ignored for the moment, watched this peculiar exchange that was so far beyond his perception of the relationship between officers of differing rank. The two fiends, only centimeters apart yet not making contact, now impressed him as serpents engaged in some elaborate mating ritual.

But then Vykos did touch her clanmate. "Shh," she cooed to him, a mother to her babe, as she placed her palms gently on his cheeks. "You are very much mistaken, Commander." Her voice was soothing now, but only in the way that ice brings numbness.

Even amidst the dense shadows that Vallejo maintained, he thought he saw her eyes glowing, not the bestial red which many Cainites might achieve, but a piercing, cold blue. Caldwell tried to protest, but she shushed him again, and with a tender finger upon his lips silenced him. She returned her hand to his cheek.

"No active part in the assault?" she asked. "How could you believe such a thing, my dear Commander?"

Vykos shook her head sadly. "When the patrols are ordered forward, they will form a seal around that museum. You see the museum?" She turned his face slightly so that he faced the High. Then she nodded his head, once, twice, in the affirmative.

"No one will escape—because of the patrols," she explained patiently. "And do you know who is inside, Commander?" This time she gave him no time to reply, but herself

continued. “The prince of this city is there, which means that it is likely that others will try to help him—mortal police, perhaps. But do you know what they will find?”

A light was dawning in Caldwell’s eyes as well, a light of realization—not realization of strategy, which Vallejo thought should have been obvious from the start. Caldwell, as Vykos soothed and stroked him, was realizing his own fear.

“They will find their way blocked,” she answered her own question. “There will be no help for the prince. Nor for any of the others.”

The absence of sound rivaled the absence of light on that dark street. Caldwell and Vykos stood practically eye to eye, his white face in her white hands. Vallejo, feeling very much the spectator, looked on in detached amazement, while Caldwell’s unobtrusive aide seemed to ooze into the cracks of the sidewalk—surely a trick that not even the Tzimisce had perfected.

“So you see how important the patrols are?” asked Vykos. She allowed Caldwell to nod his own head this time.

“Good. I wanted to be sure.” Then she began to press her hands together, steadily, forcefully. An expression of consternation crossed Caldwell’s face but quickly gave way to fear. He grabbed her wrists, tried to pull her hands away, but to no effect.

Vykos’s eyes shone more brightly. Caldwell’s face began to give way beneath the steady pressure of her palms. Slowly, her hands compressed the bone structure of his cheeks and jaw. His face suddenly took on an elongated manner, exaggerating further the furrows along his scalp. A garbled moan arose in his throat.

Vallejo watched in horrified fascination. He could not force himself to turn away.

Like warm butter, he thought. Shortly her hands would meet in the center. *Squeezing him like...*

But just as Vallejo managed to form those thoughts, Vykos plunged her thumbs into Caldwell’s eyes, *through* his eyes—for she didn’t stop at that jellied matter, which dribbled down his face. Caldwell jerked spasmodically as her thumbs, like hot knives, dug into his brain.

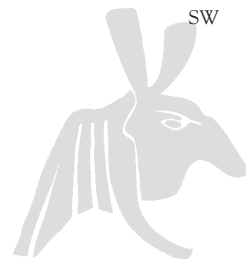
Vallejo did not remember seeing the body fall or slump to the ground, but there it was, Vykos standing over it. She flicked her fingers, and a splatter of bodily juices struck the ground like the first raindrops of an approaching storm.

Vykos turned to Caldwell’s aide, the slight Tzimisce, whose every ounce of determination was barely preventing him from fleeing into the night. “Give the order,” she said. “The attack will go forward.”

She turned and walked away, secure in the knowledge that her directive would be carried out promptly.

Vallejo, watching the councilor, thought he could hear her humming faintly as she left.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:08 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



The metal-lined corridor was lit with recessed fluorescents. Once he realized that the tunnel extended for a significant distance, Vegel broke into a run. His hurry was partly inspired by the damned cold of the Eye in his pocket.

After a solid minute of running, Vegel achieved the end of the passage. A steel ladder stretched up to a hatch in the ceiling. The Setite had noted no other doors or exits of any kind elsewhere along the length of the tunnel, so he presumed this was the next stage of his escape.

He climbed the stairs, twisted a handle and with his legs securely braced, stood and pressed the door up and open.

All the lights instantly extinguished as soon as the door broke the seal of the floor. Vegel was suddenly and disorientingly flooded in darkness. He craned his neck to look back down what he thought was the direction of the long tunnel in search of even the smallest light source, but there was none.

Hoping this was simply a safety measure to provide cover for those emerging as he was, Vegel steadied himself and then pressed the door open farther so he could crawl out. It was pitch black wherever he'd arrived, so he crouched near the door hoping his eyes would adjust. Even the faintest flicker of light would be enough!

Vegel considered revealing the Eye, but since he couldn't control the amount of the light or whether or not it shed light at all, he thought it too risky. In any event, he kept one hand cupped under the door that was now on the floor beside him. On one hand, he thought some lights might return if he closed it, but on the other he imagined it might also lock behind him and seal him Set knew where.

He remained so for another moment before deciding that the Nosferatu route had been excellent and safe thus far, and since he'd put his trust in Rolph this much already, why not accept the situation completely?

He removed his hand and allowed the door to drop shut. It did indeed lock, for it clicked into place and then he heard a vacuum sealer suck it firmly shut.

But a light flickered on, so Vegel felt his courage was rewarded.

The Setite found he was in a small enclosed area with a dramatically slanted ceiling that was only a hand's space above his head where he crouched. Considering the narrow width of the room, and the angle of the ceiling, Vegel realized this small area must be tucked beneath a staircase or escalator.

He desperately wanted to remove the Eye from his coat pocket and examine it for a moment, but this arranged escape route might not yet be complete, though he was certainly a good distance from the museum. Any delay now might mean the difference between safety and destruction, both for himself and the Eye, so he refused to tarry. Besides, the Eye's freezing cold was subsiding, so there was no excuse even to shift it to another pocket.

Pausing to mentally gather himself, Vogel felt refreshed as he approached the sole apparent door in the place. A sudden rumbling, like a minor earthquake tremor made him pause, but the brief squeal of tires eased his mind. He thought it likely he was in parking garage, so those noises did not worry him. There was nothing to indicate that those in the car pursued him.

Still, he opened the door carefully. He appeared to be on the ground floor of an enclosed stairwell. Gum and paint and bits of trash were littered everywhere, and the faint odor of urine was evident as well.

Vogel slipped through the doorway and walked quietly toward another door, this one presumably leading to the garage proper, or perhaps to the street. A small window on the top half of the door revealed the latter. Vogel looked up the stairwell for a moment, but saw no one, so he returned to the exit door and pressed his face against the window to create the greatest angle of view possible. Outside was a narrow side street. Small stores and restaurants of the variety that claim more residents than tourists lined the street, and all of them seemed closed. Vogel could see a street sign to his left, but it was oriented so that he couldn't read it. More importantly, the street was empty of people and traffic in both directions and on both sides.

It looked like the escape route ended here, for Vogel could not detect any clues regarding where he might go next. No police tape. No pictures of eyes. Nothing.

He withdrew the cell phone from his pocket and considered using it, but immediately discarded the idea as foolish and dangerous. If Rolph was correct, then the chauffeur was dead already, and a phone call might only alert his killers to the sophisticated tracking equipment in the limo. If his car was now in the hands of others who sought to wrest the Eye from him, then they might utilize that equipment to track his location by means of the locator in his phone.

The locator was normally to find Vogel in the event something untoward happened to him, but it was useless now. So Vogel dropped the device into a trash can bracketed to the handrail at the base of the steps. He then shifted some grubby fast food wrappers so they hid the device from plain view.

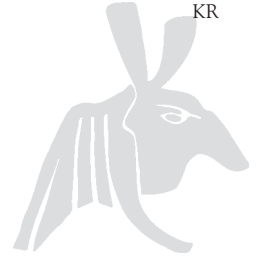
He felt his best bet was to head straight to the airport. Not Hartsfield International, where he would be sought immediately, but the DeKalb-Peachtree Airport, a small airfield north of downtown where an emergency plane was maintained. If he could be airborne within an hour, then he could be in Baltimore by daybreak. Baltimore was the site of Hesha's primary East Coast United States facilities.

He just needed to get to a major street other than Peachtree Street, on which the High Museum was located, so he might catch a cab. Too bad the streets of Atlanta were not filthy-littered with the yellows like Manhattan. Getaways were so much easier there.

Vogel creaked the windowed door open and stealthily stepped onto the street. He hung close to parking deck's wall as he made his way toward the street sign.

Almost without warning, the attack came from above.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:08 AM
Parking garage, the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



“McDonough,” came the voice Hesha Ruhadze through the secure cell phone.

“Sir!” The faintest hint of awe undercut the sharp, professional manner. Vogel’s driver had heard the chief’s voice before, but not often.

“Vogel’s number is down. Find him. Have him call me back.”

McDonough sat for a moment, thinking. He tried Vogel’s line himself, and when the saccharine voice of the telephone company started its speech, cut the connection and left the vehicle. He double-checked the car’s alarms, and walked slowly through the underground garage to the elevator. The eyes of other men and women were locked on him the entire way: guards, drivers, enforcers, playthings, and monsters waiting for their masters to return from the party above. He gave the tight knot of smokers by the exit booths a wide berth and approached the elevator. The doors opened on a heavily built, unsympathetic-looking gentleman in a tuxedo.

McDonough kept his hands in sight and steady. His voice was level. “Mr. Vogel has an important call. I need to communicate with him.”

When the man didn’t seem ready to move, McDonough added, “The caller is Mr. Hesha Ruhadze, an partner of Mr. Vogel’s.”

The guard seemed to consider that for a moment. “Step in,” he said.

The elevator brought both men up to the basement level of the High Museum, and McDonough was received by a further eight guards, all in tuxedos. They reminded him of a matched set of knives—sleek, beautiful, deadly.

“Wait here,” said the elevator man.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:17 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

Samuel softly cleared his throat behind Victoria, and the Toreador turned.

"What is it?"

Samuel said, "A chauffeur in the garage says he must immediately speak to his master, a Kindred of the Setite clan named Vogel."

"He's here," said Victoria. "What's the matter? Has there been trouble downstairs?"

Samuel shook his head. "No, everything is proceeding smoothly, milady. The driver said there was a call for Mr. Vogel, and the caller is his partner, a certain Mr. Ruhadze?"

"Hesha?" Victoria pursed her lips and nodded her head with interest. "Very well, wait outside those doors and I'll send Vogel to you. It will take only a moment to find him."

Samuel glanced around the glass maze of the gallery, and seemed somewhat dubious of this claim, but he dared not question Victoria. "Of course, milady." He bowed slightly and retreated beyond the doors through which he'd entered.

No one else was near, so Victoria withdrew to her cubicle again. She used her opera glasses to scan the gallery for Vogel.

And she could not find him.

She did take a moment to check on Julius, and found him leaning against *Satan* and sipping on a flute of blood.

Victoria assumed Vogel was still somewhere in the gallery since his chauffeur was still downstairs. So she looked again. Failing again, she left her cubicle and walked the gallery for a few moments. She found all of the other Kindred she knew to be present, but no Vogel.

Then she suddenly stopped. What kind of game was being played here? She grew a bit angry. This matter of the phone call and chauffeur was clearly a distraction of some sort. Vogel knew Victoria would be intrigued by a call from Hesha Ruhadze, and so he fed her the bit of misinformation and reeled her right in. But to what end?

Victoria decided she would call the bluff and eliminate the worry about this new matter in the back of her mind. The Toreador stalked toward the gallery's exit and opened the doors of Hell. She was proving to herself that she wasn't superstitious by using these doors, instead of Heaven through which she entered. That game was done; others were now at hand.

Samuel was leaning against a wall down the hallway toward the elevators. When he saw Victoria, he immediately straightened and stood ready.

She strode toward him, her sandaled feet smacking on the tiled floor. Her face was resolute yet still beautiful.

"All right, let's see if Hesha was really on the phone."

Samuel looked confused, but as usual, there were no questions asked. Instead he led her to the auxiliary chamber in the basement, where the chauffeur was waiting.

Victoria had already decided that Vogel had fine taste and his choice of chauffeur only added to that impression. The man was fair-skinned and blue-eyed, with features just unusual enough to be intriguing. His suit was black and Italian. Even his slight gape as his attention focused upon her was pleasing to Victoria. Yes, when all this business was over, she and Vogel would have to do business again.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but Mr. Vogel seems to have left my party, Mr..."

"Mc...McDonough." His voice was less pleasing—not actually grating, but rather mundane.

"You had a message for him?"

"Mr. Ruhadze called. Vogel's phone isn't working. I thought..."

"He isn't here," she said. "Let me take the call."

McDonough had the good taste not to speak again. He simply took a phone from his pocket and called a number with a 212 area code. The guards in the room didn't conceal their hands finding their guns as McDonough fished in his jacket. Victoria would have to see that they were reprimanded for such uncouth behavior.

She took the phone and walked to a corner of the room. Her lackeys edged out of earshot. "Hello," she said.

"Who is this?" The voice on the other end of the phone was rich with a hint of the Middle East. It was Hesha Ruhadze.

"This is Victoria. Victoria Ash."

"It's a pleasure to speak with you, Ms. Ash—"

"Victoria—"

"To what do I owe this unexpected delight?"

"I have your man here...a Mr. McDonough...who came running an errand for you. Of course, Mr. McDonough wasn't welcome above stairs...so as a courtesy to you, I looked for your errand friend myself."

"And?"

"No one's seen Vogel since midnight. A pity; he was a most enchanting conversationalist." She paused. "Is there anything else that I can do for you, Hesha?"

"No," he said, and there was as little emotion in that one flat syllable as there was enticement in hers. "Thank you for your efforts, Victoria. If Vogel should reappear..."

"I'll tell him to call you. He has the number?"

"A great many people seem to have this number. Good night, Victoria."

"Good night, Hesha."



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:26 AM
Overlooking 17th Street, near the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

“Shut your mouth before I rip it off your face,” Marcus said to either or both of the dark, lithe figures, Delona and Delora, beside him atop the parking garage. They, along with “Fingers” Jorge, who was obediently quiet and wrapped up in his cloak, had been in position for nearly two hours. Marcus had expected orders before now, and the waiting was playing on his nerves.

Playing on his nerves almost as much as the twittery laughter between Delona and Delora. The two had a jittery sort of language they spoke to each other that Marcus couldn’t understand, and he always felt that they were talking about, and *laughing at*, him. He realized, after making his threat, that it would be difficult to rip someone’s mouth actually off her face—the mouth being just a hole—but he decided to let it slide.

“Shut up, you little turds.”

They were dark and small—of course, everyone was small next to him—so turds they were, as far as he was concerned. But they looked more like spiders, with long spindly limbs that they folded up near their body. And their skin, not only dark, looked as if it had been singed all over. Marcus, unable quite to reconcile his own analogies, wasn’t sure why a spider would be burnt, or why a turd would be either, for that matter.

Worse than the fact that they were ignoring his order for silence—and Caldwell had put *him* in charge—Marcus was afraid their constant blabbering would give away the patrol’s position. They were within sight of the museum, after all, just around the corner. Couldn’t they see that this was an assignment of such importance that the little turds should shut up? The burdens of command weighed heavily on Marcus.

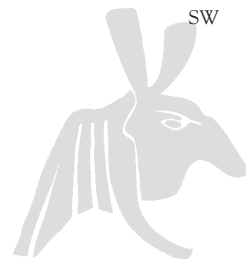
“If I’ve gotta tell you one more—”

But they all fell silent at once. Delona’s and Delora’s tufted black ears tensed and quivered. Marcus heard it too—a door opening below them; a door *being* opened, and that meant *somebody* was opening it. Marcus, his blood fairly boiling from the endless waiting and the trials of leadership, rushed to the edge of the parking deck to peer down. The turds flanked him on either side.

A lone figure had, indeed, exited the garage and was moving toward the street corner. Marcus had been told to allow no one to pass the parking deck in either direction, toward or away from the museum. The figure below was moving away from the museum, and he was being sneaky about it. Only the slight creak of the door opening had given him away.

As Marcus debated what commands to give, Jorge tore past him over the railing and dropped onto the figure in the street.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:28 AM
17th Street, near the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



There was a fluttering of a cape or cloak in the air, and then a heavy weight crashed onto Vogel's shoulders. Fortunately, the Setite was well-trained, and while another might have been crushed or pinned to the ground by this assault, Vogel reacted instantly and instinctively. He buckled his knees and allowed himself to fall backwards, but instead of hitting the ground squarely, he turned his momentum into a roll.

A fraction of a second after the attack, a heavily cloaked figure was on the ground and Vogel was balanced and ready on his feet.

But before Vogel could throw a kick at his prone assailant, there was a stentorian growl from above. The ferocious force and fury of the raging sound was accompanied by the twittering of laughter, also from above. Stepping back to create some space between his visible foe and himself, Vogel looked up.

To his horror, he saw three Kindred. At the center of the group was a hulking brute, and he was flanked by a pair of what appeared to be emaciated and badly burned corpses. But these corpses were the source of the laughter. There was no doubt of the source of the roar.

Vogel's fourth foe slowly rose to his feet. He was the most normal-looking of the bunch, though he was clearly also Kindred. This one smiled devilishly at Vogel and then revealed his humanity was long gone as well. With a hiss, the monster threw his arms wide and his fingers seemed to unfurl until they were sloppy strands of flesh several feet long. The beast laughed then as his jaw unhinged and his mouth opened cavernously wide.

There was no concern for the Masquerade here, Vogel realized. There was no mistaking these animals for anything but Sabbat.

And Vogel knew there was no mistaking himself for anything but dead.

Vogel shouted, "Come on then, you bastards! I'll take one of you with me. Which one wishes to accompany me to the hellish pits of Set?"

The Sabbat in front of Vogel uttered something, but the inhuman sound that issued from his freakish mouth was unintelligible.

Vogel began to back away when he saw the two spidery Sabbat begin their descent down the walls of the parking deck. The powerful-looking beast was throwing a leg over a railing in preparation to leap, though Vogel couldn't tell if his intent was to leap onto the ground or onto him.

Vogel was furious at Rolph's treachery. This had been some escape route, indeed. All that foolishness about Bombay and old debts! Hesha would have debts to repay now. Vogel took some solace in Hesha's well-known propensity to mete out revenge for the death of his agents.

The strong-lunged Sabbat above was now jumping, and though Vogel had by now backpedaled a good fifty feet from the spot of the first ambush, the monster's powerful legs propelled it far through the air...and behind Vogel.

The Setite was now trapped. One large Sabbat behind him and a trio of freaks before him.

One of the corpse-like twins said, "So good of you to come to us."

The long-fingered Sabbat advanced steadily with the other two a half step to the side and rear. He waved his arms menacingly and the fingers wriggled like serpents ready for a victim to crush.

Vegel did not appreciate the irony of that eventuality.

More immediate, though, was the brute behind him who was leaping again. This time, a standing broad jump carried him dozens of feet right at Vegel, who managed to twist away and escape the Sabbat's massive arms. The Setite hit the ground rolling and this took him off the edge of the curb and into a puddle in the street.

He quickly leapt to his feet and made to dash away, but the lithe twins were far quicker than he. Somersaulting and bounding like talented gymnasts, they intercepted Vegel and, when Vegel pulled up short of them, he was entangled from behind by long fingers that bound one of his arms to his side.

Vegel had to wrestle and resist for a moment in order to keep his left arm from becoming entangled as well. He made things difficult enough for the Sabbat that he bought himself the second he needed to draw a short knife from an ankle sheath. A viscous green ichor dripped from the blade, which Vegel twirled in small circles like a honey wand to keep as much of the liquid as possible on the blade. When out of the corner of his eye he saw the large Sabbat closing in on him, Vegel slashed the blade through the air. The Sabbat was not close enough to strike, but a significant quantity of the poison whipped off the dagger and splattered over his eyes and nose.

A murderous roar erupted as the Sabbat clawed in agony at his eyes. His powerful stomping sent hairline cracks rippling through the pavement of the street.

Pulling his left arm free of the other Sabbat one more time, Vegel plunged the blade through the beast's right hand. The dagger dug into Vegel's side as well, but any poison still on the blade wouldn't harm him, and freedom was worth a small wound.

His captor shrieked in pain and quickly released Vegel, who also released the dagger so it remained lodged in the Sabbat's hand, impaling it through the palm. The foe now retreated as well in order to remove the blade painfully. As he did so, though, the poison caught up with him. It was difficult to harm vampires with poison, but the variety on the Setite's blade affected the bloodstream, which was nearly as important to a Kindred as to a mortal. He and his large comrade created a chorus of painful cries.

Vegel had been unable to maintain his balance when flung down by the Sabbat, but as he scrambled to his feet he said to the spidery twins, "Which of you is next?"

And they hesitated.

Vegel flicked a forked tongue at them and the cowards were startled enough to take a few steps back.

Amazed that the disturbance had not drawn a witness, Vegel prepared again to flee, but he was caught in the back by a wild swing from the behemoth Sabbat. Vegel was flung bodily forward and hit the street with tremendous force. He tried to push himself up, but the gymnasts were on him faster. They peppered him with solid but not significant blows that nevertheless made it difficult to recover his senses.

Then he was lifted from the ground by the half-blinded brute. The powerful Sabbat had him by the collar, but spun him around so the two of them were face to face. The skin around the monster's eyes was badly burned from the poison and one of the eyes was scalded black, but the other stared at Vogel through twisted flesh.

Grunting and groaning all the while, the beast smiled as he pressed Vogel into a bear hug. Like saplings in a storm, Vogel's ribs were crushed one by one and it was the Setite's turn to scream. The monster's strength was incredible.

Vogel felt his limbs crumpling under the pressure exerted by the powerfully muscled arms. More devastatingly, Vogel felt his precious blood streaming from every orifice. The blood that welled up into his mouth caused him to gargle and choke, in the process of which he sprayed blood in the face of his adversary.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:32 AM
17th Street, near the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

Die, little man. Die! Marcus's smile broadened at the sound of his helpless victim choking on the blood that welled up in his throat as broken ribs punctured and sliced through his innards. The hulking Tzimisce even took pleasure from the blood the Setite coughed into his face. It was the blood of victory.

Marcus roared with triumph as the last resistance of the Setite's body gave way before the incontestable vise of his bulging arms. Joints popped. The Setite's carcass was crushed almost beyond existence, no doubt liquefied by the nearly geologic force Marcus exerted. Marcus hugged the remains to his chest. He could smell the rich blood soiling the once-exquisite evening wear. Then Marcus held at arm's length the remains—

Except there were no remains. At least no body. There was blood, yes, but not enough. No ruptured entrails, no liquefied flesh dripping to the pavement. The last strains of Marcus's triumphant roar curdled in his throat and were reborn as a cry of frustration.

Delona and Delora seemed to realize what had happened—the Setite had somehow slipped out of Marcus's grasp, leaving behind only clothing like shed skin. But the blackened twins had no more idea where the Setite had gotten to than did Marcus. They hurried about in different directions—up the street, down the street, around the corner, into the parking garage—but clearly the Setite had escaped.

"Gone," said Delona, as if explanation were necessary.

"Gone," echoed Delora.

Marcus let the empty clothing drop. After hours of waiting and having his orders ignored, the one intruder his patrol had spotted had eluded them. Jorge lay convulsing on the ground, and Marcus himself was half blinded by what must have been some type of poison on that puny little knife. It was all more than he could bear. Marcus's already blurred vision clouded red with rage. Without warning, he opened his powerful jaws and struck at the surprised Delora. He caught her on the neck, which snapped. In fact, her head remained attached to her torso by only a few cords of tendon or muscle or something. Denied his proper feast on the Setite, Marcus sucked what vitae there was in her tiny frame, then discarded the desiccated husk onto the street like so much garbage.

"Get rid of *that*," he said to Delona, indicating her former mate, "then carry Jorge back upstairs. Now!"

Delona, he noticed, rushed to obey him this time. While she carried out his orders, and Marcus blinked repeatedly and rubbed at his eyes, the tiny radio in his pocket began to beep at him. The device looked like a child's toy in his colossal hand. He labored briefly to press the correct button.

"Patrol five," he said.

"Tighten perimeter," said the voice that sounded much farther away than it really was. "Close to fifty yards."

The voice was not Caldwell's, Marcus noticed. It was one of his aides', the skittery one. But that of itself was not unusual.

"Gotcha," said Marcus, then remembered that there was something more formal he was supposed to say, but with all the waiting and the ruckus and the frustration, the specific wording escaped him. "Moving in," he said, and stuffed the radio back into his pocket.

"Come on, you turd," Marcus called to Delona. Jorge wouldn't be ready to move yet, if ever—who knew what Setite poison might do to a little fellow like him?—so Marcus's patrol now consisted of himself and Delona. At least she wasn't giggling any more.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:33 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

Victoria put her conversation with Hesha behind her and hurried back into the gallery to check on Prince Benison and Julius. Unless something more came up, Victoria would have to let the ghouls handle the *Vegel* matter. She needed to concentrate her attention on Julius and Benison.

About twenty minutes had passed since she'd left to deal with the *Vegel* matter, and that was time enough to irritate Benison when Julius's presence was revealed. As Victoria walked past the alcove near the entrance, she saw the *Brujah* was still within its glass walls.

Julius was imbibing another flute of blood. He seemed relaxed, poised, and confident. Victoria imagined he always expressed those characteristics, and didn't wish to consider a situation that would lay low one such as this.

She then returned to the party so she would be on hand when the action began. The party continued pleasantly, though Victoria was a bit ruder than usual as she tried to remain free of entangling conversations, particularly one with Leopold that had the makings of too much soul-searching. Now that Julius was here, she had no time for any more such foolishness this evening.

After perhaps fifteen minutes, she returned to the cubicle of glass to check on Julius. She stifled laughter when she found him speaking to Cyndy, who was pressing herself obscenely against the large man's body. Victoria could read the *Brujah*'s lips, and the sweet nothings and empty promises he whispered to the stupid *Toreador* stripper suggested to Victoria that the wily *Brujah* was using his powers to make a loyal friend and ally out of Cyndy. With that revelation, Victoria took back some of her disgust at Cyndy, for she surely did not possess the means to resist the powers Julius directed at her.

Some time later, Cyndy came strolling to the back of the chamber where most of the *Kindred* had congregated. She flashed Victoria a self-satisfied smile that made the elder *Toreador* shake her head. She realized the little bitch thought she knew something Victoria did not.

Victoria watched Cyndy for a several moments more, but the saucy wench did nothing. Therefore, Victoria slipped away again. Clarice and Stella were conversing near the cubicle, so Victoria was unable to gain its interior unseen. So she walked a bit further to find a relatively secure location for her next viewing. She risked being seen, but she was on the far end of the gallery and could use the magnifying properties of the glasses. Her watch showed that it was a bit before one o'clock. She turned her opera glasses toward *Satan*, but there was no one in the alcove.

"What do you see, Victoria?" The deep voice issued from directly beside her, and Victoria jumped in surprise.

Julius practically hovered over her, looking expectantly for an answer.

Realizing how much depended on it, the *Toreador* recovered quickly, though, and she said, "Just looking for ways to reward myself for keeping silent about your attendance, noble archon."

“Indeed.” The archon stepped away.

There was a roar from a gallery on the other side of a wall of glass. Prince Benison’s voice wavered and screeched like a mute man learning speech again. “How dare he insult my hospitality?”

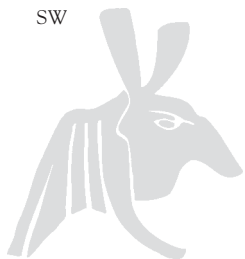
Julius stopped when he heard the curses that followed. He turned to face Victoria.

“I suppose neither of us is as tricky as we imagine.”

Victoria agreed with that. “I’d wager, though, that both our imaginations are quite exceptional, so perhaps half as good as we think we are will be quite satisfactory.”

Julius nodded grimly. “I like your style, Victoria.” He took a few steps and turned once more. “Don’t miss the excitement.”

As Victoria hustled the opposite way so she did not arrive beside the Brujah, she noted that Julius adjusted his bandolier and did a test draw with one of his swords. Or at least she assumed he drew, for the blade was in his hand so quickly that Victoria inferred the draw only when he slowly replaced the weapon. She was quick too, but that...well, that was uncanny.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:34 AM
17th Street, Near the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

From his hiding spot curled beneath an old BMW in the parking deck near the museum, Vogel realized his escape had not been clearly seen. The Sabbat lackeys ran in a few circles, looking here and there, but quickly returned to the street to look there too.

Pain and blood-loss were making it hard to think, but Vogel did have the presence of mind to register his own amazement. He'd survived! In that beast's grip, he'd tried a final, desperate Setite trick. Those of his limbs that were not already crushed beyond recognition had popped out of their joints, and he'd suddenly slipped from his blood-matted evening clothes like a snake shedding old skin.

Completely naked and badly mangled, Vogel had slid between the brute's legs, over the unconscious figure of the long-fingered Sabbat, and with a lightning-fast burst of speed, slithered into the parking garage, under the flag gate and into the thick of several parked cars. As he shot along the ground, he'd used his last few ounces of blood to build hurried clots in his wounds. There was no way he could completely seal the massive wounds, but he'd been desperate to stop the blood flow for a moment so that he wouldn't leave a red-smeared pathway to lead the Sabbat right to him.

It had worked. Unbelievable.

Various objects intervened, but from his hiding spot, Vogel could see the Sabbat in the street. The blinded Sabbat who'd nearly killed him was raging with anger. When the second of the smaller Sabbat also reported an inability to find Vogel, the larger Sabbat became livid and literally hopped with anger. To soothe his hurt, he lashed out at the bearer of bad tidings and ripped at the vampire's neck with his teeth so savagely that he practically tore its head off. The powerful Sabbat then paused for a moment to refresh himself by sucking dry his smaller victim. Then he tossed the desiccated heap to the side of the street. In a deep voice he said something to the other spidery-thin Sabbat, who hastened to obey what must have been a command.

Then, Vogel's vision blurred and he thought it best to put his head down for a moment....

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:40 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



Rolph was keeping his head down. Or up, rather. He was peering through the slats of the air-conditioning vent that was his current hiding place and gazing down at the Kindred below. They were resplendent in their evening finery: tuxedos and nineteenth-century suits; elegant gowns; even the occasional leather jacket and torn jeans carried a certain luster this evening. The Kindred of Atlanta and prominent out-of-town guests were here tonight to see and be seen. Rolph shared only the first of those two motives, and only he suspected that something was very wrong.

Not because of what was happening—the scheming, double-crossing, and backstabbing that was endemic to the goings-on of surface-dwelling Kindred—but because of what was *not* happening. Surely he should have heard something: a few gunshots, screams, perhaps a small explosion. Rolph had corroborated Hilda's reports through alternate sources both here and in Miami. The Sabbath was supposedly planning some excitement for tonight, undoubtedly a guerilla raid or the like to bloody Prince Benison's nose, wound his pride, and provide at least a propaganda victory to spur on Atlanta's anarch element. The prince had been quite capable all on his own of grievously raising the ire of more than merely the fringe elements of Kindred society. The current rebellion among the younger generations (and of a select few, well-placed elders) was of his making, but the unrest was the type of situation that the Sabbath simply couldn't resist. Perhaps that was the method to Benison's madness—foment revolution against his own rule, and then flush out Sabbath moles in the city as they became more openly active.

Rolph, in his place of hiding, shrugged. Anything was possible with Benison. The Malkavian seemed to court disaster often, but his apparently rash and imprudent actions along with his inscrutable designs tended to keep his opponents guessing and off balance.

Regardless, there was no Sabbath raid. Not yet. Rolph's sources had seemed to think that midnight was the magic hour—but it had come and gone without event. What increased the oddity was the fact that Rolph felt certain that the Sabbath were out there. In the city. More so than usual. One of his sources in Miami had reported movements of certain individuals from that city, and Rolph himself had noticed an influx of Kindred—trying with limited success to keep out of sight—in Atlanta.

Rolph fished around in his pocket and pulled out a tarnished brass watch on an equally grimy chain. Quarter till one. No raid.

Despite his concern, Rolph found himself increasingly drawn into the drama unfolding beneath him. It wasn't in his nature to ignore the little games, the snubs, the plots. Victoria had really outdone herself. Not only had she invited into the sanctuary of Elysium Thelonious, one of the activists among the anarchists opposing Prince Benison, but she had also included on the guest list the Brujah archon Julius. Julius had a history of animosity toward Benison—a sentiment the prince heartily reciprocated. Rolph was uncertain whether the archon was cooperating with Victoria, or if so how closely, but Julius had arrived almost an hour ago and had not yet presented himself to

the prince. That was a lapse in decorum which was likely—and undoubtedly calculated—to rub Benison the wrong way, and possibly to lead to strife.

Rolph observed the unfolding events with interest. Would Victoria's scheming create a breach between herself and the prince? he wondered. Whatever damage occurred tonight would be linked only indirectly to her; she had merely mixed numerous, volatile personalities, and as a newcomer to the city would claim ignorance. But her choice of guests, at the very least, would attract Benison's suspicions, if not his outright enmity. It was a dangerous game she played. Benison was equally likely to laugh it off or to banish her from the city.

Yes, the morality play with Victoria, Benison, and Julius was the most significant focus of the evening, Rolph decided. The Sabbath must have bungled and aborted their raid. No surprise there. Furthermore, that increased the likelihood that Erich Vogel, entrusted with the prized Eye of Hazimel to deliver to Heshia Ruhadze, had left the area safely. Rolph had handed over the Eye just prior to midnight, anticipating that the raid would cover Vogel's hasty exit. With the raid failing to materialize, Vogel would have to make his own excuses should Victoria accost him in the future.

All thoughts of the Setite vanished from Rolph's mind when the shouting started.

"Do you see the bastard up there?" Prince Benison was yelling at a startled, cowering Toreador neonate.

Conflicting tides of Kindred swirled in and out of the main gallery, some rushing to see what was happening, others, deciding they didn't care to be so close to the enraged prince, hastily retreating. Benison's demands and curses rose above the commotion every few seconds. Then, as if by magic, the throng melted away and there, standing practically alone amidst the statuary and opaque glass dividers, were Benison and Julius.

"Behind you, prince," Julius said perfectly calmly. He wore two sabers strapped to his back. Benison whirled to face the archon.

As the two traded threats, Rolph briefly wondered if perhaps Julius had cut some sort of deal with the anarchs—get rid of Benison and everything goes back to law and order; no more threat to the Masquerade. Julius would certainly favor Thelonious, his clansman, over Benison as prince. But Thelonious was too active in the revolt. There would have to be a compromise candidate—perhaps Benjamin the Ventrue, or someone else of stature, someone like...*Victoria*.

Rolph craned his neck about in his perch behind the vent covering. He tried to spy Victoria amongst the crowd, and Thelonious. Rolph wanted to see what their reactions were to the rapidly escalating conflict.

"Elysium be damned, I will punish your insufferable attitude!" Benison snarled with determination and twisted pleasure. Julius drew one of his twin blades—

And darkness covered the gallery.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:50 AM
Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia



Thankfully, Caldwell's body had been removed. Not that Vallejo couldn't stomach proximity to a mangled corpse—in fact, his job generally involved actions that produced mangled corpses, often in large numbers—but he needed to concentrate on the attack he was about to launch without being distracted by that grim reminder of what Councilor Vykos had done to the former commander.

That obstacle quite removed, the patrols were pulled in forming a tight perimeter around the museum, and official-looking roadblocks were set up all around to discourage casual passersby, though midweek downtown Atlanta was fairly deserted at this hour. The possibility of a few civilian casualties didn't worry Vallejo, but there was the danger that the police might take an interest in the roadblocks or the museum itself. In an effort to ward off that eventuality, a series of drive-by shootings were taking place many miles north of downtown. Vykos had ordered that at least two dozen mortals be killed. An attack of that magnitude in a sleeping city, she believed, would keep emergency crews and police busy for hours.

Vallejo did not expect to need that long.

Silently, he gave the signal for the attack to commence. A casual observer might have wondered at the lack of response to Vallejo's signal, but that observer would have overlooked the sprawling swath of blackness that crept from near where Vallejo stood and spread slowly across the street. The streetlamps seemed to flicker as the light they shed was sucked into the blackness. The shadow kept advancing, until the entire street was shrouded in darkness and the streetlamps were little more than distant beacons, miles and miles away. The three-quarter moon was conspicuously obscured.

Vallejo was filled with pride at the skillful advance of his squadron of legionnaires. The inky blackness crept forward, wrapped tightly around the base of the museum, then oozed up the long ramp and stairs to the main entrance. The other exits were being secured as well, Vallejo knew, most notably the parking area attached to the museum where intelligence reported at least a half dozen drivers and servants—ghouls fed on Camarilla blood, most likely—awaited their masters.

As if in response to Vallejo's thoughts, a figure of pure shadow took shape beside him where before there'd been nothing. It rose from the pavement and took on human form, but it was darkness through and through. Then the darkness coalesced, taking on more identifiable hues and substance, and Vallejo stood next to Legionnaire Alcaraz.

Alcaraz nodded curtly in way of salute. "Parking area secure, sir."

"Ghouls?" Vallejo asked.

"Si."

"And the other exits?"

"Secure, sir."

"All of them?"

“Si.”

“Very well,” said Vallejo, confident of Alcaraz’s ability and judgment. “Take up your position.”

Alcaraz nodded again. His expression froze, as if the image visible of him were actually several seconds old. Then, indeed, he darkened, from the edges inward, and became again a form of pure shadow, which in turn surrendered its shape, a giant droplet of ink flowing into an inscrutable pond of black.

Vallejo raised his radio to his mouth. “Commander Bolon.”

“Bolon here,” crackled the response almost immediately.

“Exterior secure,” Vallejo reported. “Phase two complete.”

“Phase three commencing.”

“Confirmed.” Vallejo reattached the radio to his belt.

Now everywhere Vallejo looked, the shadows were alive with slow, methodical movement. Not figures emerging from the substance of the shadow itself, as had the commander’s lieutenant, but larger shapes, vaguely humanoid—some more so than others—moved in ranks toward the museum. The shapes varied in outline, as well as number and configuration of limbs, but the figures shared an immenseness of stature. They towered over Vallejo, and he stood well over six feet tall. The impression given by this new advance was almost that the buildings of the city themselves were closing in on the High Museum.

It might just as well be so, thought Vallejo, so sure was he of the plans he followed. He had served Cardinal Monçada long enough to know that his benefactor did not lend support—much less a full squadron of legionnaires—to affairs that were chancy.

Bolon’s battle ghouls—Vykos’s ghouls really, just as the legionnaires’ ultimate loyalty was to Monçada, not to Vallejo—continued forward unopposed and converged upon the darkness-shrouded museum, at which point they separated into patrols. One patrol headed toward the parking-area elevator. Another prepared to force entry through the main doors. Others began to scale the walls of the museum. Vallejo was amazed to see the agility of these massive creatures, but he reminded himself that they’d been created specifically for missions such as this, perhaps for this exact mission. They were masterpieces—monolithic edifices of muscle and hardened bone armor beneath a thick layer of leathery skin. Whatever mental alacrity was sacrificed in their transformations, Vallejo was assured, was more than made up in single-mindedness of purpose.

Caldwell should have been so fortunate, thought Vallejo.

But his time for observing was at an end. There was blood to be spilled. Rich blood. And he would have some of it for his own. One final time, he checked his sidearm and the specially crafted grenades attached to his bandolier. Then, with the ease born of his Lasombra heritage, he released his physical form to join with the blackness before him, and led that blackness upward along the outside of the museum, past the ascending battle ghouls, and on to the victims waiting inside.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:50 AM
Near Abingdon Square, Greenwich Village, Manhattan
New York City, New York



Hesha sat cross-legged, stripped of his coat and shirt, gazing intently into an eye of stone. In his hand he held the cord of a hollow bronze amulet. As the flashing, fickle energies twitched at his mind and his muscle, the swinging weight traced a pattern on the paper beneath it. A trickle of fine-ground, burnt powder fell from the pendulum's tip. At last, he broke away from the focus, and looked down at the record of his work.

Five lines radiated from the center. One thin, and terribly short...another locus in New York, perhaps. Another, a third of the way around the compass from the first, was almost as small in length, but the powder there was piled high into a ridge, so strongly and frequently had the string been pulled to that side. A line as thin as the first stretched far, far to the west. The longest, thickest line ran off the paper to the east...the carpet spoiled the tail of it, but it suggested Asia.

The last line, sharp and distinct, led southwest. He would measure the charcoal carefully, later, and find where the longest line ended, if he could—but he knew, with a certainty that drove his fine, elegant hands into fists, that the track south would be roughly a thousand miles long, and that the Eye of Hazimel was loose in Atlanta.

He called for Thompson. Speaking as calmly as could—there was no use putting ideas into the man's head before the facts were available—he commanded, "Thompson, get me a report from your team in Atlanta. I suspect...I want to know where Vogel is."



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 12:53 AM
Parking garage, the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

McDonough heard the shots before he saw anything.

He started the engine.

A handful of guards—the smokers—flew from the exit to their cars, firing at an unseen menace, and they trailed dark ribbons of *something* behind them. The ones that looked back, or tripped, or had to look for their limousines were cut down first—not by guns, but by the ebon tendrils.

Car alarms went off in every direction. Ghouls stepped from their master's cars and drew weapons on the black mass that streamed unchecked down the ramp.

McDonough watched a gentleman in a pearl-gray suit turn and throw burning smoke into the darkness. The fire disappeared, and he lost sight of the grenadier. Other people—things—began to emerge from cover of the moving night. *Vegetable* was gone...

The driver cursed, put the car in gear, and shot forward. He ran over a teenage girl whose arms were nothing but bone blades and sped through a firefight without giving either side a chance to blink. The exit was blocked, he knew—he pulled into the straight lane that led to the entrance—there were orange and white gates down, but by God, the limo could slam through them...and then McDonough saw a heavy trailer pull up to the curb, completely blocking the way out. It was hauling cement sewer-pipe rings and piles of iron rebar. Swarms of the enemy crawled out of the long gray cocoons. The streetlights behind it disappeared as shadow moved in...

McDonough drew his gun with one hand and reached for the phone with the other. The emergency code: A single button and the transmit command—but he was startled away, cringing as a monster—a boy, a skinny kid with filthy, flimsy clothes—leaped on the hood, firing over and over into the bulletproof glass. It splintered, and the red-fisted child laughed, threw the gun away, and punched a claw into the cracks.

The windshield tore apart, and the other taloned hand reached down.

McDonough was pulled from the car by his hair. The shatter-cubes of glass tore at his eyes and cheeks and hands. Half blind, he shot a full clip into the side of the beast who held him. The maddened vampire shook himself like a dog, and black blood splattered the concrete around them. Then he sank his fangs deep into the mortal neck, drained him dry, and howled.

Inside the remains of the car, the cell phone's faint blue light blinked over and over and over again: "SEND?"

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:02 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



Leopold decided that Hannah simply wasn't going attend the party. If Stella was right earlier when she suggested there would be some representative of the Tremere clan present in the early hours of the event, then it looked like no Tremere at all would show this evening at all.

So the young Toreador decided he would leave. Just as he was mounting the steps to the door, however, he heard the prince's exclamations. As he paused and turned to see what this new excitement was about, Leopold found himself the target of a distant prince's gesture.

Prince Benison, with a flushed Cyndy forcibly held to his side by one great hand and one of the aproned servants clasped around the neck and pushed before him with the other hand, led a phalanx of Kindred that streamed from the rear of the gallery toward Leopold. For an instant, Leopold panicked. What could he have done?

Benison shouted, "Where is he, Toreador? Do you see the bastard up there?"

It took a moment for Leopold to realize the prince was speaking to him and not to Cyndy.

Leopold shouted, "W-who...w-wh-what?" It was only the second time Leopold had ever addressed the prince, and his voice cracked from the stress of doing so now.

"The motherfucking asshole Black Panther son-of-bitch Brujah archon, that's who, you miserable piece of trash!"

Leopold shriveled under the weight of the abuse, but he looked around. Before Leopold could answer, the prince unleashed another litany of vulgarities that lasted until he drew even with the alcove where Leopold had spoken with Stella some hours earlier.

Cyndy pointed therein and said, "He was in here."

"When?" the prince demanded, looking accusingly at both Cyndy and the servant.

Realizing he'd been forgotten, Leopold drifted down the steps and joined the crowd behind Benison. Stella quickly made her way to his side and pressed his hand into hers. It immediately calmed Leopold.

"Twenty minutes ago, prince," gasped Cyndy.

Benison threw the Toreador and the servant to the floor. The tray the servant had so ably kept balanced while being hauled to this spot clattered to the floor as well. Champagne glasses and blood sprayed across the white tiles.

"And you?" Benison demanded of the servant.

"I served his first drink well over a half hour ago," he stammered.

"Damn it all to *hell*," the prince shouted, grossly emphasizing the last word as he stamped his foot on the floor. "Then where is he now?"

"Behind you, prince," came a clear, deep voice.

The crowd parted and a corridor outlined by Kindred separated the Malkavian prince and the Brujah archon.

Julius innocently asked, “Have I offended you in some way?”

Benison smiled a toothy grin. “To the contrary, archon. You’ve made me very happy. Elysium be damned, I will punish your insufferable attitude.”

The rattle of metal rang in the large chamber as Julius drew a sword. “I guess there will be a follow-up story about those terrorists who holed up at that steel mill. Odd that terrorists would hide in a museum, don’t you think, Benison?”

Benison was livid with anger, but even his bright red eyes could not light the sudden darkness that washed through the room.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:04 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



The falling darkness blotted more than just Victoria's sight; it also strangely muffled her hearing so the cries of alarm issuing from the assembled Camarilla Kindred were oddly drawn-out and warped. Tenebrous, almost animate shrouds draped her soul in a sheath of bitterness, regret and disappointment. Her pawns were arrayed before her just as she had planned. The work of months and the ambition of decades was within her grasp, and in the dying light and sound she somehow knew her dream died as well.

Perhaps it would be reborn, for an after-image of her orchestration burned on her dulled retina like a phoenix. Julius and Benison faced one another, Julius drawing one of his swords to impale the crazed Malkavian willing to sacrifice his Elysium and his life merely because a Brujah insulted him.

Though she hadn't seen it as the scene had unfolded, in this mental replay of the scene Victoria saw Thelonious and Benjamin slipping through the crowd toward Eleanor's back. The Ventrue bitch would have been squashed if the two also chose to ignore Elysium, although she'd likely take one of them with her. Victoria expected she would choose her treacherous childe Benjamin, which meant that when the dust settled, the only candidates for prince would be Victoria and Thelonious. And it wouldn't do for a Brujah archon to stroll into Atlanta and leave with a Brujah prince in place, now would it?

She didn't scream, but Victoria's anger echoed in her own mind. She had been so damn close!

The Toreador felt the darkness outside her mind press harder upon her, and her dream images slipped away. It was an almost palpable thing, and with a start she realized the probable source of the danger just as a deep and resonant voice called out. The sound was distorted, but Victoria was thinking the word too, so she understood it despite the warble of its tone.

"LA-SOooM-brA!"

She felt the inky mass of darkness begin to press its way into her orifices, and the mindless, horrific, plasmic mass did not discriminate. Despite her years and experience, despite her own great powers, Victoria panicked. She fell to the ground and rolled as if the pitch encasing and invading her were fire that could be extinguished.

But it did not relent.

However, it did slowly part.

After it did and she saw the horrors the light of the gallery revealed, Victoria prayed that the darkness might return and she be granted a quick and painless final death under cover of the senses-dulling cloud.

From prince to destruction in a heartbeat.

Even so, hers was not among the screams that sounded then, and the wails and jeers were from offender and victim alike. Victoria shivered and she felt the blood within her—and fortunately there was a lot of it, for she had drunk heavily tonight—coalesce into a heavy bolus that made her stomach seem to sag.

The darkness rippled into pieces, and amid the patchwork maze those fragments made, Victoria witnessed every bizarre malformation of nature she could imagine. Surely there were more ways the body of a Kindred could be made gruesome, but the reality of the examples before her made other possibilities unthinkable. Scabrous, burned, bloated, emaciated, twisted, rubbery, fibrous, gelatinous...and on and on the adjectives whistled through Victoria's overwhelmed mind.

"Sabbat!" Julius shouted. Victoria recognized his voice, and though there was no indication of fear in it, there was desperation.

Victoria too knew they were doomed. The grotesque monsters could only be the result of Tzimisce fleshcrafting, and the darkness was surely Lasombra-created, so the assault was indeed a joint effort by that diabolical group responsible for much of the evil and brutality among the Kindred, the Sabbat.

How and why they had gathered for such an assault was beyond Victoria's reasoning. But then, much about the chaotic Sabbat was beyond her. The "why" wasn't so mysterious, she supposed, if they had managed to organize themselves beyond the "how." However, the "why" still applied to many questions. *Why now? Why Atlanta? Why, why, why?*

Victoria shot a look at Julius. The Brujah archon still looked powerful and dangerous, but no longer unstoppable. Tendrils formed of darkness groped like living things from the oozing puddles of the Lasombra *stuff* that seeped across the floor. The monstrous Sabbat danced and whirled at the periphery of the trapped Camarilla Kindred.

One did stray too close, and Julius's sword bit into it, but the creature was so full of the terror it fed upon in lieu of blood that the blow might have given it courage, not dampened its resolve to feast upon its prey.

All the Kindred Victoria knew—Benjamin, Eleanor, Thelonious, Javic, Cyndy, Leopold and more—immediately forgot their individual plots and grievances and banded together for survival. Victoria saw the defining moment of this more important bond when Julius and Benison locked eyes, and the Brujah whipped the second sword from his back and extended it pommel first toward the prince, who was supposedly a superior swordsman as well.

Shattering windows sounded above the cacophony of terror. Fist-sized orbs the color of flesh hurtled into the midst of the Camarilla, and as if the panic and disorientation had not been enough before, hell truly broke loose when the flesh grenades burst and spread a film of bloody ichor across the assembled host.

Then the demons pounced upon them. A big-shouldered but pinheaded monstrosity raced toward Victoria. Its arms were as shriveled as its head, so, despite the monster's size, Victoria was able to fend off the groping attacks. Then a bloated and pendulous organ that marked the beast as once having been a man rose like a third arm to club the Toreador. With such a weapon bearing down upon her, Victoria finally screamed. It struck her in the right thigh, and the force of the blow lifted her completely off the floor and deposited her in an unruly heap at the feet of the beast.

Suddenly, a sword flashed in front of Victoria and lopped the throbbing extremity from the monster. Its keening wail was so high-pitched that it sounded above the other ruckus and shattered some of the glass panes nearest Victoria. A large, taloned hand whistled over Victoria's prone body and so Julius, the Toreador's momentary benefactor, was drawn into a different fray.

The beast whose legs straddled Victoria continued its wail as blood and other juices gushed from the grievous wound. The flood of liquid did not allow Victoria to gain purchase on the floor, so she slipped and writhed about without escaping until the monster, its face still twisted in agony, recovered enough to seek revenge. Its arms and head were frail, but its torso and legs were mammoth, and when it leapt onto the prone Toreador, the great weight of its body crushed her hard to the floor.

She thought she heard her leg crack, but there was pain throughout her entire body, so there was no way she could localize any individual injury. The creature's thin arms began to beat her head and Victoria did what she could to fend off the blows, but they rained upon her so quickly the battering began to cloud and disorganize her thoughts.

So few of her gifts were of any use now. In a final, desperate move, she called out for aid. Not with her voice, but her vampiric will. And in an instant, Leopold was there. The young Toreador was not the strongest or most competent of fighters—and in her dimly lit thoughts Victoria wondered why she would call him when she might have summoned anyone—but he did the job.

A booted foot kicked at the head of the Sabbat obscenity once and twice and then, as the beast attempted to right its massive bulk with its tiny arms, a third time. The source of the crack Victoria heard this time was clearly discernible—Leopold's kick broke the fiend's slender neck. The Sabbat's body, at least temporarily denied life, slumped back onto Victoria, its weight crushing her again.

Leopold dropped to his knees beside Victoria and before saying or doing anything more he froze, looking deeply into her eyes. She was surprised, for there was no fear in the eyes, only questions.

Suddenly his eyes bulged in pain, and he was gone.

Covered as she was in slimy goo, Victoria managed to wriggle free of the wrecked heap upon her. She spared a glance only to see what had become of Leopold. A tenebrous tendril as thick as his leg was knotted about the sculptor's waist and it spun about like a bucking stallion, smashing Leopold time after time after time into the tiled floor of the museum.

Victoria felt a fleeting sense of pity, but she stood and ran. Her leg must have indeed been cracked or broken, for she immediately fell back to the floor, awash in pain. So she called upon the power of the blood within her to quickly knit that wound, and she called upon the lessons of her teachers to imbue her body with the potential for great speed. She stood and bolted without surveying the battlefield further.

The Toreador was a blur broken only by hesitations to circumvent an enemy or navigate a body-strewn wasteland in which she nearly stumbled over a black man's shattered body. It could have been either Thelonious or Benjamin.

In the space of a few heartbeats, Victoria was safely ensconced in the cubicle of glass from which she'd spied earlier. She fumbled at her pocket and withdrew the opera glasses, but she couldn't bring herself to look out. Not yet.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:04 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

When darkness fell over the chamber, Archon Julius's other senses instantly grew hyper-alert, compensating for the sudden loss of sight. Someone nearby screamed—a primeval instinct in any crowd plunged into darkness, and one which didn't die with the mortal soul—but Julius had not survived so many centuries by panicking.

He noticed everything at once: the crowd still parting nervously, even in darkness, to get away from the prince and him; Benison aborting his charge, a rare display of prudence; no one taking advantage of the darkness to move closer to either of the two combatants—so this was not some ploy by the hostess, Victoria Ash, or someone else, to get an assassin near prince or archon. At any rate, Julius doubted Victoria would attempt something so brazen. She had obviously hoped to coddle Julius into a confrontation with the prince, but she'd been caught quite off-guard by Julius's willingness, his evident intention, to pursue that course directly, without the benefit of her more subtle maneuvering and scheming. Her *modus operandi* was more a stiletto in the back, while Julius preferred to charge the lion.

After the first screams, a pregnant silence fell over the gallery. Judging by the uneasy shuffling of feet, Julius suspected that all present were surprised by the sudden blackout, but surely this was no accident....

Where are the emergency lights? he wondered, then, as he shifted his weight, he saw that there was some light from emergency units, that it was flickering—

No, the light wasn't moving. *The shadows were.*

Moving a quick step or two, Julius discerned swirling in the shadows. Patterns formed as the unnatural blackness maneuvered to surround the Kindred present. The glass dividers, black and opaque, enhanced this effect. Did Victoria, he wondered, have something to do with this after all? But then the darkness caught up with him, closed around him, and blotted out again what little light there was. Alerted to the unnatural quality of the enveloping blackness, Julius now perceived that there was weight and substance to the shadow, and it pressed against him with increasing determination. Tentacles of blackness took form, grabbed at his arms, his legs, his sword. Julius suddenly knew what he was up against.

"Lasombra!" someone shouted.

The brief silence shattered as, one after another, the emergency lights exploded. Sparks streamed through the gallery like rockets, and as they died, true darkness descended to add its influence to the preternatural shadow.

Julius struck at the tentacles. He couldn't afford to be immobilized. It was a strange sensation, his sword slicing through palpable darkness. The severed tentacles dissipated into nothingness, and the shadows drew back from him momentarily, but only to renew their assault from different directions.

Chaos took hold all around Julius. The shadows advanced and retreated menacingly; tentacles struck forceful blows that knocked Kindred to the ground. Other strands of

black, proving only to be diversions, passed harmlessly through fist or sword set against them. Always, amidst it all, were the swirling shadows, sweeping through the large chamber like churning storm clouds, so that one moment Julius was standing side-by-side with a fellow Kindred, and the next, after the darkness closed in, he felt alone among the placeless expanse of black.

Julius tried to be sure of his blows. He caught a glimpse of Benison striking at a shadow but instead smashing his fist into the face of some unlucky subject. The poor girl went down in a heap.

The prince, too, seemed to be holding his own against the Lasombra attack—for what else could it be? No other creature could wield such power over shadow. Beyond keeping the tentacles at bay, however, Julius was unsure how to deal with the problem. And not all the Kindred were faring as well as he and the prince. A dozen yards away, a mass of black writhed and jerked violently on the floor. An arm emerged, clothed in a formal jacket that Julius had seen on *someone* only a few minutes ago. Now the arm, and the Kindred to whom it was attached, struggled against the relentless shadow that pressed him to the floor.

Julius's wild thoughts of what to do next—how to find the Lasombra controlling the darkness, how to stop the attack at the source—were interrupted by the discovery that his problems had just multiplied many times over.

The few remaining emergency lights produced a strobe effect through the dancing shadows, and advancing through the disorienting scene were many more shapes—large, monstrous shapes. “Sabbat!” Julius shouted, hoping to get the attention of Benison or one of the few others who might make a difference.

Julius found himself staring *up* at the creatures that seemed to be coming from every direction. The smallest was well over seven feet. Shoulder to shoulder, they blotted out what little light passed through the shadows. One pressed ahead of the others, a whirling mass of clawed appendages—six or seven—atop two sequoia legs. Julius saw eyes, blazing red with hatred and hunger, within the blur of limbs, but no other signs of a face.

Pleased for an opponent more tangible than the elusive shadow, Julius stepped forward to meet the challenge. His sword whistled through the air, and three of the creature's arms fell to the floor in a spray of bloody ichor. It shrieked and staggered back toward its mates, which were still advancing deliberately. Julius licked his lips and tasted some of the mess that had splattered across his face.

Ghoul blood. Not potent enough to belong to a full-fledged vampire.

Tzimisce blood. Julius had tasted it before. Even if he hadn't, where Lasombra roamed there were certain to be a few of their obedient fiends not far behind, like dogs waiting for scraps under the table. Add to that the presence of the freakish abominations now pressing their attack. Only a twisted Tzimisce mind could fashion something so horrid.

The battle ghouls nearest Julius hesitated for a moment, having seen what he did to their more impatient comrade. Throughout the gallery, most of the Kindred of Atlanta were going down, and quickly. Benjamin, a second-tier Ventrue, lay dazed on the floor as one ghoul beat him senseless with a leg broken from one of the statues. Nearby, a Gangrel who'd attacked rashly and unsupported was lifted off the ground by two monstrosities who used him for a wishbone. Julius didn't pause to see which one ended up with the larger piece.

Amidst the carnage and swirling shadows, one salient fact sank beneath his primed fighting instincts—this was no mere Sabbat raid, to be beaten back and shrugged off, as he'd assumed when the Lasombra darkness had first fallen; this was the most Sabbat muscle he'd seen gathered in one place. Ever. For the Kindred to prevail over the fiends and their shadow masters would take a miracle. Soon. Very soon.

He risked another glance around as the ghouls began to close on him again. The prince was not far. He shepherded his wife, Eleanor, behind him, the two edging back closer to Julius, giving up ground in the face of the ghouls advancing from that direction.

"Benison!" Julius called.

The prince, bloodied himself—from blows given or received, Julius couldn't tell—glared at the Brujah archon. Julius whipped the second sword from its clasp on his back. Benison's eyes narrowed for a moment at perceived treachery, but then Julius reversed the weapon, took the blade in his own hand, and offered the pommel to the Malkavian.

Benison nodded gravely, then took the weapon.

From this silent exchange, a peculiar hush, a gravitas that smothered speech and action, radiated to encompass almost the entire gallery; the formation of such an unlikely, even impossible, partnership between prince and archon signaled to every Kindred present what Julius, in his broader experience, had already surmised—namely that the Sabbat, though the task was not yet complete, had carried the night. The vampires of the Camarilla were doomed.

Even the battle ghouls, automaton creations of the Sabbat, seemed to sense the moment, or perhaps their hesitation was no more than a tactical pause, a gathering of forces for the final flurry of destruction. Whatever the case, the respite lasted no longer than a single mortal breath.

Glass shattered. Shards of both the black dividers and the outer windows of the museum itself exploded inward, dug into clothing and flesh alike. Julius shielded his eyes but ignored the other dozens of glass splinters that tore into him.

Bouncing into the gallery through the shattered windows were a score of fist-sized orbs the color of flesh, that smelled of blood—and for good reason. The orbs, in unison, pulsed once, then again, and on the third pulse they exploded. Bloody ichor sprayed the chamber. Kindred recoiled in shock and surprise, then for some the blood and excitement took hold of their basest instincts. The hunger of the Beast arose within them, and they fell upon one another.

At the same time, the ghouls pounced, and the shadows renewed their attacks.

The giant malformations moved with deceptive speed. Julius was hard pressed. Only the knowledge that Benison was at his back—with the prince's wife, Eleanor, huddled between them—allowed the Brujah to concentrate on the attackers to his front and flanks. His blade found many a target. Severed limbs tumbled. Julius cleaved the skull of one of the monstrosities as it staggered forward after suffering a blow to the knee. Its gargantuan corpse formed a breastwork of sorts, gaining for Julius an extra foot or two of space for maneuver.

Not far to his right, his Toreador hostess, Victoria Ash had fallen beneath one of the ghouls. Julius stepped toward her and struck at her attacker.

His distraction almost cost him dearly. He barely avoided a huge talon aimed for his head, a blow that, had it landed, would have relieved him of that portion of his anatomy.

A slashing counterattack severed the talon, but there were five or six more poised to continue the attack. Julius lunged at the creature's torso, hoping for a single, killing blow, but an unexpected drag on his leg threw off his attack, and he missed badly.

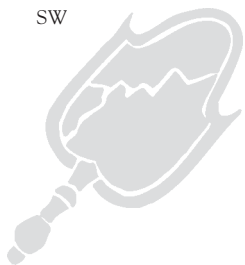
The taloned creature, luckily for Julius, stumbled back, and the archon turned to hack at what he assumed was a tendril of shadow coiling around his leg. Instead, he found Thelonious, the Brujah primogen of the city, clutching him, crawling his way up Julius's leg. Thelonious's own legs were missing, ripped off above the knees. A trail of blood led back to one of his limbs. But Julius was more concerned by what he saw in his clanmate's eyes. The madness of hunger consumed him; the flesh grenades, no doubt, had plummeted him into a spiral of uncontrollable bloodlust.

Julius hesitated only a moment, then struck Thelonious with one powerful sweep of his blade. Head and body collapsed to the floor. Never mind that this was the Brujah primogen, that he was the leader of the revolt that had threatened to topple Benison. The necessities of battle did not always accommodate the demands of politics. Julius could not afford an additional threat at the moment.

As if in justification of his split-second decision, the taloned creature renewed its assault, and this time Julius struck hard and true. His sword bypassed the remaining claws and bit deeply into the ghoul's body proper. The archon twisted the blade; it did as much damage coming out as it did going in. The beast stumbled backward over its fallen comrade and collapsed for good.

But still the shadows grasped at Julius's legs and ankles, and the ghouls—their number never seeming to decrease, no matter how many he struck down—pressed the attack from all directions. The prince was down beneath a pile of the foul creatures. Eleanor, wielding a cudgel she'd scavenged from a felled ghoul, tried to help, but the weapon was too large and heavy for her tiny hands. She swung with precious little accuracy and even less effect. A great tendril of shadow smashed some poor bastard on the floor, over and over again.

Meanwhile, Julius again waded into the fray.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:04 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

When a darkness so thick and sudden it flooded the room like a raging river overcame the party, the General was actually surprised. It was a delicious feeling being startled like that, and one he'd not felt for a long, long time.

The cries and screams were indeed muffled by the odd darkness and the General realized before someone sounded the nature of the threat that the Lasombra were surely behind this. The Lasombra and their Sabbat allies. It was an ambush of their hated Camarilla foes, a group to which the General's own bloodline belonged. The General decided that he would wait a moment longer before joining the fray. He at least needed to acclimate his vision to the virtual absence of light.

The slaughter that ensued was grisly and brutal. And swift. So fast that it could be completed in such time only by beings that were more than mortal. And the General didn't budge from his position. At first he convinced himself that it was not fear that held him back. Instead it was prudence that held him in check.

But as the massacre unfolded and gouts of blood washed the white floors and walls, the General admitted that he liked much better being the sole Kindred among a pack of kine when such slaughters took place. His safety was much more assured, in fact virtually guaranteed, in such circumstances. Even so, he still did not truly register fear, and he still found ample time to watch the terror work its way across the mouths and faces and eventually into the eyes of a score of Kindred whose undead lives were being snuffed in a heartbeat.

In fact, the General began to take mad delight in this carnage. He used his powers to keep the battle clear of the statue within which he'd found refuge, and the weak-minded Sabbat warriors could not dispute his efforts. He then became so overwhelmed attempting to observe all the details of the struggle that he nearly lost his chosen co-survivor to an obscene creature bashing her with a fleshy appendage.

He felt her mind grasping about for assistance, but she was so alarmed and confused that she could scarcely have called her own name aloud, let alone determine who might save her. So the General helped her. It was a little matter for such an aged Malkavian as himself to give voice to the terror and chaos of her thoughts. The voice still had no spoken component, of course, and such would not have been heard over the din of the battle in any event, but it summoned assistance nevertheless.

A young Toreador the General had spied regarding Victoria with great fondness earlier was close at hand. No hero, but he would act more quickly by virtue of his proximity than the General might from afar, so it was he who kicked at the head of the beast and saved the Toreador primogen and allowed her to find brief refuge within a small room formed of the temporary room dividers used to break up the wide-open spaces of the top floor of the High Museum.

The neonate paid dearly for his heroism, as most heroes do.

Victoria did not, however, reach her glassine asylum without the notice of others. A wounded war ghoule seeking easy prey noted the woman's escape and plodded forward on legs as massive as the pillars on any plantation home. Blood oozed from a trio of severed limbs, but the freakish creature still sported four arms, and all were tipped with jagged claws.

There were no other saviors for Victoria Ash this time. In fact, there was almost no one at all. The only Camarilla vampires still battling were the very odd couple of Prince Benison and the Brujah archon Julius.

The General acted swiftly. Still naked, he pulled himself from the statue and streaked to intercept the path of the war ghoule. The beast barely had time to register the General's assault before the blood-flushed Malkavian was upon him. Blood served to augment the General's strength to untold levels, and the force of his blow was such that no mortal or even ghouled mortal could withstand it. The Tzimisce masters who had stitched the war ghoule together could not anticipate a blow so terrible as this.

As if he were battering down a door with his fists and forearms, the General piledrivered into the ghoule's chest. The beast hurtled backward and crashed into some of its kind already feasting on the streams of Camarilla blood.

Without pausing, the General threw aside one of the dividers and prepared to scoop Victoria Ash into his arms and carry her to safety. But she was not within. The trap door in the floor was apparent to him, but it would probably escape the notice of the enemy for some time. He doubted anyone else was paying attention to the floor.

The General pirouetted and, edging delicately around the chaos, returned to his sculpted sanctuary. The war ghoule he struck had not regained its feet. The rush of the battle throbbed in the General's ears, but he knew his life would be forfeit if he attempted to escape now.

So he watched and listened.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:07 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

There was a single moment of clarity amidst the chaos of darkness, blood and ruin. It was refreshed in Leopold's mind during each split-second interval of the thunderous pounding his body sustained.

Victoria's eyes.

Left side smashed against the floor.

She had needed him.

Head battered another body, and a cry of pain issued from the other.

She had called him.

Left arm dangled by threads of flesh after he was smeared along the floor.

He knew it had been a sort of magic she used to call him. Was it magic available only to a sire? A calling that only went to a childe?

Legs jammed straight onto the floor, and both limbs buckled under the pressure and twisted in unintended directions.

He knew he had saved her. He knew he hadn't needed to respond to the call, but she had wanted him and he couldn't refuse.

Ribs crushed when a tremendous pressure constricted his chest and back.

Let not his last moment on this earth have been spent denying his mother. His love. He had saved her.

Limp body set free, floating through the air. Glass shattering, shards imbedding in his skin or spinning free. A four-story flight down toward a terrible impact on flagstones and concrete.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:10 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



From his vantage point above the main gallery, the Nosferatu Rolph watched the slaughter. He'd seen the unnatural shadows and heard the roars and knew the Sabbat was here. Hell, he'd expected a raid.

Then a disturbing thought struck him: He should *help*.

War ghouls? he thought, seeing the towering monstrosities playing "make a wish" with hapless Kindred. *What kind of raid is this?* Much more of one than he'd anticipated, apparently. And much more of one than he was going to be caught in the middle of. *Go down there?* He slapped himself on the face to banish the suicidal thought. *Not bloody likely!* Getting himself ripped apart, he reasoned, wasn't going to do anybody any good, least of all himself.

As if he needed more convincing, as the sea of darkness split into eddies that consumed individual Kindred, the gallery's windows shattered. Fist-sized orbs of flesh landed around the room, then exploded. Blood and pulpy body matter sprayed everywhere. The effect was very much like fishermen chumming the water. Several Kindred who had been holding their own lost it, went berserk, frenzied. Covered in blood and no longer able to control terror augmented by insatiable hunger, they pounced on whomever was closest, friend or foe.

The war ghouls took full advantage of the additional havoc to claim more victims. Many of Atlanta's Kindred were already down, although a few scattered melees lingered on. Benison and Julius, back to back instead of at each other's throats, seemed to be making a stand among the writhing and whip-like tentacles of shadow. Some other fool got himself launched through one of the few remaining intact windows—a four-story plunge to the street below; that was going to hurt.

Slowly, as if he could possibly draw someone's attention from the slaughter below, Rolph inched back down the ventilation duct. He'd seen enough. More than enough.

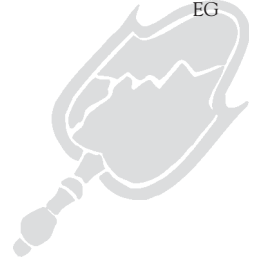


Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:10 AM
Ansley Park
Atlanta, Georgia

An explosion rocked the top story of the Atlanta chantry. Gouts of flame burst from the upper windows and fled into the night with the shriek of tormented spirits. In the front parlor, the cedarwood sarcophagus that held Hannah's remains smoldered gently amidst the conflagration.

Hands grimed with smoke, soot, and blood-sweat took hold of the unwieldy box. Ignoring both the heat and the pain, they dragged their burden roughly from the blaze.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:10 AM
Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia



The sound of splitting timbers cracked like gunshots in the still night. Rhodes Hall, haven of Prince J. Benison Hodge, slumped suddenly under its own weight. It disgorged a plume of golden sparks skyward.

Inside, amidst a cascade of shattering glass, badly mangled claws plucked forth the contents of the display cases. Each piece in the prince's priceless collection of Civil War-era Enfield rifles was passed admiringly from hand to hand as they traversed the few short blocks down Peachtree Street to the High Museum.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:12 AM
Parking garage, the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

A thin line of shadow trickled through the crack around a service hatch on the outer wall. The blackness flowed to near Bolon, fearsome leader of the Tzimisce battle ghouls, and on the concrete floor the shadow took the shape of a man. It resembled a police chalk outline, except the body was more than a line; it was a solid mass of darkness. While the shadow remained on the ground, from the feet upward a mirror image of darkness formed vertically, as if the shadow cast a shadow of its own. Then the free-standing blackness took on more substance, shed its cloak of darkness, and there stood Vallejo.

“Heavy losses,” spoke Monçada’s legionnaire to Bolon, “but victory will be ours shortly. The prince and the Brujah archon still resist, but few others.”

Bolon grunted. “If you want something done right...” He stepped over the body of the Camarilla ghoul whose bowels he’d been unraveling onto the floor. Bolon, like many of the battle ghouls of his command, stood nearly eight feet tall. He clattered when he moved, as the various plates of thick bone armor—all shaped from and directly attached to his body—grated against one another. Large spikes of bone protruded from his shoulders, elbows, knuckles, knees, and along the crest of his bone-helmeted head.

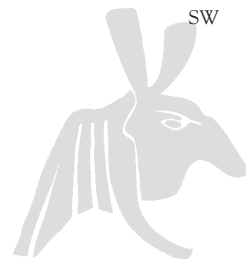
Vallejo squeezed the bridge of his nose as his senses cleared. The transition from shadow to body was sometimes a jarring shift in perspective. The allure of darkness, the unrestrained freedom of shapelessness, not to mention the unique union between himself and the other legionnaires as they merged together to form a far-reaching blanket of shadow—enough, in fact, to reach nearly from the bottom of the museum to the top—were seductive. It was tempting simply to remain a part of that common body. Indeed, the power to join their incorporeal forms was one of the uppermost achievements in their training under Monçada, and the addictiveness of that state was the cardinal’s insurance of their loyalty. Vallejo had lost not a few recruits who had been unwilling or unable to reclaim their identity from that common bond. But the strong persevered.

“Bring those barrels,” Bolon shouted to a few of his nearby ghouls, and they dutifully hauled over several oil drums that had just been unloaded from a truck, and maneuvered them toward the elevator.

Vallejo was impressed by Vykos’s thoroughness even more so than her ruthlessness—no eventuality had been overlooked. The tiny knot of resistance upstairs would give way shortly, and the battle would be over. It was already won.

Armed with foreknowledge of success, Vallejo released his physical form to the darkness and climbed upward once again.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:18 AM
Ansel's Parking Garage
Atlanta, Georgia



The Eye!

Vegel woke with a start. He'd left it behind when he slipped from his clothing. He chided himself for a fool, but then calmed, realizing he would likely be dead, truly dead, if he'd not used that trick to escape.

Damn those Nosferatu! What game were they playing? Using a Setite deliveryman to carry the Eye of Hazimel from a Camarilla party to a Sabbat ambush. Even on the surface the plan was so convoluted that only a Kindred could conceive it and probably only a Nosferatu could execute it.

As he sat silently for a moment, though, Vegel remembered the big Sabbat's last words before the Setite blacked out. He'd said to clean up the corpse and get the third Sabbat, the long-fingered one, back upstairs. Nothing about the Eye. No "search these tattered clothes for the Eye." No "the Eye is not here, so find the Setite." Nothing about the Eye.

Vegel was thoroughly confused now, but he admitted he was hardly himself. Probably delirious from lack of blood and nearly dead from his injuries, Vegel couldn't expect the best from himself right now.

The only way to learn more was to crawl back to the street and see what he could discover. And he'd better start crawling soon, for he might have escaped the Sabbat, but there was no escaping the sun. Vegel hoped he could find how to reopen that Nosferatu trapdoor. He didn't relish returning to his enemy's abode, but it was only the light-proof place within the limits of his meager strength.

There was no time like the present. Vegel crawled from the cover of the BMW toward the street. Moving caused him to take better heed of the damage he'd suffered. His rib cage was shattered. His left arm and shoulder were completely crushed. His right thigh was probably broken and the left nearly so. Countless other smaller injuries and bruises covered him, but these other wounds were the ones that would kill him unless he could very soon make it to safety.

He managed to attain the exit of the parking lot. Fortunately, there was still no one on duty. From this vantage he could clearly see the area where the struggle had taken place. His shredded clothes were still strewn about the street, and Vegel's eyes managed to focus just enough to spot the garment that was most likely his dress jacket.

The street was also clear, so Vegel inched his way toward his jacket. The drop off the curb was painful, and various puddles covered him with water and mud, but he eventually made it to the jacket.

Rolling onto his demolished left side so he could use his right hand, Vegel sorted through the fragments of the coat until he felt the silky fabric of the inside liner. He pulled that piece from the pile and found that both inside pockets were still intact. He patted the left pocket and was astounded to discover the Eye was still there.

The shock was almost enough to cause him to black out again.

He went rigid with fear when he heard something above him. It came from the second level of the parking deck—the spot from which the Sabbat had launched their ambush. Vegel couldn't make out the words, but he was certain he'd heard a deep, resonant voice like the one belonging to the brutish Sabbat.

He quickly clamped the strip of jacket containing the Eye in his mouth and crawled back toward the parking garage. His progress was tediously slow. Vegel knew his strength was ebbing.

The Setite heard more voices above him, but either they were muffled or he was too weak to hear clearly. Concentrating hard, Vegel did finally make out the words "time to go." Nothing in the tone of the voices told him he'd been spotted again, but the Sabbat were bound to see him as they left.

A few more inches and Vegel reached the curb, where he propped his head up on this concrete pillow.

He knew his choices were very limited. Die by Sabbat, or die by exposure. Even if he could reach cover, Vegel doubted he would survive until the next night, especially if his cover was the Nosferatu tunnel. And if he opted to retrieve his beeper, who knew who or what might arrive to retrieve him.

My god, he thought, *what Hesha would do to claim this Eye*. He only wished he knew how to summon power from it. Perhaps with its help he could survive. But that was a fruitless avenue of thinking.

Then he realized the only thing he could do. The only thing he *should* do. He would be a loyal servant to the end, and that loyalty would be rewarded with Hesha's vengeance on these Sabbat, as well as upon Rolph and his Nosferatu masters.

Vegel pulled the bloody cloth from his mouth and reached into the pocket for the Eye. The Eye began to throb again as he pulled it out. And now he was finally able to have a look at it.

It was a grotesque, black and fibrous thing. Slightly larger than an eye should be and covered with a film of perpetually moist ichor, it also appeared to be covered with a casing of skin. Apparently, the eye had its own eyelid, and the fleshy black lids would not part, at least not for Vegel's one-handed efforts.

Feeling the last vestiges of energy and life leaking from his body, Vegel did not hesitate. He set the Eye of Hazimel carefully down on the strip of jacket, and with his good right hand he gouged into his own eye socket, squeezed the fragile orb within and tore it loose. He tossed it aside and with his remaining eye watched the little mass roll away, picking up dirt and debris as it skittered across the pavement.

He then retrieved the Eye of Hazimel. He laughed, for even if the Sabbat found him now they would never find the Eye.

Rotating the Eye so the lid was oriented outward, Vegel slid it into his skull. With a soft squish it seemed to settle into place, and with a surprise that jolted his dying frame, Vegel felt *something* boring back into his head. Suddenly, he could feel the Eye, its heavy lid and reverberations of power from within.

Vegel opened his Eye, and his strength began to fade forever.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:18 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



Prince Benison was free. Julius had skewered two of the prince's assailants, and even Eleanor had distracted one long enough that Benison was able to regain his feet, crush the ghoul's skull with a single blow of the Malkavian's mighty fist, and retrieve his sword. The three Kindred had also managed to battle their way closer to the main entrance of the gallery—the two sets of gargantuan bronze doors, their panels covered with friezes. One of the sets of double doors nearly touched the gallery ceiling, thirty-odd feet above. Along with the slightly shorter set, they dominated the chamber, especially now that most of the sculptures and glass partitions had been overturned or destroyed outright.

Maybe they won't expect us to break for the front door since many of them came in that way, Julius hoped. He viewed the elevator itself as more of a deathtrap than an escape route, but there were other avenues of egress in that direction. All things considered, it seemed worth a try.

Benison seemed instinctively to follow Julius's lead. Not a word passed between the two, but they covered one another's rear and flanks without fail. More than once, Julius felt the breeze of the prince's loaned sword by his ear, only to see an unwary attacker fall at his side. And Julius repaid the prince in kind. All the while, Eleanor kept to the insular eddy between the two warriors, thwacking ghouls whenever they strayed within her reach and keeping out of trouble as much as she could. She was not well-versed in combat—she'd always tended toward the more subtle, though no less deadly, machinations and intrigues of Kindred society—but she was doing her best to help the two warriors, rather than letting herself become a burden.

The trio of Brujah, Malkavian, and Ventrue was at the base of the stairs directly beneath the oversized doors. Only a handful of ghouls now blocked their escape. Julius struck down one of those, his hopes beginning to rise, when he heard a strange sound, a creaking noise, the moan of metal and wood. He didn't recognize it for what it was at first; not until the giant doors, and the faux walls that held them aloft, were toppling down on him.

Julius called out as he dove from beneath the falling slabs of bronze. He landed hard on his side, but rolled and was quickly on his feet, gratified to see that Benison had escaped the trap as well. Not so for several of the battle ghouls. Two, that he could see, lay sprawled, partially pinned beneath the upended flats.

Eleanor was trapped as well.

She grimaced in agony, hundreds of pounds crushing her slight frame, and above her stood three more ghouls, the elevator closing behind them, who must have been responsible for toppling the doors. Among the newcomers—one of whom was larger than the others and wore spiked bone armor—were three oil drums.

Julius and Benison both started toward Eleanor, but the ghouls tipped the barrels, and a fiery flood was unleashed over the doors, down the steps.

Greek fire! Julius recognized—or some modern equivalent that flowed like oil and scorched like molten lead.

Before Julius or the horrified prince could respond, the liquid fire swept down over Eleanor. Her tiny body burst into flame. Her screams mingled with those of the trapped ghouls whose masters had decided worth sacrificing to squelch the final Kindred resistance.

Again, Julius could only dive out of the way. He had the presence of mind to knock Benison out of the path of the spreading inferno, and as the two climbed to their feet together, their gazes met.

Julius had thought that, over the centuries, he had seen first hand all of the horrors that war had to offer. But within the prince's eyes was a depth of pain and suffering, an anguish so fresh and pure, that goose bumps stood on the archon's skin. He turned his head—unable to hold that gaze for longer than a second—and when he turned back, the pain was gone from those green eyes. They were glazed over. Benison stared at him with a blank gaze, his face completely devoid of any emotion whatsoever. It was an expression that unsettled Julius more than the overwhelming grief of a moment before.

Julius had seen the will drain from men in battle, had seen their fury dwindle and all volition abandon them. He thought, at first, that he saw that same death of will in Benison, and knew that, alone, he himself would be able to resist for only so long.

But not for the first time, Benison surprised him. The prince raised his sword and charged at the thickest knot of ghouls in the gallery. Before, he had roared and bellowed with battle rage. This time, not a sound passed his lips. Now it was Julius who followed the Malkavian's lead.

The liquid fire had spread through the front portion of the gallery, incinerating the bodies of the dead and wounded, Sabbat and Kindred alike, but its momentum was spent. The attack had done its worst, and Julius and Benison still stood. Smoke billowed toward the ceiling, thickening the shifting darkness. A harsh alarm sounded, a piercing electronic wail that struck Julius like an arrow through the brain, and flame-retardant chemical began to spray from the sprinklers and foam as it came into contact with oxygen.

The noise and added confusion worked to Julius's and Benison's advantage. The ghouls were slow to coordinate their attacks, and one by one they fell beneath the Kindred swords. Benison slaughtered them in silence. Scarcely any of his blows failed to rend arm or leg or head from a body. Julius, too, waded into the gore. Footing became treacherous with blood and entrails ground underfoot, and the foam coating the floor.

They fought from one end of the gallery to the other, but behind the shadows, through the smoke, there were always more ghouls. They marched forward, undaunted by the annihilation of so many of their brethren, if they noticed the carnage at all. And still the shadows, which by themselves had brought down many of the Kindred, tried to distract or hinder the two Camarilla elders. It was only a matter of time, Julius knew, before a ghoul struck a telling blow, and once either he or Benison went down, the other would follow shortly.

The prince hacked mercilessly at the ghouls. He was a dispassionate butcher; his sword taking on the aspect of cleaver, dripping blood and dispensing dismemberment to any who stood before him. So much so, in fact, that Julius made sure not to push ahead of the prince, to guard his flanks and rear instead. Benison in this state might not recognize the Brujah. Benison might simply destroy whomever or whatever moved within his sight, until he was free or dead.

They fought their way past one of the few remaining intact pieces of statuary, using it for cover of their left flank for several steps. It was a large piece, a man kneeling above his four sons, but the uppermost figure grinned disturbingly over the carnage as if he saw and heartily approved of the bloodshed around him. Indeed, Kindred and ghouls lay scattered about the base of the sculpture, some burned or mutilated beyond recognition, all caught as if frozen in the contorted throes of violent death. Final Death, for beings that might otherwise have proved immortal. Chemical foam rose like floodwater to cover their bodies.

Julius tried to shut out the noise of the fire alarm; it played on his nerves a hundredfold more than injury or thought of Final Death. In a gesture of habit, he tried to brush his dreadlocks away from his face and noticed for the first time that they were gone, burned or melted away by the fumes of the Greek fire.

The sound of shattering glass drew his attention from the two ghouls he was holding at bay. The final glass partition, a tall cubicle of sorts near the center of the gallery, toppled over and smashed into thousands of tiny black shards. The ghoul with the long, jagged spikes protruding from his body, the largest of the three who'd overturned the barrels, stalked through the wreckage. The others, showing their first attitude other than the desire to rend and kill, deferred to him. They parted before him, allowing him to wade unhindered through the sea of foam, glass, smoke, and body parts.

In the other direction, Benison drove his sword three-fourths of the way through the neck of the last ghoul that stood against him. The creature toppled with a majestic slowness so much like that of the glass cubicle that Julius expected him to shatter into pieces as well. But the ghoul rather landed with a dull thud. Behind the position he'd held stood an undulating black curtain, a fluid wall of shadow. Battle ghouls on one side, the full force of the Lasombra shadow on the other.

The prince, for the first instant since his wife had burned before his eyes, turned to face Julius. His stare was no longer blank, but his eyes were glassy, and the whites so bloodshot they seemed they might burst. "Come, my archon," said Benison, in a tone more respectful than he'd ever assumed toward Julius before. "We must withdraw into the woods."

With that, the prince turned and stepped into the shadow, disappearing from sight.

The woods? Julius, uncomprehending, stared after him. Had Benison taken *complete* leave of his senses after all? There was always that chance with a Malkavian. *The woods.* And then the prince had disappeared into the Lasombra shadow.

Julius was perplexed by both Benison's words and deeds. Nor was the Brujah enthusiastic about the prospect of charging into the blackness that had been trying to ensnare him all night—but the ghouls were closing in again, emboldened by their spiked leader, who seemed to Julius more than a ghoul, Tzimisce perhaps. The archon knew well enough that the best chance he had (if he had *any* chance) was to stay with Benison.

So Julius turned his back on the ghouls and strode forcefully into the shadow—where he was caught and held fast.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:21 AM
Outside the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

Marcus poked half-heartedly at the inert form of the vampire that had crashed through the fourth-floor window and landed on the street with such a resounding whomp ten or fifteen minutes ago. He could smell the vitae leaking from the broken body. It would be an easy thing to haul up the carcass—it looked to be a particularly scrawny vampire—and drain the last of its blood. But Marcus was in no mood to indulge himself.

There was a battle going on within those walls. Hearing the crash of broken glass, watching the body sail through the air and then come to such an abrupt, bone-smashing stop, had gotten his blood up. He'd been primed for the order to join the attack, to break bones, to rend flesh—the order that had never come.

Instead, he and Delona stood out in the street like damned watchdogs. There weren't even any mortals to kill or chase off. The roadblocks had worked too well.

"Get away from that!" Marcus growled at Delona.

He'd already chased her away from the body once. Not that there was any reason for her *not* to help herself to that vampire's blood—only that Marcus didn't feel like drinking it, and so he didn't feel like watching her drink it either. Besides, he was starting to like this business of ordering her around, and the way she flinched at everything he said, like she was afraid he might do to her what he'd done to Delora.

But despite those tiny pleasures, he'd had enough of waiting in the street.

"Come on," he ordered her.

There were plenty of patrols around the museum. One less wouldn't hurt anything. Besides, Marcus suspected there would be plenty of vitae to scavenge inside. And, if he was lucky, maybe some people to kill.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:29 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



Damn Benison and his whole clan!

The tenebrous blanket of shadow smothered Julius's every attempt at movement. He might as well have been trying to lift the weight of an entire ocean. He called on the power of his blood, but he had already spent much of his strength in surviving this long. If anything, the shadow tightened about him as he struggled; it snaked down his mouth, tickled the back of his throat, held him suspended like a fly in amber. Perhaps he would become a fossil to grace the halls of the museum. More likely, he would be nothing more than a pile of ash by morning.

This is Benison's fault! Julius tried to use his anger to fuel his body where blood was not enough. He arranged all this just to get me! Sacrificed his city, his wife—all just to get me!

The idea was absurd. In the back of his mind, Julius knew that, but caught as he was by the Lasombra shadow, with the Tzimisce battle ghouls no doubt bearing down upon him, he grasped for any sliver of conviction that might engender enough rage within him to overcome his fatigue. His deep-seeded mistrust of the Malkavian ruler of Atlanta, who until a short while ago Julius had planned to dispatch himself and who had shouted murderous threats at him, was an easy mark—and Julius felt his color begin to rise.

But the shadow held firm.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, reaching around his neck. The ghouls were on him, were pulling him by the head, but still the shadow would not relinquish its claim to him. Enormous pressure threatened to rip his head from his shoulders. Julius added his own strength to the hands that pulled him—at least if he were free of the shadow he could go down fighting—and at last he budged.

Julius tightened his grip on his sword. He couldn't afford to leave it in the wall of shadow. His captors, if they were smart—which, with the ghouls, was a considerable *if*—would pull only his head free of the shadow, then lop it off. If he could get his sword-arm free, he'd stand a chance, however slim.

The darkness wavered for a brief moment, then his face was beyond it, his head locked in the iron grip of—

"Benison!"

The prince was pulling him free, an inch at a time, despite the greedy determination of the shadow. Somehow the Malkavian had made it through on his own. Now Julius too was out, and on the side opposite the ghouls—but only for a moment did the shadow divide them.

As Julius came free, the darkness parted, and the ghouls charged through.

The first swing of Julius's sword took off the hand and face of one. His next blow disemboweled a second.

"Archon, this is no time to dally!" called Benison from behind him.

Julius turned to see the prince slip out an emergency exit, and for the first time since the great bronze doors had toppled over and the Greek fire had poured down the steps—minutes that seemed like hours—hope took hold within Julius.

He slashed at the closest ghoul, then sprinted past one last damaged statue—a grotesque rendering of the slain Abel, now fully missing an arm that had been mostly intact earlier—and to the door. Julius threw open the emergency exit, slammed it behind himself, and was greeted by a world of madness.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:32 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



Marcus opened the door to the gallery just a crack and peered through. He still hoped he would get to kill someone, but he was having second thoughts about coming in without orders. He'd hurried up the winding, circular ramp that ringed the main lobby of the museum—or, rather, he'd jumped up, bypassing the first two and a half stories, and then hurried the rest of the way.

"What do you see?" Delona nagged him from behind.

Marcus backhanded her harder than he'd meant to, and she flew backward over the railing and fell down the cylindrical well to the lobby floor, four stories below.

"Uh-oh."

But Marcus couldn't be bothered just presently. Besides, Delona was a tough little booger. She'd recover. Eventually.

Marcus eased open the door. All the activity seemed to be at the other end of the gallery, as far as he could tell. Smoke hung thick in the large, sprawling room, and some strange foam stood almost a foot deep, like there'd been a huge shaving-cream fight. A fire alarm added to the confusion. At the far end of the gallery, Bolon stood with maybe a dozen of the battle ghouls.

Where are all the others? Marcus wondered. He hadn't seen other signs of fighting on the way up, and there'd been at least four times as many ghouls before. Marcus instantly forgot his reluctance at having disobeyed orders—just as Delona was now out of sight and out of mind—and trudged over to Bolon. The commander was a fellow Tzimisce and one of the few of *anyone* as large as Marcus. With each step, Marcus's wide, flat feet crunched down through the foam and crushed whatever was beneath: glass, marble, bones.

As Marcus reached Bolon, he became confused. The wind was blowing—it *looked* like it was blowing—but he couldn't feel it. After another second, he realized that it was just a trick of the light. Shadows were swirling and whipping around violently, and it looked almost like light coming through the leaves on a windy day. Marcus looked around, but there weren't any trees inside.

"What are you doing here?" Bolon demanded.

Marcus looked at Bolon but was still confused by the puzzle of the rippling light and no wind. Several of the ghouls were pounding on a large metal door. They had ripped off the panic bar, but the door wouldn't open.

Before Marcus could think of an answer for Bolon, a strange dark shadow interposed itself between them. A second or two later, the shadow was a man, a fairly tanned vampire with black hair and a dark uniform. Marcus recognized the crest of Monçada's legionnaires above the breast pocket.

"How'd you do that?" Marcus asked, not used to seeing people materialize out of nothing.

"Commander Vallejo," said Bolon, ignoring Marcus for the moment, which suited Marcus just fine.

The smaller, darker man looked tired. The shadows he'd stepped from seemed reluctant to relinquish him. They formed deep pools in the considerable hollows of his cheeks and beneath his eyes.

"We cannot pass the door," said Vallejo, frustrated. "I've never come across anything like this—some type of seal that I can't explain."

Bolon nodded gravely. Marcus wasn't sure what they were talking about, but the mention of a seal made him think of a trip he'd taken to Sea World as a boy, and of the seals that had tossed balls back and forth without ever dropping a single one. That had been a happy time for him, but he couldn't remember it properly with all the banging on the door that was going on. Battle ghouls were like that. They didn't have much sense.

"Huh," Marcus grunted as he shoved aside the ghouls. He pressed against the door with all his weight, but it didn't budge. "Stuck pretty good." So he took three steps back and launched himself at it, using all the strength of his massive legs and the force of his considerable mass that he could muster.

The door gave way this time, almost folded in half around Marcus's head and shoulders. He stumbled through the doorway and landed in a heap, completely unprepared for what awaited him.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:36 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



Julius ignored the pounding on the door against his back. Ghouls behind him be damned, he couldn't understand what was *before* him. Every few seconds, he saw what he knew he should be seeing—metal stairs going both up and down. But for the majority of those minutes he stood with his back against the door, the scene before him was of a steep, wooded, mountain path—not of the inside of a museum in the middle of Atlanta.

The night sounds and mountain smells were even right. And there stood Benison, partway down the path—the stairs, damn it!

"This way, archon," urged the prince. His emerald eyes shone with enthusiasm now, and instead of the suit he'd worn before, he was clothed in a Confederate uniform. "We'll rally the company. Sherman will never take Kennesaw!"

The sudden conviction in his voice was as baffling to Julius as all the rest. The prince seemed to have recovered from the death of his wife, or perhaps he'd plunged far more deeply into madness. But that didn't come close to explaining everything else: a mountain path, trees, outdoors where there should be indoors or at least an urban landscape.

The pounding on the door steadied Julius. He knew there were Sabbat battle ghouls on the other side—not a situation that he was pleased with, but at least it made sense. The door shouldn't have held this long. Even with Julius holding it closed, the Sabbat should have been able to break through already. It was as if whatever madness had taken root here was determined to keep the portal closed.

Julius was not reassured when sanity reasserted itself, and the door gave way and came crashing in on top of him. It bowled him over, and very nearly knocked him down the stairs-path. An experienced warrior, he managed to hold on to his sword as well as to avoid a serious fall.

The creature that had dislodged the door and stumbled into the stairwell-wilderness was too powerful to be a ghoul. Like them, he was a veritable giant, a walking juggernaut, but he appeared at first glance more self-possessed, less deranged, as he climbed to his feet.

Apparently the mountainside surroundings caught him by surprise as well, for the juggernaut gazed around in obvious puzzlement at the trees, and the rocks, and the clear night sky. Julius took advantage of the delay. He slashed with his sword, and the behemoth's steaming entrails spilled out onto the ground. The creature dropped to his knees, but that was all Julius saw. He turned and bounded down the trail after Prince Benison.

This new, inexplicable reality, the alternating stairwell-wilderness, Julius realized, was free from the damnable Lasombra shadow. That had been true from the moment the emergency door had slammed shut behind him, but it was another phenomenon that he didn't understand. No mere door could hold back that tide of inky blackness, and there was not the remotest chance that the Lasombra didn't want to pursue him and the prince. No, something else was at work here.

Julius rushed downward around a bend in the trail and came face to face with Benison, who was waiting expectantly. The Malkavian's eyes still burned with an unnerving glee.

"Now we have them, archon! This way."

Benison turned to the steep mountainside, where Julius saw, of all things, an old metal door right in the side of the mountain. The door was set into a wooden frame, all of which was bound by together by a rusty chain and padlock. Benison tore away the entire contraption and cast it aside, then took Julius by the arm. They stepped from the mountainside into a forest glade.

Julius craned his neck around, but the mountain was gone. A cave he could have understood. At least it would have been consistent with the madness around him. But to step from a winding mountain trail directly into a level clearing was...unfathomable.

"By the gods, what is this?" Julius exclaimed.

"Why, Archon Julius," answered Benison almost playfully, "it's the 37th Georgia, a regiment of Hood's boys."

And to Julius's astonishment, truer words could not have been spoken, for double ranks of shabbily dressed Confederate soldiers were forming into a line of battle along the far edge of the clearing. Perhaps two hundred men bearing muskets waited, front rank kneeling before the second, ready to fire.

"This way, archon," said Benison, again leading Julius by the arm. "We must seek a safer vantage."

"This cannot be," Julius muttered as he let himself be led out of the line of fire.

"God willing, General Sherman will share your sentiment shortly. He will never wrest Kennesaw Mountain from us," Benison reiterated.

"But the mountain's gone..." But Julius was unable to form any reasonable argument, as the mountain never should have been there in the first place.

The Sabbath ghouls, now edging into the serendipitous clearing, appeared to share Julius's disorientation. Their earlier relentlessness had given way to apprehension at their surroundings, the most dangerous part of which—the Confederate troops—now opened fire.

The simultaneous roar of the guns was deafening. Lead Minié balls ripped through the ghouls, tearing away limbs, shattering bones. Julius could not believe what he saw.

Before he could again assert the impossibility of the scene before him, however, another roaring filled his ears. The metal stairwell had somehow rematerialized at the far end of the clearing, and a twisting flood of pure black was pouring down it and over the field. This landscape of madness no longer held the Lasombra at bay.

The rushing shadow swept over the mutilated ghouls and on toward the line of battle. A second volley from the 37th Georgia had no effect on the darkness, which now hit the hapless soldiers like a tidal wave at landfall. It brushed them aside and swallowed their death cries. Then the darkness rose to a terrible height, only to crash down upon Benison.

The Malkavian prince disappeared beneath the tide of blackness, and simultaneously the landscape wavered, as heat rising from the earth on a summer day obscures vision. But it was the landscape itself that wrinkled, then swirled into its own tidal wave of

color and sound and motion. This wave of pure force, the swirling flotsam of Benison's own dementia incarnate, smashed into the darkness, and the shadow was broken. It fled like a thousand black vipers hurled toward every point of the compass.

But the wave had not yet spent its force. It turned in on itself and, around Benison's inert form, formed a raging whirlpool. Trees, grass, boulders, sky—all hurtled past Julius's eyes, and in the center of it all Prince Benison. The whirlpool wound more and more tightly, its fury compressed into an area constantly growing smaller.

Finally, its vector shifted and it bore straight down—down with the roar of a train passing, into the depths of the earth, and it was gone. Only a dark hole remained. The mountainside, the clearing, the soldiers, Benison—all gone.

Julius stood in shock at what he'd seen. The prince's derangement had forced itself upon the world, had claimed the Sabbat ghouls...but in the end it had claimed Benison as well.

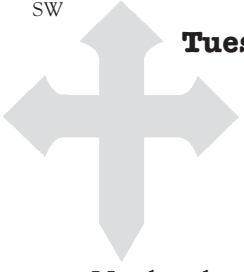
Some while passed with Julius staring down into that dark hole. Only slowly did he come to recognize it for what it was—a gaping elevator shaft, and he stood at the very edge.

He turned slowly, still stunned and astounded by the rapid shifts in perspective, by what he could only perceive as the outpouring of Malkavian madness. Again Julius was slow to recognize the reality that he faced—the eight-foot-tall juggernaut, holding in his guts, stuffed back inside him, with one hand, a look of definite consternation on his wide face. The hand not covering the gaping wound in his belly was curled into a large, meaty fist, which promptly smashed into Julius's face.

The blow shattered his jaw and lifted him off his feet, propelling him over the edge and into the elevator shaft. The fall was maybe thirty or forty feet. Julius had fallen farther before without ill effect, but he landed hard by the open hatch of the old elevator itself. The shoulder that took the brunt of the fall splintered. Shards of bone sliced through muscle and skin.

Julius had very little time to worry about that, however. The faint light that did penetrate the shaft was suddenly blotted out. Julius suspected the Lasombra shadow at first, but then the behemoth landed on him with full force, snapping the archon's spine, and all was darkness.

SW



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:37 AM Eastern Daylight Time
The bowels of the earth

His laughter shook the stone walls of the tomb, so that in his delight he caused mild tremors on the lighted surface of the world. It was no matter. No one suspected he was here. In fact, no one had reason to believe he still existed at all.

But now he was whole.

What pleasure it would give him to play childish games again....

Tuesday, June 22, 1999, 5:37 AM (1:37 AM Eastern Daylight Time)

**Aboard the Concorde
Above the North Atlantic**



A glittering star. Always above me, no matter how fast or how high I fly.

Odd to think that mortals had gone to places none of Anatole's kind could reach. At least he could not, not actually. No doubt it would be easy to convince himself that he had been to the moon and back, but that was a discussion better left to the mages. Anatole could create his own reality, but not others'.

Or could he? He'd boarded this airplane with many others who were not ticket holders. At least that was the most manageable way to record them, but that was not for him to be pondering. Other processes were in place to decipher the metaphors he must confront. Better to penetrate the fog of symbols that constantly enshrouded the ancients when he was awash with symbols as well. That much he had learned.

His quarry's guises were too unfettered by anything concrete and discernible to be rationalized, so Anatole continue to appear mad, though he felt that his madness was a passing affliction.

More likely this pretense to sanity was further evidence against him. The mortals snickering at him behind the thin interior walls of this great machine mocked his eccentricities, but the true madness lay so much deeper and was so much more primal. Anatole could not expect them to see that. *For God's sake*, he thought—a curse that bore no weight—they spend their time mocking my sandals. *Not one among them—*

How foolish of him. Judging others when he remained so incomplete and addled himself. Where had the years brought him? Since the Eight? Since Sarajevo? Fishing was all he did, for his own elusive white whale, that sea dragon that turned aside his advances even as it remained the most approachable of its kind.

But that glittering star drew him back.

It is blinking at me.

Easily dismissed personification?

No. But not intrusive enough yet to be explored.

But why were there passengers on the plane? *Ah, I am in an infinite moment again.* The snickering had stopped because Anatole now existed between comments. Between moments. The empty seats around him only added to the sensation of solitude. And that was the point. Anything that might exaggerate these split seconds was of immense value. Imagine the mind-numbing visions he would have floating above the dunes of the moon after he launched himself into the lighter air! With the entire earth spread out beneath him, a mote in God's eye.

He would be a star in the heavens to those below.

That glittering star, winking at him like a knowing eye. Eyes and stars and eyes.

The Eye.

The infinite moment blossomed up and down beyond the horizontal of the timeline and, in a moment of perspective chaos, Anatole saw that an eye was showing him the way. As he evidently knew it would, or else why would he be flying there now?

He rose and the star rushed to meet him. Strangely, there were no untoward effects of this. The Earth's atmosphere remained intact, the plane remained intact, the light did not eschew the darkness of the small room.

In the center of the small, round room, the tiny star floated like a will-o'-the-wisp and drew Anatole toward it. It floated at the level of his eyes, and only when he was upon it could he see by its dim light. Only then did he see the asp dangling from it by the tail. The snake twisted to snap at Anatole, but its stroke was too short, or he was too fast.

His sidestep placed him outside the carrying distance of the powdered chalk the snake suddenly spewed from its mouth. The powder drifted lazily in the low light like dust motes in a beam of sunlight. Then quickly it gathered, seemingly propelled by an unseen wind to the ground, where it coalesced into a shallow line.

Anatole knelt for a closer look, but the cobra struck again. Its hood extended fully, so that for a moment the room grew dark as the light of the small star was entirely blocked. Anatole rolled backward, away from the chalky venom the cobra again spewed at him. This time the powder blew out in massive volume and the light was once again nearly eliminated. But then the venom gathered about itself and flew toward the ground.

Another line formed.

A picture of some sort was clearly being drawn, so Anatole danced around the snake, tempting it. He got close enough to make out the bands of red, black and yellow of the coral snake, but it would not strike at him. But when he moved in a semi-circle around it, the snake sprung to life. Anatole was not surprised and rolled back again.

Another line formed.

A coiled serpentine form suddenly became visible in the pale light of the star, and Anatole must scramble to the walls for safety. A python, which struck; then an anaconda attempting to snare the Malkavian in its writhing body. Then it was gone. And then the star dissipated as well. No, it was not gone, but burned out—it was still suspended in the air above Anatole.

And he was left alone in the small cave, able to see only because of the torchlight. He stared down at the crude symbol. A letter from an unknown alphabet? Five lines radiating from a central point: two short, one medium, two long. A misshapen five-pointed star?

He settled onto his belly beside the diagram, and slowly traced his finger along the length of one of the long lines. It was conveniently the length of his arm, but when Anatole reached the end he saw that the chalk was that of the school board on which a youngish man wrote. The teacher was interesting enough, surrounded as he was by a nimbus of white issuing from a rent in the air above the impassive heads of the students who observe his writing. Could any of them decipher the ancient language he presents? Could he? Did he even comprehend the great capacity for freedom he was delivering to them? Anatole thought he must, and that he hoped they would subconsciously grasp it as well, even if they were incapable of understanding the source of their empowerment.

Anatole propped himself up on an elbow and reached over that long line to the medium one. He was now on a dark city street and the odor of death and blood clung to the air. A dozen meters away, a large snake coiled on the ground. No, it was motionless, presumably asleep after consuming so much flesh and blood, assuming it was the one that had wrought such havoc on the surrounding corpses.

Then the snake opened its baleful eye upon Anatole. It was a single eye, large and unwieldy in its skull. He could see his own image reflected on the surface of the eye, and as always, he was himself. Never any closer to a metaphorical guise than before. But then he was the snake and saw himself. His body was twisted and broken, his own limbs as exaggerated and clumsy as the single large orb in his scaled head. Then he was back again, staring into that eye rather than out of it.

As his finger brushed away from the line, the snake uncoiled and looped its body into a figure eight. And as Anatole removed his finger, the snake turned into a powdery dust—the only flesh remaining was the eye, and it rested at the vertice of the numeral figure.

Then the eye drew in the powdered snake and blew it forth into five lines of varying length and the eye itself rose into the air, supplanting the burned-out star at the tail end of the dangling snake.

Anatole regarded the crude diagram again and rose to his knees to shuffle to the other long line. He brushed his fingers along it and he was inside a dark crypt. Where the city street had brought the scent of fresh blood and natural kills, this crypt proffered the keening of ritualized death and sacrifice.

The walls were the handiwork of ancient men using crude tools to inspiring end, but he did not linger upon those. He could not, or else he would be bombarded by the import of every one of the images, and he sought something darker here: the heart of this tomb.

Anatole twisted through hallways, pushing past impassable barriers of collapsed masonry and stone, into corridors lined with ghoulish and barely living shackled prisoners as ancient as the tomb. Into chambers of swarming rats and snakes. And eventually into a room with a blood-speckled floor upon which pivots a fleshless mongoose provoking a cobra to strike.

In a moment, the cobra had grown weary and slow, and the mongoose struck. It grabbed the snake's head and crushed it. Instantly, the snake's flesh was the mongoose's, and a skeletal snake fell to the side. Anatole noted in passing that the snake's skull had but a single socket within it.

The mongoose, now hiding in a guise of flesh, regarded hi,, but with a single eye, although it had sockets for two. It wanted to say something, but the line was longer than Anatole's reach and his finger strayed from it. The mongoose turned to mist and drifted upward.

Anatole then chose one of the short lines at random. Or so he think. The line of chalk piled high resisted him, and predictably, he went to the other. At least he was cognizant of the deception even if it made him no less malleable.

He reached perhaps his most pedestrian destination of all. Inside an alchemist's lab, Anatole watched a young fool play with an assortment of objects he pretended to comprehend. Even the professor of moments ago had possessed truer expertise with the information he had disseminated.

The alchemist opened a small box decorated by a fleur-de-lis. He pulled a sheet from within it, and studied it for some time. Then he placed it upon a desk and Anatole saw the paper was blank. So the alchemist began to write. A list of commonplace items.

But the paper had a secret etched on its pages, though as soon as Anatole understood this, he also realized that it was meant for others. He turned his attention away.

Four radiating lines that led to pieces of the puzzle. The light of the eye from which the snake dangled began to fade and Anatole saw it slowly shifting to become a star that he saw through the frame of his window....

He resisted. There had been a fifth line. He would not be denied by such a simple trick of misdirection!

The connections were fading regardless of his efforts. The subtle tapestries of illusion and vision woven from metaphors were fraying, and this creation threatened to be lost forever, its final strand unexplored. This was an artful fantasy that he refused to lose, so Anatole brought his chimerical needle and thread to the task and began to stitch the tears and rents.

A streak on the windowpane!

Anatole placed his finger on one end of it and slowly traced it toward the cabin. Slowly, slowly, the water streak became a snake. His finger went on and on for many moments as he sought the end of the serpent, but he found it was now coiled into a continuous hoop, its tail within its mouth.

He had penetrated this camouflage and when next his finger neared the head, the serpent struck. But there was no powdery ash this time. Or the next. The snake was too careful.

Anatole's needle had to do more work.

So he became a mongoose. He weaved and darted and taunted. He implored the serpent to strike, and it did, always missing. Its poison might well kill at this point, because the Malkavian mongoose was so close.

Finally, he exhausted it, and it grew careless. A short line of powder issued forth, but the light one. Then a long line to the professor. Then the medium line. It seemed hours of struggle before again the ash was vomited in the wake of an unsuccessful strike: The other long line appeared again. Anatole began to tire as well, and he feared that before marking the fifth trail again, the serpent would collapse. So he feigned even greater fatigue and encouraged the serpent to renew the attack.

Eventually, the fifth line was drawn. Anatole was upon it at once, his finger pushing into the high-piled powder and working along the length of the line.

And he was in a cage of metal, slowly lowering into the bowels of the earth. And he was himself, which made him weak and vulnerable. It was an old elevator, but it operated smoothly, noiselessly. It continued downward. Looking up and down, Anatole could plainly see the bedrock shaft, more like a mining tunnel than an excavation befitting this kind of apparatus.

The air seemed damp and Anatole noted a sheen of water upon the metal. A scissors gate made of brass was highly polished, yet streaked with slight discolorations of green. Was that the connection that opened the door? Pure chance? He hoped not, or he had learned nothing.

Below, something sluggishly stirred. A moment later Anatole's feet touched water, yet the elevator continued to move downward. When the water quickly overtook his waist, then his neck, and then his head, Anatole gained an impression of just how fast he was moving and therefore how very deep in the ground he must be to have traveled for those couple of minutes.

Submerged but buoyant, he rose to the top of the cage, his back pressed against the ornate metalwork of the ceiling. Still he moved down.

Fortunately, he had no need to breathe, especially in a woven world such as this, so the water proved an impediment to movement only. When the elevator finally shuddered to a stop, the inertia of his movement pushed Anatole down to the floor. As he floated back toward the top, he grabbed hold of the locking mechanism, unlatched it, and pushed the doors apart. However, the doors would not budge because a vine as thick as Anatole's arm was woven through the latticework of the bottom of the cage. He saw now that this vine extended from the elevator and into an enormous chamber beyond, and he wondered whether the tether above the elevator had lowered him, or whether this vine below had drawn him here.

Anatole struggled with the doors and soon the brass gave way. Pieces of the gate still managed to fold neatly together, but the bottom edges were twisted and broken and the gates would not completely close. No matter, though, as it was wide enough for the Malkavian to pull himself out of the cage and into the underwater cavern.

He saw or realized two things immediately. First, this was no cavern, for while the walls were rough-hewn they were nevertheless carved by man, and presumably modern tools had been required to excavate a chamber of such size and depth into the earth. Second, there were gigantic creatures all around, and though they seemed to sleep, they nevertheless stirred the water with their breath.

It was the motion he'd detected before. There had been a current on the water, but it had been haphazard, as if generated by the inhalations and exhalations of these gargantuan dragons.

He let go of his hold on the brass gate and let himself be pulled by these currents. It was not a rapid movement, but it was sudden. Jolting in a direction one moment, then languidly coasting to a stop before being dragged another way. The currents took him firmly in their grip and he did not drift toward the chamber's ceiling.

After a few moments of this lulling movement, Anatole noted that it was not likely that any of the three dragons present had moved very recently. Vines far thicker than the one that knit the elevator doors together also bound these sleeping giants. Perhaps they were not the masters here, but prisoners instead.

The breathing of one of the sleeping beasts then seemed to take command of Anatole's fortunes. He found himself inexorably drawn toward it with each rumbling inhalation. It was a slow and inescapable death: soon to be drawn into the belly of a beast residing inside the belly of an even greater Beast. For the chamber was very much alive. Not just the vines thick as sequoia that clenched the walls, but the chamber itself.

He was close to the dragon's maw now. Its tongue was rolled up in its mouth, and seemed to rotate with each massive intake of water. Anatole saw that the mouth was toothless, but that frankly had little impact on the ultimate consequences if he were drawn into it. He would not perish in this vision, but if he were expelled from this place again, then even the likeliest of metaphorical connections would not create the way back. The snake, the eye, the dragons would all be lost to me. To be devoured would allow ignorance to consume me. Secrets now near would again be unassailable.

Then he realized his deliverance lay in the same freedom that professor had offered his students. The archaic chant he had scripted on his board. After all, it was really just a state of mind—and what was Anatole the Prophet if not in a perpetually judged and judging state of mind?

And so he was a fish swallowed by the dragon, processed by its internals and shat back into the water. But not merely the water of the chamber, for he had penetrated the belly of the Beast and never had he been so tantalizingly close.

Anatole saw the deepwater behemoth before him. Or at least the inkling of it, and in centuries of pursuit this was all he had ever managed. Why did this one hold the clue? Perhaps it was only that Anatole must believe that he did. This one had been one of the few—the only?—to waken, and the one the Malkavian had stumbled most closely to. There were others, such as the one locked or maybe simply hiding in ice, but this one, the Dragon, was the restless one.

If the secrets Anatole and his Kindred desired, if the riddles he must unlock resided anywhere, then they had to be within one such as this. And even if not, then he would place himself so close to this Beast that he would learn every secret it hid and uncover every secret it discovered.

It bristled with tentacles and gelatinous pods and unspeakable, indescribable formations. Some of these appendages were fleshy and others fibrous, but they ranged in limitless directions and probably for unrecognizable miles.

But then Anatole realized had made a fatal error. Unlike the sleeping dragons that required no sustenance, this Beast did. Where a fish might pass through the dragon, it would not escape a predator like this.

Still, the Malkavian made the connection.

For the briefest, most elusive split second, the Beast regarded him.

It saw through him and saw all of him.

Anatole saw nothing but its gaze and the barest hint of something more beyond that. Something with which his metaphors could not grapple. Something they could not represent. That's why this was a predator too strong for this fatal tactic.

And Anatole was swallowed. And shat again.

Under the light of a glittering star he sat stunned.

It regarded him.

The Malkavian prophet's impossible task was now even more improbable, because this was a victory. But it *was* a victory for him. And where one battle could be won, then the entire war was possible too. So, no matter the increased complications, this day his chances of success had catapulted from impossible to a merely astronomical long shot.

And Anatole had liked his odds before.

Tuesday, June 22, 1999, 5:37 AM (1:37 AM Eastern Daylight Time)

**Aboard the Concorde
Above the North Atlantic**



Even though they were airborne, the companion assumed the stewardesses must have considered this a vacation. They never knew what to make of this odd passenger, his friend Anatole. The Malkavian refused any service, of course, and that left the normally busy and politely chattering attendants in an aimless state, because there was no one else to serve.

On the entire plane.

The companion always warned Anatole about drawing this kind of attention, but how could he aptly describe solitude to a man with multitudes inside his head? This was Anatole's tenth time aboard the Concorde and the ninth time riding it without a single other passenger.

Except for the companion, of course.

Him, and a few ephemeral others this night whose company he didn't care for. But he was not in control of such matters. He sometimes wonder whether Anatole was either.

This was evidently proof that the outside world could (and did) intrude upon his friend's internal one, for the ceaseless prattling they'd encountered on that first trip had prompted future payments of cash for every seat on the plane. In fact, one day several years ago, Anatole had booked his next nine flights on the Concorde. This one was taking them back to the United States, and the fact that they were on their way meant something was either happening or about to happen there that was important to the prophet.

It also caused the companion to wonder, as he had on every prior pre-paid flight, why the Malkavian had booked nine and only nine flights. It was not for lack of money, as Anatole possessed a sizable fortune that he put to little use. It was a question the companion expected to be answered soon, as this was the last of those flights.

The companion was just as glad for the silence. A couple of the stewardesses were veterans of past flights and had evidently warned the others that the sole ticket-holder was not to be disturbed. The captain of the Concorde still made various announcements as he was presumably required to do by law, but the volume was turned so low that mortals would barely have been able to hear it.

Anatole, of course, could, but he suffered this as an inconvenience of transatlantic travel.

As for those other phantom companions aboard the otherwise empty plane, the companion had, at the very least, to record their names for Anatole's sake—although he could share much more were he so inclined. He was not, but suffered their presence as his own inconvenience of transatlantic travel. Anatole subjected him to so little, he could not reproach him on this count.

Toward the rear of the plane, two Setites conferred. The companion knew a great deal more about these guest than they would choose to reveal. They might hide secrets from others, but if he paid attention to Anatole, the companion could glean as much as he might need to be reminded of later.

Both were physically adept, dangerous-looking men. One was black. Bald in the modernly fashionable way, though without any pretense to modern fashion, as he also wore a monocle in his left eye. Rich robes were folded over his seat and the one next to it, and his nimble fingers constructed cat's cradles with a slender cord. At the end of the cord was a bronze amulet that seemed to leak a dark powder, but this Hesha was not mindful of that. He merely unwound the cradle and rebuilt it anew. He nodded while receiving a report from the other Setite.

This other was scrawnier, yet as athletic as his superior. This was Vogel. Even though he was bleeding profusely, none of the other passengers, nor even Hesha himself, nor the attendants seemed disturbed or offered to help.

One expected other Kindred to be alert to blood, especially the Tremere sitting by himself in the front of the plane. But the Concorde employees' indifference could be explained by Anatole's strict interdiction of their activity.

The blood seemed to be pouring from Vogel's face, but as he was turned away from Anatole and toward Hesha, the companion could not make out the details of the injury. Oh well, one less passenger would please him.

As for that Tremere, he was busy attempting to conceal a small wooden box from the other passengers. That was why he'd moved to the front of the plane, where he sat near the attendants who did not dare offer him the slightest glance. The companion could make out mother-of-pearl inlaid in the box's lid, but the pattern escaped him.

Then the companion forgot about the man, as Anatole said he was of little importance to them, though others involved in their chase would need him.

The companion didn't know what Anatole meant by this, but then he did not understand much of what the prophet did. He only recorded facts, and if nothing more about this Johnston Foley was required, then he would not burden himself with useless information.

The other three passengers disturbed the companion far more than the first three. Well, two other passengers, though neither of them were as peculiar as the small sign on the seat across the aisle from where Anatole sat. It said **RESERVED** in bold small capitals, and none of the other passengers had taken this seat or even looked its way. Had someone missed the flight? But Anatole had purchased all the seats.

The other two then. One mortal; one older even than Anatole. Jordan Kettridge was the more observant of the two, an experienced mortal, one who clearly knew something of the Kindred, but not enough to risk missing a single detail more. His tanned and wrinkled face swept back and forth around the room, though he paid the most attention by far to the only conversation, the one between the Setites in the rear of the plane.

The other one, a Methuselah or other ancient Kindred, worried the companion simply because of his age. Unlike Kettridge, this Ravnos named Hazimel had no need for eavesdropping, and the confidence he had in his knowledge and power was unsettling. Everyone, even Anatole—especially Anatole—sought information, but this Ravnos thought he possessed it already. Foolhardy perhaps, but frightening just the same. It provided him an aura of invincibility that seemed real enough by extension to actually make him so.

Like Odin, Hazimel had paid a price for his wisdom, for he was missing an eye. The limitless depths of that empty socket were as dark as the rest of the man. Not in skin—that would be a superficial description for a creature such as this—but again in his aura. His entirety seemed as depthless and boundless as a black hole.

Then they all silenced or sat up, giving their attention to Anatole, who reached across the aisle and plucked the plastic RESERVED sign from the seat. He waited a moment, but when no one rose or appeared to take the seat, Anatole stared emphatically at it. However, it failed to transform into something more meaningful, which was oftentimes the case when his own attention was so thoroughly engaged. But this metaphor remained a mystery, and Anatole slowly replaced the sign.

He then settled into his seat, for this, the last of his prearranged flights across the Atlantic.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:40 AM
Underground Garage, The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

Countless thoughts raced through Victoria's mind. She could be wrong, but she guessed herself not so much in shock as completely and utterly baffled.

She struggled to find a means to put the pieces together. Were the Nosferatu involved? Rolph had left early. The only other early departure was Vogel, but she'd seen the Setite's chauffeur when she returned to the garage with Samuel. If that was supposed to be a distraction, then why one that called attention to Vogel's absence?

Additionally, if forced to guess, she would say that Hesha was surprised by his henchman's absence too. Victoria couldn't read people nearly as well over the phone as in person, and Setites in general were slippery liars, so it was very possible that Hesha was part of the deception. If it even was Hesha that had been on the other end of that line. The Toreador knew to take nothing for granted, especially on a night when a Sabbat attack had decimated the Kindred of her city.

The questions about the Sabbat themselves were limitless, and it only confused Victoria more to give them room to whirl in her conscious thought, so she kept them pushed back.

Some of her questions clearly had no importance any longer. Did Eleanor know Victoria was responsible for the tip to Benison about the missiles? Had she told Julius? Just as with everything regarding the last two years of Victoria's life, those questions were now meaningless.

Because Victoria had no doubt that absolutely every Camarilla Kindred attending her Summer Solstice Ball had been destroyed by the Sabbat. Perhaps one or two more besides herself had escaped, but she couldn't imagine it. She'd managed to escape only because of the trapdoor she'd installed in the floor of her cubicle of glass.

After she had gained the cover of that cubicle, it had taken her a moment to overcome the shock—there had been shock then—and begin to make life-saving decisions. The trapdoor led to a maintenance area between the third and fourth floor, and the less than four-foot height meant Victoria crawled to safety.

She heard the screams and threats and war cries above her, and more than once she crawled through a puddle of blood. She imagined she heard Julius's taunts, and she stretched her fantasies to imagine him victorious, but the odds were too great. Besides, the sounds of struggle ended too quickly. Not even one with Julius's speed could vanquish so many foes so quickly. Perhaps he and Benison together, but the Toreador knew such thoughts were mere fancy.

If she doubted the totality of the Sabbat victory at that moment, then any residual hopes were quashed when she reached the parking garage. She had hoped to find her ghouls unaware of the death above them. They would throw her into her Rolls Royce and race to one of her South Georgia havens—though maybe it would be better to go north—before the dawn arrived.

But they were decapitated and gutted. The same for the driver in the limo, which she now knew to be Vegel's vehicle. Like her Rolls, the limo appeared to have a light-sealed compartment where a sleeping Kindred might hide, but Victoria didn't dare remain so close to the Sabbat horde. The wheels on the cars were all slashed, but she suspected the perpetrators would return for whatever booty these cars might hold. She couldn't imagine a band of that size staying together for longer than it took to annihilate the Camarilla, anyway. No doubt they would be fighting each other for whatever baubles might be found on their victims.

And that's where Victoria was now. Looking inside Vegel's limo for anything of use, she decided there would be one less item for the Sabbat to consider confiscating, because she took the cell phone. Her own phone was wired into the Rolls, so this portable one suited her present need. Besides, she knew the number the chauffeur dialed to reach Hesha, and she would use it if necessary. If it really *was* Hesha and he really *didn't* know why Vegel was missing, then perhaps he would help her. For a price, of course, but any price was worth her life. Well, almost any price.

Then Victoria hurried out of the parking garage to the small street behind the museum. She wanted to find a covered position that allowed a view of the top floor of the building, but satisfying her curiosity wasn't worth the risk of exposure.

The noise seemed to come from a long way off, but the echoing ding of the elevator doors sent shivers down Victoria's spine. She immediately ducked behind a low concrete wall and looked back at the extreme interior of the garage. A gang of oddly shaped shadows emerged from the recesses of the elevator.

She forced herself to remain calm. Panicking now would only bring them upon her more quickly. But when a pair of dark red eyes seemed to flash from the darkness directly toward the spot where Victoria crouched, the Toreador lost her resolve. Summoning every bit of inhuman speed she could muster, the Toreador ran for her life.

Though her powers and her blood meant she rocketed along the street at a speed unknown to the greatest human sprinters, the pursuit seemed possessed of the same uncanny prowess, and Victoria numbered the moments of her life by the steps she took. For her incredible speed—and she now outstripped any speed limit humans imposed upon vehicles within the confines of this city—was empowered by the blood within her. As a human kine burns calories to fuel exertion, so the Kindred body requires blood.

Through the blurred haze of lampposts and concrete and glass, Victoria blessed her indulgence this evening. Yes, she had celebrated far too soon, for she'd sensed the victory that would have been hers if not for this outrageous assault by the Sabbat, but this evening she partook in good measure of the blood she offered her guests at the High Museum. She usually denied herself this blood, for it came in crystal flutes and was devoid of the scent of mortal flesh. The warmth it carried was that of stovetop simmering and not of kine vigor. She was not a passionless monster desiring only to satisfy her hunger; the humanity she set her wits to fanning in other Kindred by virtue of her inhuman powers and ultra-human beauty still flickered within her as well.

But the humanity was soon forgotten amidst her present flight. The blood encapsulated by her lifeless flesh burned and flushed her with the speed she required, but giving herself to the motion for so long—sustaining her flight for so many moments with blood that was stolen from a now-dead mortal—brought the monster she denied closer to the surface.

Victoria's body shuddered with feral ecstasy, for it had been many long years since she last gave in so heedlessly to the potential of her immortal form. It had been so long since she'd needed to. And it was required now, for though a beast, she knew herself the prey and not the predator. A glance over her shoulder confirmed that despite her terrible speed, a trio of the Sabbat still dogged her, though others had fallen out of sight.

They were slender creatures who seemed to cut through space as if the air gave no resistance. Long and spindly-legged, they did not possess the build a sprinter should, so Victoria knew she was undone if they could move so quickly regardless. These creatures were built for distance. For endurance. And though by dint of great effort she increased her lead by a stride and two and three, the Toreador knew she would not shake them before she burned her entire consumption of blood.

Without that blood she would stand no chance when cornered. Although maybe that was best.

But she gave one final effort. Her body flushed with warmth and she found a greater speed. Victoria ducked around corners, through breezeways of office buildings, into underground garages and soon the athletic capacity she demanded of her tiring body overmatched the simple knots that strung her faux-Grecian garb to her curved body. It slipped off and fluttered to the side, revealing glimpses of a body that could be possessed only by a Toreador whose greatest work was herself. Even so, dashing naked through the Atlanta night, too fast for mortal eyes to track or at least comprehend, Victoria continued to clutch the cellular phone with the impossibly mad hope that it might yet save her.

The humid night felt cool on Victoria's heated skin, but as she slowed to a trot and then came to a standstill, that taste of the wind became the bitter one of freedom lost. Though they'd lost contact with her for several seconds at times, the Sabbat pack was yet upon her trail, so flight held no further purpose.

Her eyes swallowed her probable last view of the night. One hundred thousand prior nights had been hers. She knew she'd lived those nights as if they were hers exclusively. She'd sought beauty and power so she could have more of both. Arrogant, yes. And egotistical too. But she couldn't regret it. Here, at the end, with a halo of city lights blotting out the starlight above her, Victoria was alone. For what other than herself should she have fought? For whose fate but her own was she responsible?

As she watched the three lanky humanoids close upon her, Victoria briefly wondered if this night was in fact her exact one hundred thousandth sunset. It was damn close.

The fiends did not slow as they neared Victoria. They fanned out, but their incredible pace did not abate. They slavered and howled, and Victoria held no hope of victory. She would join those felled at the High-if she was lucky. This defeat would not hurt so much as would the vanquishing to come if she survived. The Sabbat despised beauty, and if they could resist destroying her outright, Victoria might become a prized plaything of some Sabbat lord foul beyond imagination.

The Toreador prepared to fight. Prepared to goad the creatures to blood frenzy. Better to be ripped to shreds in an orgy of predation than be dissected and disfigured by a cool-headed surgeon. The Sabbat was so frightening because it was capable of both

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:51 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



The fire-retardant foam was breaking down, gathering into foul-smelling puddles with swirls of blood, like oil and water. Bolon stood amidst the carnage in the gallery, relatively unscathed himself. That was more than he could say for his battle ghouls—of the fifty he'd sent in, none remained.

Not a damn one! he thought, increasingly incredulous the more he thought about it.

Not that they couldn't be replaced. Within a week or two, Vykos and the Tailor could produce twice that number, but never had Bolon expected to lose more than half of his battalion. He wasn't even sure what exactly had happened to the last dozen. Vallejo and nine of his legionnaires had resumed physical form, but they weren't in the best of shape. They were dizzy, and puking blood—whatever had happened had taken its toll on them, even in their shadow form, and they couldn't seem to reconstruct how they'd lost three of their comrades.

But even if the Prince of Atlanta had disappeared, Bolon, consoled himself, the Malkavian's power was broken and the Brujah archon captured—that thanks to Marcus, the bulky fellow Tzimisce who'd shown up rather fortuitously in the gallery. He told a confused tale of trees in the building, and soldiers, and cyclones, but despite the vagaries of his addled mind, the idiot had defeated the Brujah archon—no small feat, that—and hauled the crushed body from an elevator shaft.

"And where is the prince's body?" Bolon asked for the fifth time.

Marcus scratched his head. "Gone."

"Taken away by the cyclone," Bolon repeated what he knew the other giant would tell him again.

"Mm-hm," Marcus nodded vigorously, glad to have someone else agree with his story. He pointed at the contorted body on the floor at his feet, the Brujah that had sliced him open. "He was the only one left." Marcus's stomach clearly pained him still, but the wound itself had healed enough that his insides were staying inside.

"I see," said Bolon. There was no point, he could tell, in questioning Marcus further. The brute had rendered a valuable service in smashing the archon; to expect more of him at this point would be to ignore his obvious limitations.

"Marcus," Bolon said, moving on to other things, "you know Commander Gregorio?"

Marcus's brow furrowed, but after a moment he nodded that he did. "The real white guy?"

"The real white guy, yes." Bolon didn't think he'd heard an albino described in that exact manner before, but Marcus's meaning was clear enough. "Go find him. Tell him that I sent you to join his force. I'm sure he'll find many uses for your particular skills."

Marcus turned away, mostly recognizing the compliment paid him. "I'll take Delona too," he said as he trudged across the gallery.

Two more matters required Bolon's immediate attention.

"Commander Vallejo."

The weary Spaniard rose to his feet from his perch on one of the larger statue fragments where he rested with his surviving legionnaires.

“Can your men see to the fire that needs to happen here?” Bolon asked. He was not surprised by Vallejo’s affirmative response. For a Lasombra, the young commander struck Bolon as fairly competent.

Finally, Bolon knelt down by the crumpled body that Marcus had dutifully left behind. “Well, Brujah Archon Julius, that just leaves you.”

Vykos had known this particular Camarilla dignitary—if a Brujah could be referred to as such—would be present, and Bolon had been hoping for just this sort of meeting.

The archon’s body was thoroughly broken—flattened in some places, bent at impossible angles elsewhere. Bolon could easily count four kinks in Julius’s spine after only a cursory examination. The Brujah’s mouth hung open, as much as it could with his jaw, swollen and misshapen, wrenched around to the side. His eyes were closed. Perhaps unconsciousness had claimed him—*lucky bastard*—but as yet Final Death had not. For as severe as the damage was, these were injuries that blood could heal. How much blood, Bolon could only imagine. And without massive surgery to align properly the broken and mangled bones, the healing would cause nearly as many problems as it solved. Bones would mend, but they would knit together at peculiar angles. Julius would heal; his body might be whole, but it would be far from functional. The mighty warrior, his exploits legendary for centuries, would survive as an infirm, twisted cripple throughout eternity.

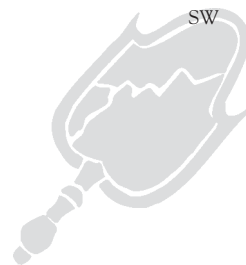
That thought carried a powerful appeal for Bolon. How satisfying it would be to see the once-deadly archon beg assistance merely to stand or sit or tie his shoe. Or Bolon could ship the Brujah to Monçada or, more usefully, to a Tzimisce benefactor who might relish the chance to perform experiments on one of Julius’s stature—or former stature.

There was, however, a consideration more overwhelming than even those rewarding alternatives. *Vitae*. It was not often that an opportunity arose to possess the blood of an elder, a vampire far older than Bolon himself. With age came potency, and with potency, power. And infamy. News of such diablerie, the draining of a prominent Camarilla archon, inevitably spread like wildfire. Bolon would be known from that night forward, to friend and foe alike, as the destroyer of Julius, archon of Clan Brujah.

That made the decision easy, in the end.

Bolon lifted the limp body off the floor. “I only wish you were awake,” he said to Julius, then sank his fangs into cold flesh and drank deeply till every ounce of life-sustaining vitae was his.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 1:58 AM
The Fox Theatre
Atlanta, Georgia



Prince Benison struggled to his knees. He felt as if he'd fought the entire Civil War in the space of an hour, and perhaps by sheer comparison of energy expenditure, he virtually had. To create a world out of madness was one thing, but to superimpose that world upon those not as deranged as the prince...well, that was another thing entirely.

And the former prince of Atlanta was absolutely drained from the exertion.

He fell from his knees and onto his back again.

From this vantage he could stare up at the authentic-seeming Egyptian decoration in this upstairs ballroom that was a part of the famed Fox Theatre. The prince reflected that he had himself hosted a number of occasions here.

Then he found himself closing his eyes, and only with a Herculean effort—such as that which had allowed him, less than twenty minutes before, to push his way through the animate darkness the Lasombra had used to surround the High Museum—did he manage to pry them open again.

Scarabs, ornate sarcophagi, and animal-headed statues loomed around him, and Benison further reflected that this was not a wholly inadequate place to perish. But truly he would rather have forfeited his entire Kindred existence for the right to be beside “Stonewall” Jackson at Chancellorsville and take the bullets that in reality had found the general. Such were the quirks of fate that sent one man to death by his own army and another toward the top ranks of the vampires.

He briefly wondered if the Brujah archon Julius had made it to momentary safety such as this; if so, he would have a better chance to survive, as he surely had not expended the energy Benison had to make good their escape. Surprisingly, Julius's possible survival did not leave a bitter taste in his mouth. The man was a good warrior.

The prince again closed his eyes. There was just nothing left in him. No blood. No will. No chance.

Then he remembered Eleanor. And he knew why he had fought so hard to get away. Why he so desperately embraced the illusion of his past and sank so miserably into it. And for a moment he was separated from himself again, detached and viewing his horrified expression reflected in the pupils of Julius the moment after the Greek fire had rushed in a liquid inferno over his beloved wife, trapped beneath the damned colossal door. He shrank from that visage of himself. It was terrible. Not only had the energy for life left his body, but also the kind of will for life and shock at its loss that empowered the emotion he had felt at that moment. It made life itself too terrible to consider again.

His feelings for his Ventrue lover, his love, were too authentic, too true, to be put aside for ennui, no matter how distilled. A fire as hot as the one that had snuffed his wife forever from this earth laced through Benison's limbs. His eyelids opened and he stood without a shudder or a tremble.

He did not think to fool himself: He could not fight now. He still needed safety and rest.

The Sabbath would shake to the deepest foundations of its most impregnable stronghold for the loss it had inflicted upon him. He swore that it would.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 2:03 AM
The High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia

Vykos stood alone at the very center of the carnage that had been the interior of the High Museum. All around her stretched a wasteland of smashed statuary, broken glass, puddles of mingled gore and ichor and fire-retardant chemicals.

She felt very much at home here.

Sighing contentedly, she surveyed the full scope of the devastation. *Impressive*. The entire fourth floor had been gutted. The elaborate labyrinth of glass partitions had been systematically shattered. Interior walls had been violently reduced to rubble. The vast entryway portals were toppled and trampled and badly scored by Greek fire.

Her gaze traveled uninterrupted around the vast empty chamber. Nothing above knee-height remained standing, save two forlorn statues, and Vykos herself. To the casual observer, she too might have seemed only an overlooked piece of sculpture that had, against all odds, managed to escape the fate of its fellows.

This night, Vykos did bear more than a passing resemblance to an *objet d'art*. Her bearing was statuesque; her visage, cool as marble, sculpted without pity or remorse. Smiling at this thought, Vykos heightened the impression. Her facial structure seemed to shift disturbingly with a sound like that of ice cracking. She regarded her handiwork in a shard of mirrored glass at her feet. *Excellent*. Crushing the mirror underfoot as if grinding out a cigarette, she strode off purposefully toward the elevator.

For all practical purposes, the fighting was over. There were still a few scattered knots of resistance in the city that were being untangled even now. Already the select group of warriors that she had singled out as having distinguished themselves in this night's fighting had begun the laborious task of rounding up the surviving captives and dragging them back here for her inspection.

My *carrion crows*, she thought. Yes, things were shaping up nicely.

Through the high, broken windows, Vykos could see the flickering light from the dozens of fires that had been kindled in the pierced metal oilcans ringing the building. The whoops of the fire dancers, their crows of challenge, their cries of triumph, were welcome to her ears. The unmistakable signs that control of Atlanta had passed into the loving hands of the Sabbat.

Vykos, however, could not long dwell upon this night's victory. There was still far too much at stake. She collared a passing legionnaire.

"Get me Vallejo, Bolon and Caldwell, immediately."

The soldier saluted sharply and hastily turned to obey her orders.

"Soldier," she interrupted him. "Forget about Caldwell. Get me that weaselly lackey of his, you know the one. And be quick about it. We don't have the leisure to stand here all night discussing the matter. Move out." She turned away without waiting for his second salute.

"This place is far too quiet," she mused aloud. "Where are my war ghouls? There must be *something* left to smash around here."

Vykos was distracted by the soft but unmistakable sound of stifled sobbing. She instinctively moved toward the noise, not entirely motivated by sympathy.

"Light!" she called as she picked her way forward through the debris. Her night vision was understandably keen, but her eyes were dazzled by the afterimages of great suffering that hung in the air like phantoms. In places, the lingering halos of pain were clustered so tightly together that she could not clearly make out her own footing for the glare.

Someone nearby obediently struck up a makeshift torch. Actually, it looked like more of a candelabrum. A separate flame burned atop each of the dismembered hand's four remaining fingers, giving off an oily black and unpleasant-smelling smoke.

The bold young lieutenant held his light before him. "May I escort you, my lady?"

"Not if you're planning on toting that thing around, soldier. I suspect the fire-prevention system will unleash its full fury upon you in a moment. In the meantime, find me a flashlight. Dismissed."

As the soldier hastily extinguished the flames, Vykos moved on. Picking her way over the fallen entryway doors, she discovered the source of the sobbing in the foyer.

The Little Tailor of Prague knelt amidst a heap of torn and crumpled bodies. He held one of his pitiful creations, a monstrous aberration easily three times his own size, in his arms. His eyes clamped tightly shut, the Little Tailor rocked back and forth slowly, sobbing under his breath.

"Never find all the pieces...never find all the pieces...never find..."

Vykos drew back before she was noticed. She had no desire to intrude upon the old one in his grief. She quietly retraced her steps to the gallery.

Damn it, there were altogether too many casualties here. And far too many of her forces that she could not yet account for. Where were the rest of those war ghouls?

"Bolon!" Her bellow echoed back and forth through the gutted upper story of the museum.

It was Vallejo, however, who appeared before her. He rose up suddenly from her own shadow. Vykos took a quick defensive step backward but, of course, the materializing form moved with her. It was an unsettling sensation.

To cover her unease, she barked, "Report! What the hell's going on here, Commander? I want Bolon here *now*, or I want his head on a pike. I want to know where the hell all my war ghouls have gotten to. I want the Malkavian prince and the Brujah archon here either in pieces or in chains. And I don't care to be kept waiting any longer. Understood?"

Vallejo weathered this storm patiently. His face was scored with fatigue and his entire form seemed to waver as if a strong wind might well tear him to tatters. Vykos was not certain what was keeping him on his feet.

He seemed to have some aversion or reluctance to meeting her gaze. "My lady," Vallejo acknowledged her orders. "I believe Commander Bolon is...coordinating activities. Near the service elevator. If you will follow me."

Vykos began to retort that she knew damned well where the service elevator was, but she checked herself. Vallejo was near the end of his strength, that much was apparent. And she would have much need of him still this evening.

Bolon was exultant as he swaggered proudly and purposefully toward them. The mangled form of the Brujah archon dangled from one fist, its shattered legs dragging along the ground. This awkward burden did not even seem to slow the pace of the towering Tzimisce commander.

“Lady Vykos.” Bolon dropped to one knee, depositing his macabre trophy before her.

“Where is Benison, Commander? And where are your troops?”

Bolon shifted uncomfortably and did not look up. He was painfully aware that the vulnerable nape of his neck remained exposed above the interlocking bone plates of his exoskeletal armor.

“My lady, it is my unpleasant duty to inform you that the remainder of the battalion was lost in destroying the Malkavian.”

“The entire battalion? Lost? Damn it, commander, I *need* those troops!”

Bolon tensed for the *coup de grâce*, but it did not fall. Slowly he raised his head and met Vykos’s eyes. He forced himself to suppress his initial reaction to her fearsome visage.

“We will rebuild the company, my lady. I will see to it personally. We will be in full fighting trim within the month.”

“You don’t have a month,” Vykos replied coolly.

“But the city is ours, my lady. Certainly there will still be some anarchs to hunt down or convert. And there are, no doubt, a few fugitive warlocks that managed to escape the conflagration at the Chantry. But that work is best left to the resourcefulness of full-blooded Cainites.”

Vallejo cut in quickly in defense of his counterpart. “Yes, it is as the commander says. The war ghouls will be required for the defense of the city, but surely there can be no reason to fear counterattack so soon, Councilor Vykos. The Camarilla was caught utterly by surprise. It will take time for them to organize their resistance. And even then...”

“Even then,” Bolon picked up the dangling thread of conversation, “they have no suitable staging point to gather their strength for the counteroffensive. Charleston? Greenville, perhaps? Memphis?...”

“Savannah!” Vallejo smacked a fist into his palm. He turned hurriedly to Vykos. “My lady, they will come through...”

“Already taken care of, commander. I received confirmation just a short while ago that our forces seized control of the port earlier this evening. Exactly on schedule,” she added pointedly.

Her announcement had both of her commanders clearly at a loss.

“Come, gentlemen, I have told you that this engagement was to be no simple Blood Siege—nor some mere single night’s assault. This is war, gentlemen. Welcome to the fire dance.”

Vykos left them there in stunned silence. After three quick paces, however, she turned back. “Commander Bolon, you have one week to reconstruct your company. You understand? One week. You have a pressing engagement that I would not care for you to miss. Do not disappoint me.

“Commander Vallejo, you are with me.”

“Yes, my lady.” Vallejo turned sharply on his heel and fell into step, as unshakable as her shadow.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 2:09 AM
A dark street
Atlanta, Georgia



His tongue lapped at a thick, viscous liquid nearly dried on some hard, rough surface. And that was all that was important.

Time passed and that solitary act, which had his survival at its core, remained the sole element of his environment even to nudge his conscious thought.

Restlessly, relentlessly, he continued his work. On his hands and knees like a animal, he voraciously sucked, devouring even the finest dew-like film of the liquid.

He was so dehydrated that he generated no saliva to aid his tongue's grisly congress with the ground. And because the liquid was so thick, it was difficult to swallow. But he continued to nuzzle at it, grinding his nose and mouth into the narrowest cavities because he smelled more of it. Where his entire face could not reach, his filthy tongue might, and it pressed into tiny hollows where perhaps a pin's head of the liquid was trapped.

But every drop was sacred.

More than that, every drop meant his life.

Despite his best efforts, though, he could find little of the liquid. A deep-rooted instinct told him there should be more. It was a pre-Kindred instinct. Even pre-kine. Something from his primordial past before his kind had gained balance on two legs.

He heeded that instinct and mindlessly groped about for more, his tongue pressing beneath every small object it encountered, groping for every available congealed drop.

This kept on for an indefinite period of time.

What was time when life was on the tip of the tongue?

In the end, he found little, but he found enough. The pain and need subsided. Gradually, the Beast subsided, and gradually Leopold's senses returned.

Blood!

It was his first thought.

It was the liquid that gave him thought at all.

Then it became clear that he was squatting on the ground near the edge of a paved road. His situation was clear, but his mind was still cloudy, his thoughts suspended in the humid porridge of the summer night in Atlanta. So he was not startled to find himself thus.

As his senses continued to clear, Leopold rocked back onto his butt and sat with the high curb bracing the small of his back. He massaged his head, and as sensation and taste returned, he violently spat and then raked his tongue with angry, impatient fingers. The sand and grit from his mouth was tinged with a touch of lightly red moisture. He shook the debris off and then absently sucked at his damp fingers.

As he recovered further, he became aware of his ridiculous behavior. He plucked a gum wrapper, with tooth-dented putty still within it, from his head. When the gum remained, he furiously tore out a chunk of his hair.

There was also a lollipop plastered to his cheek. The small purple nub of the candy was stuck to him and the short white stick dangled down. His palms were greasy with the leaked oil of an earlier car, and his elbows and knees were thick with reddish-black filth.

Blood!

He leapt upright and looked at the dried outline of the nearly drained puddle that had occupied him a moment ago.

He felt confused again. Vertigo claimed him and he stumbled back to the pavement.

Vertigo he did remember, because suddenly he remembered the crashing of glass and a long fall. And pain. Though he must have called upon his blood to heal the worst of his injuries, Leopold's ribs were still tender, and perhaps still broken.

He rubbed his mouth, suddenly aware that something was inside it. Something he was sucking on, rolling it smoothly about his mouth with his scratched and painful tongue to calm himself as a child absently seeks a pacifier. He assumed it was a tooth, perhaps jarred by his first, long fall and now sprung loose when he tripped. But it was too soft.

He stopped swishing it about, and looking at the ground where he had recently found himself lapping like a starving dog, Leopold gained a strange premonition about his mouthful, and he was worried to reveal the contents to himself.

But he did so. He spat quickly before conscious thought could catch him and stay his hand. The roundish object sank softly into his hand and he clutched his fingers about it. It no longer seemed solid to him, and instead felt fragile and flaccid, like an egg yolk.

He slowly uncoiled his fingers and revealed an oval item a good bit larger than a marble. It was sticky now and he realized a good deal of the grit in his mouth must have come from this before it was washed clean by his tongue.

He shivered, but still refused to admit to himself what it obviously was. The white of it puckered like gooseflesh when he pulled a finger from it, a motion he carefully repeated over and over again as he maneuvered it around in his fingers until the pupil bore a gaze upon him. An eyeball.

He flung it aside, and he nervously watched as it jumped and then skittered and then wavered to a stop, once again covered with filth as it must have been before his animalistic needs bade him claim it.

Leopold shook his head. He could well imagine the frenzy of action that must have driven him here from the High Museum. The Sabbath attack. Victoria's summoning. The shattered glass. And he recalled the resounding thud that must have been the ground punishing his body. And now the instinct that had saved his life: blood for replenishment.

Which he ignobly found on this street. But how?

He dared not turn his head to look up and down the street. Presumably up, to his right, for a slight incline rose that way, and the blood he'd consumed must have washed downhill from something.

Something? Come to think of it, the blood had seemed to invigorate him rather quickly. But he could not place the flavor. Not human, his usual game. Nor was it any domesticated pet animal. Something far tastier than any of that lot!

A sudden desire to know the delicacy on which he gorged overwhelmed him, and Leopold looked right and up the slight rise. The shadows were heavy, for the battered lamp lights battled the thick air of a growing humidity, but Leopold could make out the form of what without question was a man. Presumably a dead one.

Shattering glass.

It was not the first corpse of the night. Arrayed before his eyes, from a split-second memory of the scene he'd escaped as he plummeted forty or fifty feet from the fourth floor of the High Museum of Art, were the tattered corpses of a dozen Kindred.

What had happened!?

He looked left, where he could see the top of the High Museum. He could see no evidence of the attack within. It was probably over by now anyway.

The carnage was a jumble in his head and he knew he would have to think hard to piece together any coherent interpretation of the assault. From the many snapshots and sound-bites that whirled through his head Leopold did clearly remember a couple things, like several figures savagely dragging Prince Benison to the ground and someone shouting "Lasombra!"

If he was correctly recalling either of those events, and Lord help him if both were accurate, then it meant that Atlanta was changing hands. Maybe it was simply one of the primogen making a bid to replace Benison, but clearly everyone attending that party was meant to be killed. That he was alive was a miracle. To remain alive would require another, and the blood he'd found so easily was a delicious start.

But what of Victoria? Or Stella? He moaned and looked at the High again. Despair was evident in his face as he considered the loss of his few friends, and probably the answers to his past as well. All gone.

With the exception of Hannah, perhaps. That idea helped him refocus his thoughts on himself. Right now it didn't matter what had happened at the party. The only important thing was that he reach his haven safely. And maybe later he could venture toward the Tremere chantry.

He glanced right again. He could use more blood, and he still wondered about the source of his meal.

Leopold loped up the shallow rise. He reached the prone figure in a moment, and concluded from the quantity of spilled and dried blood that it was indeed a corpse.

It was a man, and he was naked. The figure's bare back was turned toward Leopold, and the head propped up on the curb, the legs slightly bent and tucked into the body. The corpse's left arm—the one on top—stretched away from the body, while the right was folded under its head so the right hand clutched at the face.

No wounds were evident, yet blood had clearly gushed from somewhere.

Perhaps there was nothing left to drink. Now in control of his faculties. Leopold doubted he could stomach copying his earlier feeding methods. He decided to investigate more closely. He at least had to know if it was this poor fool's eye upon which he'd sucked.

Leopold slowly circled the corpse.

Disoriented and weak though he was, and even though the corpse was bereft of the suit and tie on it earlier, Leopold recognized the dead Kindred instantly. It was the Setite, Vegel.

Leopold was a little shocked, and he wondered how the Setite had managed his escape from the attack. The Toreador's fascination was too complete to turn away,

though, and he crouched to gain a better view of the dead Kindred's face. Even from a new angle, Vogel's lifeless hand shrouded his face, as if Final Death had struck and the Setite thereafter rubbed his lids shut with a post-mortem sense of decency.

Bile was already rising in Leopold's throat. Was it Vogel's eye he had sucked?

Carefully, Leopold prepared to knock that hand away to reveal the Setite's face. When he was ready, he moved quickly and with the precise motion of a sculptor chipping off an unwanted bit of marble.

The revealed face was so terrifyingly inhuman that Leopold's legs melted from beneath him and he swooned toward the ground. The right eye was intact and strained desperately wide. The left eye was chilling, almost surreal in its obscenity. It too was blankly staring wide-eyed into the distance, but Leopold gained the unnerving impression that it was looking at him too.

The gruesome orb suddenly seemed less an eye to Leopold than a malignant, perhaps malevolent, tumor fitted with a pupil and cornea. And like a painting of an old spinster in a haunted house, the eye's baleful glare seemed to follow Leopold no matter how he repositioned himself.

Leopold shivered, but he looked at the eye more closely. Someone more superstitious than himself would have crossed themselves or whatever they thought might protect them against the evil eye.

The luminous white of the eye was crisscrossed with deep and brilliant striations of blood. It was perhaps surgically grafted to Vogel, because it protruded slightly more than an eye should and there was patchwork flesh about its edges where it seemed to overlap the flesh of the Setite's face. In any event, Leopold was certain he had not been so engrossed by his work during their earlier meeting with Vogel that he had overlooked something so obvious and disgusting.

It did indeed seem something a gypsy woman might brandish to curse those who wronged her.

Perhaps the eye had been implanted in Vogel. But how could such a procedure be done so quickly? Leopold admitted to himself, though, that he didn't really have a good idea of the time. Who knew how long he'd wandered the streets between his fall from the High Museum and devouring the blood from this street?

Leopold felt little sympathy for Vogel. Perhaps if the Kindred had shown a bit more interest in his work... Besides, he expected to hear news of many other deaths, and the loss of this Setite would weigh little on his mind.

Then the Toreador went slack-jawed. *That* was why the blood tasted so different, so rejuvenating: it was Kindred blood! Leopold knew stories of what some others of his kind called diablerie—Kindred feeding on Kindred—but he'd not understood the temptation. Now he did. Even the sweetest of blood from the juiciest mortal would not compare to the smooth liquor from this cold-blooded Kindred.

Of course, Leopold had also heard that diablerists had another motivation as well: power. To devour the blood—to *the last drop!*—of a Kindred of an earlier generation meant moving closer to Caine yourself. Evidently something of the power of the blood was retained, absorbed by the tissues of the body perhaps, even if the liquid was later lost or expended.

This idea gave Leopold pause. It also encouraged him to turn a more critical eye to the dead Setite.

Dead or alive, Vogel held no favor in Leopold's eye, but the corpse of the Kindred now enlivened the artist's eye within the Toreador. The pale yellow of the lamplight obliquely struck the Setite's body and created ribbons of shadow that highlighted and accentuated what was after all a rather fine and muscular figure.

What was it he had been trying to tell Vogel as the Setite turned away from him for more important business? Leopold remembered his words. *These harder substances still don't respond well for me. Perhaps I should try something more malleable...*

Like wood, he'd added.

Or flesh, Leopold mused now.

At that moment, Vogel ceased to be a once-living, or even unliving, being in Leopold's thoughts, and the Toreador instead viewed the corpse as the spectacular sculpture it could be. Limbs splayed but powerful-looking. A pool of blood but no heinous wounds. An expression that stared at and through the viewer. And that eye as a centerpiece. What a remarkable work it could be!

Leopold glanced furtively about, suddenly worried that someone might be noting how much time he spent with a corpse. But more than that, he realized that he coveted this eye. If it had been planted within Vogel's skull, then it could be removed as well. It would serve as his Muse, the centerpiece of some great work. And Leopold knew with a chilling clarity that such a work would be a masterpiece, something so much more than the technical achievements of his past.

With a savage determination born partially of fear and partially of greed, Leopold attacked the Setite's head, shivering as he plunged two fingers of each hand deep along the sides of the hideous eyeball.

The texture of the eye was at once revolting and fascinating. Spongy, yet somehow inelastic, the eye ultimately delighted his sculptor's sense.

Extraction was surprisingly easy. Granted, the Toreador had never gouged out an eye before, but he'd expected some variety of fibrous or at least fleshy cord to connect the back of the eye to the brain or somewhere. But there was none. It slid out like a quick-growing weed that has had no time to gain purchase below the ground. Indeed, the few slender bluish veins that trailed from the back of the eye did branch like fragile roots.

It was done so quickly that Leopold was surprised to find himself still crouching, but now with the oversized orb nearly filling his palm. As he rolled it over in his hand, fleshy lids began to close over the eye's pupil. Leopold was startled, and he watched in fascination as first the deeply bloodshot perimeter of the eyeball was covered, and then, gradually but methodically, the lighter, almost apricot color around the dark pupil was extinguished as well.

Leopold was distracted by a slender rivulet of blood that welled within the shallow depression and promptly flowed from the Setite's now vacant left eye socket. The Toreador peered briefly into the recesses of the shadowed hollow, but could see nothing other than darkness and the blackness of blood softly welling within.

And without another thought, Leopold crouched close to the Setite's skull and his tongue probed the eye socket. The thick liquid was pure, unblemished by the dirt and trash of the street. It was a sweet treat to Leopold and he worked his tongue deep, lapping at the scraps of flesh in the rear of the socket.

Once the depression was dry, Leopold sat and licked his lips. Then he ran his coarse and abused tongue across his prodigious canines. He still needed blood!

Desperately, Leopold folded himself around Vogel like an airless parachute and promptly sank his teeth into the Kindred's pale neck. A trickle of blood eventually grew to a pool that oozed into his mouth, and the Toreador drank a deep draught of the ambrosia.

Leopold closed his eyes and let the silken elixir drain through his lips and down his throat. When the supply grew meager, he applied some suction, and eventually he found himself inhaling with tremendous force for the benefit of mere drops. But these drops were the most exhilarating of all. Each one set his mouth ablaze.

Finally, Vogel was so completely drained that his body lost all density and collapsed under its own weight. The beautifully poised sculpture drooped into a jumble of spare body parts that intersected at impossible angles.

Only then did Leopold back away, his tongue stretching to inconceivable lengths to catch the drops that lingered on his lips or that slid toward his chin. He gazed at the collapsed and desiccated Setite and could not dispute the tingling sensation of confidence and energy that radiated throughout his body.

He knew it was true. Much of what he had heard about diablerie must be true. He had no doubt that Vogel belonged—had belonged—to an earlier generation, and now he, Leopold, had absorbed some of that might for himself.

That plus the palpable sensation of power that emanated from the eye he grasped. The Toreador knew he had been near death earlier that night, but now he felt reborn. Potently reborn. He yearned to direct this newfound prowess onto his art. Yet at the same time he felt deep within that a greater destiny awaited him. Yes, some miraculous masterpiece was on the fringes of his consciousness. With the depths of resolve and creativity he knew he could apply toward that still unknown endeavor, Leopold did not doubt that he would change the world.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 2:36 AM
Near Abingdon Square, Greenwich Village, Manhattan
New York City, New York



The Eye was closed again, and the traces were cut dead. As mystified as Hesha had been to know it open and in another's possession, he was twice as frustrated by the sudden silence. He rested his head on the high back of his chair and listened as Thompson called man after man. No driver—neither agent from the hotel—no pilots waiting at the plane. He called Fulton County police and reported the limousine stolen, and was told there were enough emergencies as it was—or wasn't he watching the news bulletins? Call back tomorrow.

Thompson put his phone down for the last time. "Nothing, sir. I think...I think they're dead." His voice cracked. Ronald Thompson had chosen the team that escorted Vogel to Atlanta. They were his own agents, and some were even friends.

"We won't jump to conclusions, Thompson. No one pushed their panic button?"

"No sir."

"We'll hope, then, that they've gone to ground somewhere." With a keystroke, he put the news page onto the dashboard screen. "Tomorrow they may have time to get word to us," he said. "They may even be on their way out already." Patiently, Hesha let Thompson stay in the room, giving the old cop time and...companionship.

The mortal would need a day or two to adjust to the deaths. In Hesha's own mind Vogel and his team were already six corpses—to be written off and replaced as soon as possible.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 3:12 AM
Manhattan
New York City, New York

There was no single voice. Or single purpose. Or even single sentence. Instead, an amalgamation of impulses, needs, instincts.

Of course, one being's instinct was another's careless assumption. Animals have mysterious means of finding water. Men merely turn their faucets. Kindred merely find men.

However, the assumptions made now were not careless ones. Instead, they were infinitely complex. So intertwined that conscious thought was too weak to separate the strands.

It took something greater, and the collective of impulses, needs and instincts was far greater indeed. It was also a dark intelligence that could only be deemed malevolent, if indeed there was anything in existence that could gauge such an unknown.

Its response was precise and sufficient, put into motion as casually as a sleeper swats a mosquito. Then slumber resumed.

But the tiniest stone cast into water spreads ripples.

A half-dozen workers were preparing to reopen subway tunnel 147, when hundreds of swarming rats flooded into the tunnel and left nothing of the workers but picked-clean bones.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 3:15 AM
Parking garage, the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Georgia



Vykos drew up short in her inspection of the prisoners, clasping a hand to her mouth in delight.

The fallen had been arranged in neatly ordered rows, following the first organizational scheme that had suggested itself—the network of painted white lines that delineated the parking spaces. Most of the Cainites gathered here would not again stir from this final resting-place.

“Oh, will you look at this?” Vykos cooed. “Isn’t she absolutely precious?”

She stooped to brush a strand of hair away from Victoria Ash’s smudged face, revealing a patina of dried blood and caked ashes.

Victoria’s long eyelashes fluttered open at the touch. She was faced with an apparition conjured straight from the realm of nightmare.

The face that bent over her was folded in upon itself sharply, at right angles. One eye was easily three times as large as the other and placed high on the brow. The other was small and sunken, riding low on the jaw. The nose, too, had an unsettling geometric bend to it.

The most disturbing thing about that face, however, was that it was absolutely and breathtakingly beautiful. Victoria’s artistic eye, fine-tuned through intimate acquaintance with so many of the great works and artists of the past two centuries, could not be mistaken on this point. The face before her was undeniably a Picasso.

But it was no Picasso that had ever been enacted on canvas, much less in such a vivid three-dimensional medium. It was like a vision discarded by the artist, cast aside and denied life—a vision of the very face of madness and cruelty.

Victoria was certain that fever and blood loss had taken hold of her senses. She felt herself beginning to faint. Gentle words came to her, as if from a great distance.

“My precious little rag-doll.”

Victoria lost consciousness as Vykos began to wipe the grime from her cheek. She continued to scrub at the face until it shone, taking on the gleam and even the texture of finest porcelain.

Satisfied, she bent low and planted a gentle kiss upon one perfect cheek. Her lips left a small darkened mark upon that cheek, as if from a smudge of lipstick. Upon closer examination, however, the mark would be discovered to bear the unmistakable shape, etched in exacting and indelible detail, of a serpent swallowing its own tail.

Vykos gazed down with great affection at her new prize. “Bring her,” she called over her shoulder.

She took three paces toward the street exit and stopped suddenly, struck by an even more delectable idea. “No...” she said, turning slowly, with one finger pressed mischievously to her lips and a look of artistic triumph in her eyes. “Take her to the ghouls.”



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 5:12 AM
Thirteenth floor, Buckhead Ritz-Carlton Hotel
Atlanta, Georgia

Parmenides awoke with difficulty. He could not seem to disentangle himself from the familiar dream. He had been running, or attempting to run. To flee. Infuriatingly, no matter how he struggled, he could not seem to lift either of his feet. He was rooted to the spot and pursuit was not far behind. The “other” would soon be upon him again.

He could not even bring himself to turn to face the unknown terror that rushed headlong toward him, closing the distance at an alarming rate. The sense of panic grew to the point where it was nearly unbearable and then, suddenly, he felt the weight crash across his back, and he went down.

Flailing, Parmenides pitched forward, suppressing a scream. Arms came at him out of the darkness, caught him, steadied him. He was standing upright once again. There were soothing words being whispered very close by. He tried to turn and face his unknown benefactor, but his feet were rooted to the ground. He stumbled again and nearly fell to the floor.

The voices that came to him seemed disjointed.

“Hold still won’t you?”

“There’s no reason to flail about like that.”

“I did not expect you to come back around so soon.”

“I’m nearly finished now, though, and there’s no sense putting you under again.”

“You’ll just have to tough out this last little bit, but we’re soon finished.”

“That’s my brave boy.”

“My young romantic.”

“My *philosophe*.”

It took him some moments to realize that there was but a single voice addressing him, and a while longer to piece together the flow of the monologue. It was not until a long time afterwards that he realized why he was having such difficulty with these basic cognitive functions. It was the pain.

The pain. The howling, mind-numbing, nerve-tearing pain. Somewhere nearby, someone screamed.

“Now, this won’t hurt a bit,” came the reassuring voice, which some distant part of his mind recognized as that of his client. Vykos.

Again the piercing scream.

“Tsk, ts. Don’t they give you even some rudimentary training in mind-over-body techniques in that mountaintop paradise of yours? No one can be expected to produce quality work under these conditions.”

Another long scream. “Now you’ve utterly ruined the nose and I’m going to have to start it again from scratch. And if you don’t hold still you might actually manage to tear one of those feet loose from the floor and do some real lasting harm.”

Screaming, and more screaming, and a sharp slap striking something fleshy and nearby that might have been his cheek.

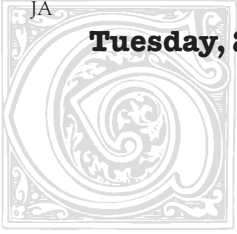
“Now, are you going to calm down or am I going to have to put you under again?” She did not have to put him under again. Consciousness fled him. The flesh became unresisting, and bent to her will.



part three:
searches and
seductions

Tuesday, 22 June, 1999
to Friday, 2 July, 1999





Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 11:43 PM (5:43 PM Eastern Daylight Time)

**The Mausoleum loggia
Venice, Italy**

Isabel peered down the vertiginous air well, from which no cooling gust or stale exhalation issued. This house, the loggia, the ancestral home of vampires of Clan Giovanni, had stood for a literal millennium. Over the intervening centuries the house had grown—burrowed, rather, twisting in upon itself and crawling beneath its old basements and sub-basements in a gruesome parody of the Giovanni family's own genealogical tree. By the time Isabel stood at the top of the stair that descended into the bowels of the house, the family had added no fewer than thirty floors, and indeed, far more of the manse rested below ground than above.

The excavations had been made to accommodate not only the swelling ranks of active clan members (from a mere handful at their inception during the—Renaissance?), but also the corpses, ashes and other legacies of Giovanni both dead and undead who deserved no harbor other than a memorial enshrinement. Failed Giovanni Kindred and fallen scions of the clan alike occupied their final resting place beneath the Mausoleum, which had a complex code of categorization understandable only by the keepers of the crypt. The ashes of Catherine Giovanni, who had masterminded the family's immensely profitable role during the Babylonian Captivity and the following schism of Roman popes and Avignonese popes of the fourteenth century, occupied an urn in an alcove next to the preserved tongue and genitals of Marco Gracchus Giovanni, who had deserted his critical alliance with the Desert Fox and fled the sands of northern Africa. Only the keepers understood the placement of the remains, but almost all Giovanni understood the circumstances of their fallen forebears. Ancestor worship (and, as often, revilement) played a very important role in the nightly affairs of the clan's members. Even ghouls and mortals of the Giovanni, who might very well be ignorant as to the blood-sucking nature of the family's darkest secret, knew at least some small degree of the Giovanni's history. From their humble beginnings as harbingers of Western Europe's emerging post-medieval middle class through the affluence brought about by Crusade war profiteering, from their tenuous relations with the Roman and Spanish Inquisitions to the glory of the Age of Exploration, the Giovanni family claimed a broad and grandiose history, of which little was wasted on its young.

That very history concerned Isabel Giovanni on this very night. Since their rise to prominence, the Giovanni had been haunted, oftentimes literally, by the ghosts of its past. For with the Giovanni's prominence had come depravity, the most obvious symptom of which was their study of the Black Art, *nigromancy*. As the story went, as the Giovanni amassed more and more wealth, their tastes became more and more jaded. On the road to their debauchery, the Giovanni took pleasure in acts scorned by society at large. Giovanni annals were rife with litanies of sodomites, pederasts, incest enthusiasts, coprophiles, corpse-fuckers, snuffers, slave masters, kidnappers, and practitioners of veritably every other deviance on the list. These practices had carried on into the modern nights, so great was the Giovanni wealth and so ingrained was their ennui that could be

challenged only by flouting grave social mores. Isabel herself had, in life, borne her brother's child, pleased her father and her aunts and uncles, smoked Oriental opium with the gigolos of Milan before fucking them to exhaustion, and severed the tendons of those among Garibaldi's Red Shirts who earned her displeasure. And the family annals didn't record every deed perpetrated in the name of Giovanni debasement or ambition—Isabel's daughter's death was not truly the result of chronic colic, and anyone inspecting that tiniest of white coffins would find only the bones of a sheep. But even these aberrant tastes could quell the insatiable lust of the Giovanni for so long before *nigromancy* took a firm root. As the family tree grew ever more upon itself, so too did the family's mastery of Dead Magic grow. What had started with the summoning of simple shades had become a cottage industry and then blossomed into a full-fledged aptitude.

Clan Giovanni had no qualms with this. Its rude Epicurean tastes accommodated such things as the handling of entrails and intercourse with corpses. Indeed, *nigromancy* even had a purpose beyond simple indulgence—by provoking the ghosts of the dead, the Giovanni could master them. Their invisible tormentors-turned-servants proved the ultimate boon in their transactions. Whether gleaning secrets from supposedly secure back offices or plaguing their contacts with nightmares and more physical haunts, the dead spirits offered a myriad of possibilities to the Giovanni that those with whom they did business (or conducted other affairs) could not harvest. When one trafficked with Giovanni, like it or not, one also trafficked with a host of his unseen allies.

But those unseen allies had become capricious of late, which upset the prominent members of the clan. And rightly so! Their previously reliable and ubiquitous aces-in-the-hole had suddenly become peevish or, more frequently, simply gone missing. It was as if a convocation of ghosts had been convened...elsewhere. While once the Giovanni could have easily called upon a host of wraithly spirits, their powers had suffered some sort of unexplained limitation that now allowed them to call upon only one at a time, if that. Thanatologists among the clan speculated that an enormous upheaval was taking place in the Underworld, the chthonic spirit-world of the dead. Others postulated that in the frenzied final nights, as the Gehenna foretold by other, older families of Kindred approached, the Giovanni ancestors had turned against them. Still others surmised, somewhat fancifully, that magic was changing or eroding completely, and that the old ways had simply become too dated or ineffectual in the modern world: In a faithless age, mysticism lost its potency.

Whatever the case, Isabel Giovanni numbered herself among the Kindred concerned with the sudden impotence of necromantic power. In less than a month, she was supposed to serve as liaison between the Boston branch of the Giovanni empire and a few important representatives of the Camarilla, a vampiric organization from which the Giovanni cordially abstained. It simply wouldn't do to go without her resources. And so, in search of answers to this particular mystery, Isabel had come to the one place where she knew she could count on the dead magic working. Ever since the mausoleum had been built—ever since its first crypt had been scraped from the silty rock of the ground beneath sodden Venice—the spirits of the family had watched over the family, and later, the clan. And so it was that Isabel Giovanni descended a score or more flights of stairs, to prostrate herself before the bones of her grandmother Giulia. Giulia had never been Kindred herself, which was why her bones still existed, but she had been “sensitive” to the spirit world.

On her knees, dressed in a light wool robe and bent before the alcove in which Giulia Giovanni Abruzzina's remains rested, Isabel whispered her grandmother's name.

And again.

And once again.

Had the damnable, secret affairs of the wraiths not taken precedence, Giulia would have come. As it was, however, something more pressing must surely be occupying her. Isabel needed her insight, though, and she had no choice.

When the spirits failed to heed a necromancer's call, the only alternative was to force them to manifest. The surest way to do so was to anger the ghost, who could later be placated and dealt with constructively. Isabel had some reservations, but as always in the mind of the Giovanni, the end justified the means.

Isabel gathered Giulia's bones from the niche and made a pile of them on the floor. Torches in the sepulcher flickered, leaving momentary trails of black smoke. Atop the pile, Isabel placed the lower mandible of the skull. Walking thrice counterclockwise around the pile, she made the sign of the cross with her left hand and whispered Giulia's name three times again.

Still nothing.

Growing frustrated, Isabel knocked over the pile of bones, gathered them once again and placed them in an incorrect alcove. Turning her back on the niche, she opened the folds of her robe to expose herself, adding, hopefully, an appropriately lewd touch that would attract the wraith's attention with its vulgarity.

It worked.

A cold breeze wafted strongly into the room, extinguishing a torch and coalescing the smoke into a long, thin face with drooping eyes. "Slatternly child!" the face's mouth cried, with a voice that sounded as if it came from the bottom of a chasm. "I have ignored your call with reason! How dare you assume that your selfish wants take precedence over my cold purpose?"

"I am sorry, Grandmother, but your wisdom is incomparable." Isabel knew that flattery never hurt when dealing with the impatient souls of the departed. Only by inflated estimations of their worth could ghosts be calmed, as many still had profound attachment to the physical world in some form or another. Still, one could never be too careful around the Restless Dead—they had no qualms about giving one's secrets to another in exchange for their favor.

"What is it, then? Speak your mind!" Clearly, something was pressing on the other side of the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead.

"It is this urgency, Grandmother, that concerns me. What is it that transpires in your Underworld?"

"Ah, so those who walk the lands of the living have noticed...." Giulia began, but trailed off apprehensively.

"Yes, Grandmother, we have." Isabel left the comment to hang in the air, hopefully prodding the wraith to further insight. But none seemed forthcoming. "Does something beneath the shroud of death compel you?" she ventured again.

"Powerful forces shake the realm of death," Giulia whispered, her manner becoming furtive. "I cannot say any more, because the truth evades me. But I can say this: Our

armies move each night. The tides of blackness whirl and eddy in a manner I have never seen before. Lightning strikes and thunderheads make too much noise. Great change is on its way.”

“Grandmother, help me. You’re not making any sense,” Isabel pleaded.

At once, Giulia became angry again, losing the fearful cast her smoky features had taken. “I have spoken what I can, my ill-mannered descendant. Cover yourself! The dead have no duty to tell you of our private affairs. I will warn you though, contemptible whore, that an old evil has found a new body. Even if the war beneath the living doesn’t plague you with its aftermath, those who wait beyond the grave will. Augustus has damned his brood in more ways than one: Your unwholesome traffic with those of us whose life has left is but the first of your blights. The knife of treachery is hot, especially to cold, undead hearts....”

“Crone, you’re speaking in riddles!” Isabel decided to shift her tactics. Giulia was either under the influence of the darker half of her consciousness, or she was deliberately trying to occlude the issue. Isabel knew that the ties that bound wraiths to the living world, the objects that fettered them and prevented them from going on to their true rest after death, held great import. Giulia’s bones were all that remained of her grandmother, and the only tie she knew that bound her to the living world. The Giovanni blood that sat lifeless in her veins held a great potential for depravity, and Isabel hoped that her own capacity for violating taboo exceeded that of her grandmother’s ghost. “You leave me no choice.”

Isabel pulled the bones rudely from the niche in the wall; they clattered like the keys of a macabre xylophone. She shed her robe and opened one of the veins in her arm, spraying cold, dead blood over the bones and her nakedness.

“Prurient slut!” shrieked the spirit, at which Isabel grimaced lewdly. Slowly, lasciviously, she dropped to her knees, sprawling on all fours over the scattered pile as a mortal woman would a lover.

“Just speak frankly with me, Grandmother, and I’ll stop.” Isabel ran her fingers over individual bones, mocking the caress with which the living fondled each other during acts of passion. Each gesture was an impurity, hands stroking the phallic skeletal remains, blood soiling them. With every lustful pass over her lifeless body, Isabel enraged her long-dead grandmother by defiling the ivory pieces of her legacy. She licked them, tasting her own vitae; she prodded herself with them, passing them over the gash in her arm, her breasts, her barren and hairless sex. She favored some in her blasphemous acts and cast others aside, spurned and impotent tools that gave her no pleasure. But beneath such hellish, wanton acts, Isabel’s mind remained her own. Even the most carnal of acts could not satisfy her Kindred’s lust for blood. Mortal sex—no matter how insidiously parodied—provided her no orgasmic joy. These vulgarities served only to demonstrate superiority over the wraith. For every memory of the debased mortal ecstasy this would have caused her were she alive, Giulia’s ghost felt a spasmodic shudder, as the remnants of her earthly body served merely as a vehicle for the concupiscence of another. The ghost’s remaining vengeful resolve withered as her grandchild, the fruit of her once-living mortal loins, pressed the pelvic bone to her own pubis, mimicking the advances of a lover atop his naked paramour.

“Enough, wanton! I’ll tell you what you want to know. End this display.”

Isabel braced herself for the pang of guilt she knew should come after such a horrendous act. To caper so whorishly with the corpse of the woman who helped bring you into the world! To make such rude and carnal gestures with *the pieces of corpses*! Unthinkable!

And yet, the rush never came. She had ensured the wraith's compliance—seized what she wanted—and felt no remorse. In nights past, she would have brooded seemingly without end, but not this time. The time she had simply—taken. And that was it.

“The spirits of the dead wage war, Granddaughter,” Giulia spoke while Isabel pulled herself into a standing position and covered herself with the robe. “The struggle between factions is not a monopoly the Kindred hold. A storm brews in the dead realms that threatens not only to overwhelm this world, but to poison the one in which you exist as well. Several of your kind have taken up residence here—constructed a stone city they sacrilegiously name after one of the cities of God's first. They are unwelcome in this world, as much as I would be in yours. The time has come, it would seem, when the lords of this dead kingdom would have them removed, driven from the Underworld. But those lords are too shortsighted to know the effect this would have. The storm—it will come now, for tempers have flared unchecked for too long. It will claim us. And it will cross the veil. Your world will know the vengeance of that which is greater than men or any who walk among him. God will judge many before the night of His wrath is felt wholly. May He have mercy upon unworthies like yourself. And until then, we must prepare.”

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 7:15 PM
A subterranean grotto
New York City, New York



A shadowed figure entered the small chamber and clambered onto its seat. Long fingers stretched, clasped, and tugged on the chain of the small lamp set over the desktop. Calebros sat before his desk and prepared to examine the new reports. The entire nucleus of his fact-gathering operation was buzzing outside this room with the news that the attack in Atlanta last night had been much, much more than the mere “raid” that had been expected. Instead of merely being another in the endless sorties between the Camarilla and the Sabbat, the latter seemed to have prepared and organized to an astonishing degree in order to strike a telling blow against their enemies.

And our allies, Calebros reminded himself.

As much as he liked to imagine his clan a neutral party in the Kindred world, they did after all belong to the Camarilla. However, Calebros himself felt little attachment to that cause, at least in light of issues both closer to the heart of the Nosferatu and far greater in the larger scheme of the world and history.

Even as he sat there, Calebros heard Umberto rattling off a list of the possible—and in light of the scale of the attack, probable—casualties.

“Prince Benison... Tremere chantry leader Hannah... Brujah archon Julius...”

Notable names, Calebros silently agreed with a slight nod of his head. But Rolph had reported in, and evidently Heshu’s man Vogel had successfully departed by the prepared exit. The attack had been somewhat later than expected, however, so the escape route might not have worked entirely as it was designed.

But even so, after a little while, perhaps even as soon as next year, the 21st of June would merely be a day recalled by some few members of the Camarilla as the day when the Sabbat had attacked Atlanta. Even if the raid turned into a full-scale attempt to wrest the city from the Camarilla, history would only recall the event with a notation on a timeline in annals that only the tiniest fraction of those who walked the earth would ever study.

Yes, it was essential to know, and therefore essential to record, because it was an event that would be studied as part of larger patterns; but the event itself was more hype than reason at this point.

Calebros nodded to himself again. Perhaps the Brujah would regard it differently, because the date would forever be the anniversary of the loss of an archon. But that did not compare to the two-year anniversary soon upon the Nosferatu. Two years since they lost a justicar! And still they were no closer to the solution.

Regardless of the size of the attack, at least he and his agents had accomplished what they needed in order to continue with their own efforts. Nevertheless, they were obliged to sort through the business of the other clans, and that meant piecing together the details of the attack.

However, that would have to be left to the others for a moment. While Calebros believed this seemingly major event was actually rather mundane, he fretted over the vast implications of what on the surface appeared to be a very ordinary coming and going.

Very ordinary it was, but coming on the heels of this Sabbat offensive, the timing of the arrival in question was worrisome.

Calebros stretched a hand toward his desk and picked up his trusty red pen.

Whoever had placed the reports on his desk this morning would deserve very special praise, because the choice for the top item was absolutely correct, even stacked as it was atop details of the Atlanta attack.

22 June 1999

re: Anatole

FILE COPY

Sighted so-called Prophet of Gehenna outside J.F.K. Airport, 4:25 AM. No luggage, companions, evident money or other valuables. Followed him into NYC to Cathedral of St. John. He went straight to gardens, seemed to pray to or with statue there.

At this point, I was forced away from the site. I have no explanation for this phenomenon—some force made me move away and out of sight. I summoned help, but the others couldn't enter the garden either, or alone within sight of it. We monitored the perimeter of the cathedral all night, but Anatole did not come out again.

→ Why now? Was he in the air before or after Ralph extracted the eye? Query Ralph on exact timing.

→ Check assignment schedule.



Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 7:21 PM
A subterranean grotto
New York City, New York

Calebros sat quietly at his desk. With his tongue he prodded and probed a canker sore that had formed on the inside of his lip where his sharp, misaligned teeth rubbed. Not even the constant, jarring pain distracted him from the report he read over and over again.

The Prophet of Gehenna. In New York.

Calebros could not quite put his finger on what bothered him so much about Anatole's presence. Perhaps what pressed down upon the unraveler of secrets was merely the weight of history. And of the future.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 9:46 PM
CSX freight yard
Atlanta, Georgia



She swallowed deeply, and the life-giving nectar washed down her throat. By the time she became conscious of this, of what she was doing, it was too late, and Victoria feared to open her eyes. But so long as she'd imbibed already, she reasoned, nothing more could be lost by continuing to feed. If the blood was tainted or was being offered under any pretext that might later damn her, then the damage was already done. Beyond that, she hated to admit, the hunger that drove her to open her throat and gulp down the stream of blood left her little real choice in the matter. For the moment at least, the hunger was stronger than she was.

But she still refused to open her eyes. Her other senses warned her that her bitter fight against the Sabbath hounds had unfortunately not resulted in her destruction. She heard movement, very close by. She smelled smoke and the unmistakable odor of burned flesh.

Nevertheless, as soon as she appeared to be feeding purposefully, the refreshment was denied. A soft, crooning voice whispered, "Don't like it too much, Toreador bitch. If you give in to that so easily, you'll be little fun for the ministrations you're meant to resist later."

The speaker moved closer to Victoria as his words purred forth. "Later," he said again, and a puff of stagnant, ruinous air breathed hot and terrible upon her face. Her captor—for this was surely no benefactor—was so close that her skin tingled, and when she opened her eyes, her long eyelashes brushed the monster's forehead.

He—*it*—smiled.

"Did you enjoy your drink?" he asked, suddenly licking a dribble of blood from Victoria's lower lip with a thick and gristly tongue. He stared into the Toreador's eyes for a moment, but she did not meet his gaze. She dared not.

He shrugged and then stood, which made Victoria realize that she was seated. She was crudely bound, by metal bands about her wrists and ankles, to a wooden chair that might have been the throne of a fat pauper king. As the fog cleared from her mind, she registered, as well, her nakedness, and looked up at her captor.

He backed away another step and smiled as he regarded her bare form. His mouth leaked another purr. "Your polished body will not excite me as it did your Ventrue customers, Toreador whore!"

Victoria just continued her stare, however, not meeting his eyes. Her captor was a grotesque caricature of a starving mortal child. His body was impossibly emaciated, so that everywhere it seemed his flesh was stretched taut over the underlying bones. Everywhere, that is, except his stomach, which was bloated, straining the flesh, discolored with a gangrenous hue. His triangular head tapered to the small mouth, and upon a hairless pate the ugly beast possessed ridges of bone that ran in rows parallel to the width of the skull.

His legs and arms were obscenely long and folded, suggesting something like a cross between a man and a cricket. Victoria could not determine how many joints these

limbs possessed, but they alternately folded and spread, and she watched the Sabbat sway back and forth as he stood before her.

Involuntarily, Victoria shuddered. She had hoped that the Sabbat hounds pursuing her would destroy her so that she might avoid just this sort of future, which was now a present she could not deny.

“Care to ring your Ventrue lover?” the Sabbat whispered, dangling Vogel’s cell phone from long, skeletal fingers. “When they brought you to me, you were clutching it like a dying man’s prayer.”

He put the phone to his ear and mouth and feigned a woman’s frightened voice, “Oh, darling, hurry, Elford has gotten hold of me and there will be nothing left of me to love but—” and here he changed his voice to a hoarse croaking, “a hollowed-out sack of scarred and burned flesh!” Cackling, he threw the phone against the wooden wall—she seemed to be in an old railroad boxcar—that Victoria’s chair pressed against. Two large, clearly unusable, plastic chunks ricocheted to floor, exposing the guts of the device.

As Victoria watched one piece of the phone spin slowly to a standstill, she tried to calm herself by such degrees as well. As it slowed, so she wound to a stop, to a spot deep within herself where she might forget the terrible times in store for her now. Perhaps some night she would reawaken, some centuries hence, and this nightmare would be over.

But sharp agony jolted her body. She coughed and then choked in pain. She felt her limbs involuntarily flap like suffocating fish on the wooden chair.

“Do not seek to escape me, Victoria,” Elford said pleasantly. “I told you before, you are meant to resist. If you do, then I will make your time with me more bearable.”

Victoria’s insides still spasmed, though the pain had lessened—for the moment. She looked for the first time into the face of the creature who planned to torture her. To break her. But he was no longer looking at her face. She followed his gaze along the length of his arm to where his hand cupped her bare right breast. Wafting smoke obscured the details for a moment, but he blew his fetid breath and cleared the air. He chuckled as he withdrew his hand. Victoria felt twinges of pain as her seared flesh peeled away from each of Elford’s fingertips.

Upon the alabaster of her pure skin were five black and shriveled marks, pressed into the firm flesh of her breast.

“Oh yes,” Elford murmured, “you had best resist.”

He raised a glistening, scalpel-like claw toward her mouth. Victoria’s fear rose uncontrollably within her, and she vomited forth the blood she’d so recently consumed.

Tuesday, 22 June 1999, 11:11 PM
Cathedral of St. John the Divine
New York City, New York



Anatole was there much too early, although already the ground was beginning to roll as from a gentle tide. Pupilless eyeballs atop thorn-covered stalks wavered as the soil beneath them undulated. And the low green wall surrounding the woman and him crackled as a final wave made it tremble.

The earth had a memory for what would come, and so did Anatole. So many paths crossing. Here the young wizard reclaimed his muse. But the work he needed was already done by now. So why had he been drawn here?

The black asp was shredded and torn, but he would live. Miraculously.

Why would the woman not give him a miracle as well?

Anatole looked up at her. Her limbs were awkward and she was bleeding. She had no face. No wonder she prayed only for herself and those as wounded and helpless as she was. Why should Anatole expect succor from one so consumed already?

Is that, he wondered, what turned me away from God?

The white dog sniffing, found the trail.

The mongoose's child, led by the empty socket, spied the trail as well.

But the renegade hid the prize well, and only the white dog, bearing the asp as a collar around its neck, pursued.

Where was his path among those who ran? Did he swim in the tide with the deep-sea dragon? It was its water that rocked all of them, and his currents that directed their flow. The woman and he were upon a boat in the middle of his storm.

The eye of the storm was where safety could be found. And from the center omniscience could spawn. Where was the guide who could lead him there? Anatole would await him, here. For the prophet could only see where he could not go. It rested with another to take him where he must be.

Leave a place for me, artist. Leave a place for me.



Wednesday, 23 June 1999, 2:24 AM
Near Abingdon Square, Greenwich Village, Manhattan
New York City, New York

Hesha turned on his laptop and called up a news site. Atlanta was having, apparently, a terrorist attack.

Historic Charleston lay in flames. Flare-ups in Savannah were being linked with a militia organization, denied by mayors and police departments, connected to the Atlanta incidents, isolated from the Atlanta incidents—it was a familiar pattern: the Masquerade. By tomorrow morning, the official reports would have settled into human history. He would have to find the truth (or what passed for it among the Cainites) along the grapevine or not at all.

“We’re going out, Thompson. When you’re ready.”

“Baltimore, sir?” asked the driver, hopefully.

“Not yet.” The Eye could be anywhere, now, and even the greater faculties available to Hesha in his own haven would be no help in finding it. There were, however, the two short traces close at hand. Somewhere in New York, there was a clue to Hazimel, and Hesha meant to find it. “I have questions for a few friends. Weapons and full jacket, Thompson, just in case. And call the Asp. There will almost certainly be beggars at our door; I want room found for them. Have him join us tomorrow.”

Wednesday, 23 June 1999, 3:52 AM
East Bay Street
Charleston, South Carolina



The not-so-distant flames danced toward the heavens, whipped themselves into a spasmodic frenzy, and from the widow's walk atop his home of more than two centuries, Davis Purrel could do no more than watch. Watch as the flames grew closer. Watch as, like a red tide, they washed across the Battery. The mortal firefighters struggled valiantly, and occasionally they managed to check the advancing firestorm. But invariably the fickle winds swept in from the bay, giving new life to the flames and howling like banshees through the eaves of Purrel's magnificent home.

If the wind were all we had to contend against, Purrel thought, *we'd have a chance.*

He'd received word of the dozen or so boats trolling into Charleston harbor several hours ago. Immediate response might have saved his city. He'd heard rumors of the attacks on Atlanta and Savannah the night before, of course, but who could have expected something of this magnitude so soon on the heels of actions a hundred miles to the south and over twice that far to the west?

As proof of his error, his city burned. He'd made so few mistakes over the years; how ironic that the consequences of this one should be so harsh. So final.

"Davis, you must come in."

At first he thought the flames were calling to him, entreating him to embrace them, as they embraced the heart of the city he had seen rise from colonial port to center of culture and commerce. But the voice belonged to the old man who stood half protruding from the trapdoor behind Davis.

"Davis," said the old man again, "come inside."

Davis ignored Antoine Purrel, ostensible owner of the Purrel-Turney House and most recent in a long line of descendants who had been the face of Davis Purrel's power in the kine world. The features of Davis's proud face were reflected in the older man's: distinctive, aquiline nose; sharply set brow; narrow jaw and squared, cleft chin. Antoine's face was fleshier. His skin hung loose, a milepost of time, though it was Davis who was much older, who was both progenitor and protector of both the Purrels and of Charleston.

I've been a shepherd here, thought Davis, and it was true. He had ruled the city fairly and wisely, and been surprisingly successful for a rare Toreador risen to the position of prince. From the start, he'd culled the rebellious element who would've brought instability to his city, but even in this he'd not been callous or cruel. And the city had flourished. Today, the neoclassical mansions crowded into the bastion of splendor that was the Battery, the point of land in the crook of the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, rivaled the glory of any other period, even the last antebellum years.

But now the wolves are among the flock.

The flames could not be denied. The Sabbath jackals had done what the mighty Union fleet had been unable to accomplish in that last glorious war—take the city by sea.

"Davis, do you hear me?"

"Go to bed, Antoine," said Davis with a sigh. "It's much too late for you to be up."

"By God, there's fire all around!" said Antoine defiantly. "I'm not going to burn in my bed. We should go to the house in Columbia and come back when this is taken care of."

"Go, if you wish," said Davis. Perhaps the old man could save himself, but Davis doubted it. The roads would be watched, the harbor sealed.

Davis had never bothered to tell Antoine much about the inner workings of the Kindred world. No, the old man had never possessed the proper acumen to operate among the plots of the undead as anything other than a pawn. He was capable enough to assume the public face of the family, to show himself at the country club and the Historic Foundation meetings, but little more. Antoine's son had been little better and was now banished to the West Coast, but the grandson—ah, now there was a promising lad. Jason Purrel was away at art school. He had no talent to speak of, but he possessed certain sensibilities and strengths of character that Davis admired. Enough so that Davis had planned to ghoulish the boy some day. Now that would never happen.

"You shouldn't be close to these fires," Antoine scolded.

"Antoine," said Davis slowly, calmly, "I have always been truthful with you—"

"That's a damnable lie," said the old man.

Davis allowed himself a wry chuckle. "Fair enough." He leaned against the railing of the widow's walk. His head hung low, but his voice was strong and clear above the din of fire and wind and sirens. "But know that I speak truthfully now. If you do not leave me at once, I will kill you where you stand." Davis craned his neck to face the old man. "Do you believe me?"

Antoine's face was grayer than before. He seemed suddenly vulnerable to the stench of smoke that even the gusting winds could not dissipate. He licked his lips and, without a word, retreated back down the stairs. Davis turned back to the city and heard the trapdoor pulled shut behind the old man.

The flames were close now indeed. The firefighters scurried around like ants, but for every fire they tamed, another sprang up. Davis knew better than to believe that even the ill-timed wind was responsible for the leaping of the flames closer and closer to his haven. He could spy at least a dozen historic structures already marred by fire, black swaths across their facades like the scars of pox on the face of a beautiful child. He could not look upon the scene for more than a few moments before he turned away.

Perhaps if I just went out, if I gave myself to them, he pondered, perhaps then they would spare my city.

Davis did not think of his fellow Toreador of Charleston; he did not think of the other Kindred who served him willingly or grudgingly. They could all roast in the morning sun, for all he cared. But his beautiful city—the fine mansions, the brick carriage houses, the spacious gardens around his own home. He could not watch it all destroyed, and what would resistance do except ensure that it all burned?

Davis turned his gaze toward the faint outline of the fort in the harbor. *Is this what you felt like, Major Anderson?* he thought to ask the long-dead Union hero of Sumter. *Surrounded, cut off, watching that which you served crumble around you?*

But the only response Davis heard was a sickening crackle as the roof of one of his estate's outbuildings, the old cattle shed, burst into flames. The end was near. He

considered climbing back through the trapdoor, for he longed to run his fingers along the plasterwork ornamentation within his home, to gaze upon the crystal and bronze chandeliers, to walk one last time down the grand, free-standing staircase that dominated the entry hall.

No, he steadied himself. *I will await the flames here. They will not be long.*



Wednesday, 23 June 1999, 3:59 AM
Thirteenth floor, Buckhead Ritz-Carlton
Atlanta, Georgia

Vykos waited patiently. Eventually, a ragged moan told her that her charge was clawing his way back toward consciousness. Noting the precise time, she found herself, not for the first time this evening, surprised at the Assamite's tenacity.

Another of her clan might well have immediately and obsessively fallen to recording such minutiae in some interminable experiment journal. Vykos was not in the habit, however, of leaving such revealing written records of the exact abilities and tolerances of her subjects.

The first time he had come to, last night, he had taken her unawares. The fool had fought his way back to consciousness right in the middle of the sculpting. Vykos noted that the subject had not attempted to employ even the most rudimentary of pain-control techniques—this despite the fact that a major portion of his face was, at the time, laid open to the bone.

He had screamed, of course, and the accompanying facial contortion could not have eased his discomfort. But the pain neither stopped nor slowed him. It wasn't as if the subject transcended the pain, or blocked the pain, or defied the pain. It was simply that the sensation of agony, in all its primal glory, failed to act as a deterrent.

Vykos found herself wondering if the nervous systems of these legendary killers were somehow cross-wired as part of their training and initiation? Vykos ran down the list of likely suspects: drugs, post-hypnotics, laser surgery, voodoo, neural inhibitors, fanaticism. The possibilities were intriguing, but her speculations were inconclusive.

She had experimented, of course, with disabling the pain sensors, the emitters, the receptors, the processors. But each of these efforts had inevitably produced clumsiness and led to numerous injuries to the extremities that went unnoticed by the subject until he reached the threshold of critical blood loss.

But this was something else altogether. Something astounding. There was not a square inch of this subject's body that had not been battered or poked or pinched or prodded or twisted or torn or pounded or kneaded or...worse. And unless she was greatly mistaken, he was about to spring for her throat.

With a bestial howl, Parmenides sprang for her throat.

He came up several feet short and collapsed face down on the hardwood floor.

Painful, Vykos noted. *In most subjects, this would prove a strong deterrent to further attacks.*

But the subject was pushing himself back up onto hands and knees, apparently trying to regain his feet. This last endeavor was, to some extent, doomed to failure or at least frustration as the subject's legs were still fused together at the knees and ankles.

The Assamite turned a gaze upon her that was all shards and jagged edges. Ice and razors. A look full of the haunting calm and total focus of a great cat in mid-pounce.

"Enough. I have already warned you that you would only injure yourself in such foolish displays of bravado," Vykos scolded. "I have labored some hours on your behalf and I am not about to sit idly by while you recklessly undo all of my efforts."

Vykos took him by the hair, effortlessly lifting his head and chest off the floor, and pressed her face very close to his. “Now, think.”

The reproach struck him like a physical blow. He reeled backwards at the very cusp of defiance—caught midway between spitting in her face and lunging forward (at the cost of a mere fistful of scalp) to tear at her face with his fangs. Vykos shook him once and pressed on before he could resolve the issue. “Think!”

He lunged.

Parmenides was expecting, *relying*, upon the fact that he would hear the sound of hair and scalp ripping free before the first wave of pain actually struck home. It would buy him a crucial fraction of a second.

He was thus utterly unprepared for what actually happened. It was over more quickly than even his adrenaline-tuned senses could follow. It was as if Vykos had suddenly loosed her grip. Or so he thought, as his face, freed of this restraint, slammed resoundingly into the floor.

Only Vykos had not loosed her grip. He was assured of this when the very next moment she yanked his head back up to face her again. For some reason, he had the hazy, pain-fogged impression that his hair had actually *stretched*—pulled out to a length of about three feet before snapping back again.

His first reaction, of course, had been one of elation. It was as if some passing spirit had granted his dying wish. His entire will had been focused on bridging the tantalizingly slight gap between his fangs and the face of his tormentor. And something within him—some previously unguessed reserve of strength or will or spirit—had risen up and answered his one defining need.

He felt hot blood welling out of his lip and streaming from a gash above one eye. He was broken in body and his legs did not respond to him. But he did not feel broken. He felt strong and whole and indomitable. He smiled broadly and savored the familiar taste of the blood trickling into his mouth. He saw the briefest look of surprise flicker across the cool, sculpted face of his adversary.

“Ah, you have seen it yourself, then,” Parmenides crowed. “The righteous anger of the masters is a hammer. It thunders from distant mountaintops. It churns the intervening waters. It reaches its shadow over you and you tremble beneath it. Your blood is mine.”

Her hand fell away and she backed away half a step, unbelieving. Somehow, against all expectation and in open defiance of his pitifully wracked body, Parmenides stood.

Vykos cursed softly. She could swear like a soldier when pressed. In fact, if the truth were known, she could swear like a legionnaire in perfectly conjugated Latin. She could swear like a crusader (in the vernacular). She had even been known to make the most hardened Tartar, Magyar, or Cossack blush, giving each a scourging with his own tongue.

On this occasion, however, such eloquence seemed to have deserted her. She was distracted by the ferocity of his determination, and also perhaps by the rigors of the experiment. There was no denying that this subject was unique and the effort of monitoring its responses in such minute detail was fatiguing.

She could feel the intensity of his twin passions—to survive and to kill. She could measure each of them, plot them, analyze the resulting graphs. But she resisted the temptation toward detachment. It was much more intriguing to interact with the subject directly.

She could feel his need. It rolled away from him in waves. It was as if both drives were but a single passion, one instinct, one volition—his live-kill. She immediately dismissed the clumsy term. The sentiment was more meaningful in German, but translated into English poorly. It was an instinct simultaneously toward and away from the grave. A rushing in and backing out. A frenzied dance on the edge of the precipice.

She was both surprised and delighted at the speed with which his body consumed itself.

She could not help but feel the warm glow of pride when she thought of that trick he had pulled with expanding and retracting his hair. Inspired! She would not expect such aptitude—such a seamless fusion of need and fulfillment—even in a servant many months his senior.

His desperate attack might have succeeded had she not felt the first familiar stirrings of the Gift moving within him. Even with this slight warning, however, it proved all she could do to remove herself from the direct path of his fury. She was more wary now. And he, well, the subject was about to start testing the controls of this experiment in earnest.

She thought it immensely improbable that he would be able to free his legs. She had seen to it that the bone itself had been fused, and bone was a harsh and unforgiving medium. Mastery over the hair and nails—inanimate media—was something well within the power of a trained novice. Bending the inanimate to the dictates of the will, however, was mere child's play compared to the true bone sculpting—a difference like that between working in play-dough and Florentine marble.

The fact that he seemed oblivious to what should have been debilitating levels of pain was a challenge, but one which Vykos found both novel and exhilarating. Here was something that merited further examination—if the subject should survive these initial tests.

For the present, Vykos turned her critical eye back to the subject's first blind, childlike steps into the Great Art. Vykos was watching him keenly now, noting each flicker of emotion as the subject passed from the initial elation into doubt and, very soon now, into fear. These changes were but the outward symptoms of the revelation writhing within him, tearing its way toward the surface of his awareness.

"Gently, now. Do not fight it, my young romantic, my *philosophe*. Even your vengeful masters will not begrudge you this one small indulgence. It is a gift. Drink deeply and be content."

The doubt had clearly won the upper hand. He struggled to free his legs, but to no avail. "You cannot imagine that you will be suffered to..." His voice was choked with indignation, forcing him to begin again. The damage he was doing to the musculature of his legs was growing quite extensive. One small part of Vykos's mind kept a resigned tally of the hours of work wasted and the weeks of bed rest and physical therapy that he was accumulating.

Parmenides raged on. "Even if you should manage to prevent me from feasting upon your black heart..." He paused. The admission had cost him dearly.

Vykos could see the fight leaking out of him. He swallowed hard and rushed on. "Even so, there will be others. The masters will forge a special hell to receive you and they will not rest until they have seen you dragged, screaming and begging for your life, into the fires that burn eternally, but consume not."

Unmoved, Vykos clapped her hands slowly. As she did so, their flesh began to blacken and peel. Soon, each clap was accompanied by a small cloud of crumbling ash, gusting outward and settling gently to the floor. Parmenides could see the glaring white of bone peeking through. He heard knucklebones popping and cracking as if from extreme heat. He saw jagged blackened stubs of bone clatter and bounce noisily to the floor.

"Enough," he cried, jerking his head away from the grisly spectacle. "Enough of your infernal parlor tricks. You are not impervious to harm. The masters have had centuries to perfect their art. They will know how to accomplish your end. You may rely upon it. Do you think we have not slain your kind before? You deceive yourself, lady."

"Ah, but you, yourself, do not know the trick," she said matter-of-factly. "The wooden stake through the heart, perhaps? Immersion in running water? Garlic-flavored holy wafers?" Her hands were whole once more, all trace of the charring gone. She circled him warily. As she neared the doorway, she stooped to kneel over something on the floor, just out of his angle of vision.

He kept his gaze fixed rigidly forward as he strove to master himself. He found he was actually trembling with frustration. Through an extreme effort of will, he managed to hold his tongue, and refused to be goaded into responding to her jibes.

After a few moments he saw, out of the corner of his eye, Vykos straighten up again, righting an overturned chair. She propelled it before her, rolling it forward as she approached.

"Very shortly now," she explained, "you will collapse. Already you are pushing the point of no return—of doing irreparable damage to your legs. Will you please sit down and cease these senseless threats and posturings? There are weighty matters to discuss and time has already grown short."

He wheeled upon her, as if to lash out once more, but the effort proved too much for his maimed lower body. He went down with a sound like a canvas tent collapsing.

"This humiliation," he raged at the floorboards, unable to rise or even to turn. "It will not go unavenged. You are doomed as surely as I am." He caught a rasping breath. "Even if you were to restore me now and set me at liberty, it would be too late to buy even one additional night of your cursed unlife. Though I have fallen among fiends, it is you, my tormentor, whom I pity."

There was a long pause, during which Parmenides did nothing but suppress the racking sobs that convulsed his entire frame. But no sound of this inner struggle escaped his lips.

"My young poet," the voice was gentle, soft with affection and perhaps a touch of pride. "Be still now. It is enough. In you, I am well pleased."

It was some minutes before he felt strong hands take him firmly under each arm. He did not struggle against them. His eyes were shut tight in humiliation and defeat. Through cracked and bleeding lips, he began to spit broken prayers for the dead. He hardly noticed as he was settled into the hard, straight-backed chair. The grisly device barely registered upon his consciousness. His prayers became more fervent, as if by drowning out the sound of what was going on around him, he could deny the events themselves—shout them down, banish them.

From somewhere very far off, he heard a familiar female voice which, for a moment, he could not seem to place. It was a pleasant voice, an attractive voice, and one which seemed full of concern for him and for his well-being.

“Only in this one thing am I disappointed,” the voice crooned. Parmenides pitched forward, his head nearly bouncing off his shattered knees as the chair rolled forward. “That you would, even for a moment, believe that I would be so reckless as to take you into my care without the knowledge—much less the encouragement—of your cherished masters.

“There will be no retribution, my gentle assassin, because you are a gift. A very special gift. A peace offering from the Old Man of the Mountain. You are to be a pledge between our two peoples.

“You have been given into my care. Do you understand this? You are mine completely, to do with as I will. Just think of it! The fun we shall have together.”

Parmenides may have screamed. Through the haze of pain and horror, one part of his mind, a very well-disciplined part that had been rigorously trained for weeks on end to respond to just such an occasion, instinctively groped for the Words of Undoing that would preempt his suffering.

Wednesday, 23 June 1999, 4:41 AM
CSX freight yard
Atlanta, Georgia



These moments of peace seemed filled with as much eternity as the hours of pain that preceded them. Victoria Ash, Toreador Primogen of Atlanta—very nearly, she felt, Prince of Atlanta—could not look at herself. It would shatter her peace, as the scent of her own blood that drenched the wooden chair nearly did. So with eyes closed, she deferred the horror of her current situation and turned to the future.

Despite Elford's worst—and it was terrible, evil and sadistic work indeed—Victoria now knew that she would survive. She would be a ruined heap, potentially for decades; the scars of this night alone would take months to repair, and there were likely to be many such nights in her future. As the cruel Sabbat had savaged her, however, Victoria had actually discovered a tiny ray of hope shining through the darkness of her torment.

At first, her fear had convinced her that she would succumb easily to such torture, that her mind would snap, and that she would cry and beg and plead and resist as Elford desired. While her vampiric flesh was indeed weak to the will of the Tzimisce flesh-crafter, Victoria's mind remained intact. More importantly, though, through Elford's wicked alterations, she was learning what made him tick, what he desired, what titillated and enthralled him. And so she resisted. She channeled the pain he inflicted. Her every groan and contortion was timed and shaped by his sadistic yearnings, which his words and deeds made clear to her; her reactions to his abrasive caresses pleased him to distraction. Until he crawled away panting, and slammed the sliding door of the boxcar closed behind him.

How many other boxcars concealed playthings for the torturer, Victoria had no way of knowing. But surely there were others. Sometimes Elford smelled of their blood, or came to her with unidentifiable specks of their matter on his skin.

Victoria knew that her physical beauty was great enough to seduce Kindred. She had done it many times. Now she suspected that the promise of the degradation of that beauty was enough to seduce a Tzimisce. The Toreador felt that Elford would be hers—not tonight, or next week, or next month. But his desires were a scalpel in her hands, and she wielded it as expertly as he did any of his implements. Time would test her, indeed, but she would persevere, and time would bring her reward—and then her captor would pay. For everything. From the greatest malformation to the tiniest blemish.

The pain she'd endured when he had slid his hand into her chest and grasped a rib had been excruciating. His operations were filled with sexual innuendo, and that had been Victoria's first clue. The fool had spoken too much. He'd not only revealed the means of his own defeat, Elford had also given Victoria a focus for her thoughts when she'd been reaching desperately for anything to mask the pain. His intrusion within her had surrendered all significance, and from that moment onward, she'd laid her plans.

These were the marks of Elford's pleasure. In his hands, the Toreador's rib became like clay, and bent to fit his vision of how Victoria was meant to look. The former primogen could no longer resist examining herself. Her right breast, already studded with oval burns inflicted by the Tzimisce's fiery fingertips, was now impaled by one of

her own ribs. Elford had bent it outward and threaded it expertly, painfully, through her body so that its tip jutted out in place of her nipple, the so-called blemish that earlier had been removed by a savage bite.

And so began a line of visible bone decorations, small horn-like protrusions that made the skin around them itch and burn unrelentingly. Her clavicle was twisted and separated into a series of outcroppings connecting those on her right arm to her bone nipple. The spurs on her arm had been massaged from her humerus and stretched until they too extended beyond her skin.

Finally, there were two more such spurs on the back of her hand, perhaps meant eventually to join with the other row.

All these wounds, these grotesque surgeries, could be healed, she thought. She *hoped*. Unless Elford bore much older blood than she imagined, or unless she was wrong in her beliefs about Tzimisce flesh-crafting—and her real knowledge of the fiends' powers, despite her present, terrifying exposure to them, was slight indeed—unless a hundred other possibilities that might leave her a scarred, misshapen monstrosity, unless just *one* of these multitudinous possibilities was true, she might eventually be able to restore her pristine form to its previous beauty. That was what she had to believe. That was the only hope she had, and she clutched it to her heart like water in a desert land. Her body was indeed her temple, and to dwell upon the damage done to it would be to surrender to despair. It would render her incapable of taking the strong, decisive actions that might eventually free her.

Victoria sank back into her chair. Her mind turned from the future to the past—either a preferable alternative to the present. She could scarcely believe the turn of events that had brought her here. Her party and plans at the High Museum had been meticulously prepared, had come so close to fruition. She had entered the gallery through the door of Heaven. Now she had descended into Hell. Assuming she did in fact survive this Hell, she would carry a valuable lesson with her, for now she knew that she was never completely safe. No matter how many tests she applied to her plans before execution, no matter how great the power she might gain, no matter how formidable the defenses she might erect—she was never safe. Even if she escaped this railcar dungeon—*when* she escaped it—she would never feel safe again.

While Victoria's confidence in eventual freedom increased by modest degrees, her short-term prospects remained monumentally grim. She possessed no desire to suffer the degradation and torture that Elford planned for her. If she could escape sooner rather than later, then so much the better.

Victoria had a multitude of ways to bend an individual's will to her whim—as both kine and Kindred, she'd always been expert in making others *want* her, passionately, desperately—but in first attempting her most potent means with Elford, she'd instantly realized that it would never work. He was too much a slave of his existing passion for his work to have an additional desire so instantly manufactured. With him, her only recourse was to ply her wiles over time. She might some night, soon or not so soon, be successful, but that was of little immediate help.

But what other options did she have? Victoria glanced at the pieces of cellular phone on the floor. Undeniably broken, and she had no reason to believe that she could repair it, even if she could reach it. Its loss was not a cause for total despair,

however, because the Toreador had other means of summoning aid. There was no guarantee of success. Far from it. But as she regained her fighting spirit—hotly pursued, as it was, by her dread of the next session with Elford—she determined to try.

Over the many years of her nocturnal existence, Victoria had come into contact with countless Kindred, and now each and every one of them was a potential savior. Even those she had not compelled consciously to adore her could not have neglected to notice her irresistible beauty and charm. Her image would be indelibly burned into their psyche. Such was the nature of the gifts that accompanied, if not compensated for, the Curse of Caine in her case. Those other Kindred, it was true, might not be predisposed to help her. Their decision, however, was not entirely one of free will. They might resist her call, and most likely those powerful enough to rescue her from this hellhole were also powerful enough to ignore her summons. But Victoria could be quite persuasive.

Though their names sounded only in her mind, she began to call them, one by one, to her side.

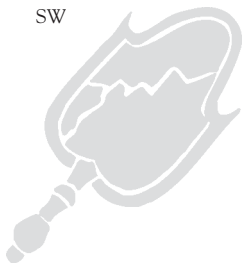
Her urging and urgent request would persist for the remainder of the night, no longer, so it was only worthwhile to summon those who were likely nearby. *Benison. Julius.* She concentrated on their names. These two able warriors were probably dead with the remainder of the Camarilla who had reveled at Victoria's party, but at least she would disturb their graves. She chuckled, and called *Eleanor* as well. How ironic it would be if that bitch had survived somehow and managed to save Victoria.

She tilted her chin toward the ceiling and propelled more names into the ether. She would see what had become of the deserters from her party: *Veget. Hannah. Rolph.* Perhaps their intricate plans of escape would be foiled by a return to Atlanta, assuming that's where Victoria was—for she had no way to be sure.

And others too. She had few confidants, and no one she could honestly call a true friend, no one that remained loved as the centuries passed, but any of a short list of lovers, admirers or comrades—mostly lovers and admirers, she admitted; she'd had precious little call for camaraderie—might come if the circumstances permitted: *Oliver,* though she thought the Brujah brute was likely in torpor; *Jan,* though she knew he was in Europe, probably bound to his Ventrue elders in ways that New World Kindred could not fathom and that he could not overcome, even if his feelings for her persisted; *Joshua,* because if anyone could sniff out her whereabouts, it was this Gangrel.

Humor was a difficult proposition, but Victoria laughed at herself as she sent her next summons: *Leopold.* The youngster had saved her once at the High. Perhaps he could do it again—unlikely, since the shadowy tentacle had surely pounded him to pieces.

The process took a long while. By the time Victoria had mentally recited the list of names, dawn was near. Her tired, injured, violated body gave in immediately. She closed her eyes, and closed too her mind, attempting to go to that place beyond thought, where she might be free, at least until the next sunset, of the ministrations her Tzimisce tormentor would offer.



Wednesday, 23 June 1999, 4:50 AM

A townhouse

Avondale Estates, Georgia

Prince Benison—no, just Benison now—struggled back to wakefulness. Dawn was not yet imminent, but it was near, and he was so very weak that the slightest promise of its arrival sent spasms of rubbery weakness through his arms and legs. It was a terrible feeling for one so physically gifted, but Benison gritted his teeth and managed to push himself up to a sitting position.

The Malkavian knew he was on the verge of torpor, the deep healing sleep that his kind sometimes required in order to recover from wounds that might have slain a mortal many times over. In Benison's case, the wounds were less physical than emotional. But the cause of his deepest wound—the loss of his beloved Eleanor—was also the clarion that kept him moving, yearning, and even existing at all. He was driven by the need to avenge her, and if others thought him mad before, then they would shrink to behold his terrible nature now.

If it wasn't Benison himself who was now shrinking. The Malkavian slumped down again. He did not need to be sitting to hear the cry for help that echoed in his mind. It was not the voice of his sweet, beloved Ventrue from beyond the grave—although he had indeed spoken to her as he slept during the day—but instead it was the Toreador, Victoria Ash. One of those who had been primogen in what was once his city.

So, she had survived as well. Despite the bone-weary exhaustion that made his body feel hollow yet as heavy as the concentrated matter of distant stars, Benison managed a sad grin. She *would* survive, he thought. Her kind often did. The beautiful would always find their benefactors.

And she was looking for one now. Perhaps she had not escaped so much as merely survived, and now she was awakening to find herself in the clutches of the Sabbat. That made sense to Benison too. The Sabbat would delight with her as a plaything. *Perhaps she will soon be as mad as I am*, he thought.

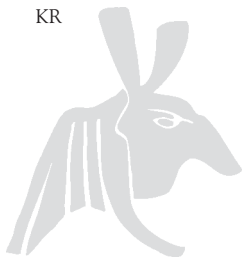
Fortunately, despite his weakened condition, Benison was able to resist the call. It was a summons of the sort that some could not deny, and if he could resist it in his condition, then Victoria must be weak and powerless as well. So it was likely others too would resist, if indeed she called for others.

Which made Benison wonder if perhaps she wasn't calling for help at all, but was instead attempting to deliver him to the Sabbat. The former prince imagined the Sabbat must be concerned that they did not recover his body. Perhaps Victoria was bargaining for her life with his.

But if she was truly in need, then it would be left to another to rescue her. Benison had reason even beyond his condition to deny her need, and that reason was the dynamics of the party she'd staged. Benison's feelings regarding Julius, a Brujah archon, were somewhat different now that the two of them had fought for survival side by side. But without that bond created by extreme circumstances, there probably would have been bloodshed between them. Benison assumed the whole affair was staged by Victoria Ash.

Besides, Eleanor had never cared for the woman. While prince, Benison had overlooked that as due to the squabbles between Toreador and Ventrue, but now that he was no longer, he no longer needed to deny it.

So, in the least impressive of his former multitudes of havens, Benison lowered his head and closed his eyes. It was an hour before dawn, but even when the light came, he would be protected in this interior, second-floor room.



Wednesday, 23 June 1999, 7:30 PM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York

“Miss Dimitros?” the querulous voice of Agnes Rutherford called.

Elizabeth closed the crackling diary before her, stored it neatly in its case, and presented herself at the door of the bindery. “Yes, Miss Rutherford?”

“I am leaving now for London. Call the car around.”

Elizabeth obeyed, and looked up from the phone to see her employer still poised in the doorway.

“Mr. Ruhadze’s secretary called and asked that you stay to show him the Thoth necklace.” Elizabeth nodded her acquiescence, and Agnes went on. “I wouldn’t ordinarily leave you alone to deal with one of our most valued clients, but he seems to be willing to settle for an associate on this occasion. Please remember our standards, Miss Dimitros. Your manners and deportment are not always what we could wish for in our staff,” she said, looking the younger woman up and down like a statue of particularly dubious provenance, “although I will admit that you do better than most Americans I have employed in the past. And keep those clothes on, Miss Dimitros—”

Elizabeth blushed bright red, eyes wide in indignation.

“I looked over the security tapes from yesterday, and I advise you not to run around tonight in greasy T-shirt and torn dungarees. This is Rutherford House, *not* a jumble sale.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Liz straightened her shoulders beneath her navy silk dress, and tried to remember whether her plain leather pumps had been polished this week, or the week before. “I brought a smock to work in today, Miss Rutherford.”

“Be sure you aren’t wearing it when you answer the door, Miss Dimitros.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Elizabeth escorted her employer to the street door, bid the old lady a polite and properly subservient good night and safe flight, and set the alarm after her.

Delicately, wearing thin cotton gloves, she took the collar from its display and brought it to the viewing table. With care she draped and pinned it on a velvet model of a woman’s neck and shoulders, and stepped back to see that the clasp fell correctly, into the hollow of the throat. From the files upstairs she brought the provenance papers—the photographs of the site at which the necklace had been found, copies of reports of its discovery, its sales, the bankruptcies and inheritances, the final auction that brought it to the Rutherfords—and set the House’s signature, cream-parchment, gold-embossed folder on the table beside the treasure. At the customer’s chair, she laid a jeweler’s loupe, calipers, a fountain pen, and a pad of cream-and-gold stationery for notation. Prepared, she turned down the front lights and slipped back through to the workroom. She donned her smock, and set to work on her desk with a home-coming smile.

Wednesday, 23 June 1999, 9:15 PM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York



“Good evening, Mr. Ruhadze. Please, come in.”

“Call me Hesha?”

“Whatever you like.” Elizabeth reset the door, and turned to her customer. “Miss Agnes wanted me to tell you how sorry she was not to be able to attend to your needs herself.” She paused. “If you’d follow me...”

An hour and a half later, Rutherford House’s claims for the necklace had proved—so far as could be told by loupe, light, and letter—genuine. The sum agreed to was lower than the first mentioned by Elizabeth, higher than the first suggested by Hesha, and comfortably above the mark Miss Agnes would have been pleased by in person.

They’d passed into companionable conversation, finally. The mutual embarrassment of their last meeting was gone. The assurance was building that the night to come would be, at least, intellectually interesting, and they had discovered considerable tastes in common.

“So, Elizabeth. How did you come to know all this?”

“Oh. It started with a bachelor’s degree in art history, which my father promised me would lead nowhere. After I graduated, it looked like he was right, so I hung the first diploma on the wall and went after another.”

“Something practical this time?”

“It was supposed to be an M.B.A.”

“But it wasn’t?”

“My master’s thesis was ‘The Dissemination from Mesopotamia of Key Motifs in Neolithic Pottery.’” She grinned weakly. “Wall Street expressed no interest. My father had a fit.” They watched each other across the table for a moment. “Would you like some coffee?” she asked.

“Never this late, thanks. It’d keep me awake all night. But don’t let that stop you.”

“In a while. I’ll need it to drive home.” She tilted her head and returned a cooling question: “How did *you* learn all this, Hesha?”

“I just grew up with it. My family had a rather...eclectic collection of North African household goods from the fifteenth century. Don’t ask me how Grandfather came by it all.” He thought for a moment. “How is your desk coming along?”

“Fine,” she replied, mildly surprised. “Very well, actually. I was just putting it back together when you came.”

“May I see?”

Elizabeth blinked, and smiled. “Sure.”

The desk stood magnificently, whole once more and polished—where polish could help its scarred hide—to a high sheen. She took the last of her tools and buffers away with the smock, and watched her companion approach the edifice. Hesha Ruhadze slid

three fingers across the right side panel. He kneeled to see light on the grain's edge. He rubbed one thumb over the curved saucer of a drawer-pull, and finally slid his dark hands flat across the smooth surface of the restored top.

Elizabeth realized, suddenly, that she was frowning; that she didn't like the way his eyes roamed over the wood. Almost hostilely, she asked, "Why are you so interested in my desk?" It was the first time she'd used the word 'my' aloud for this possession; it was a defense, and she realized it once it was spoken.

"I'm not." He withdrew his touch. "I'm interested in why you care so much about it." Hesha leaned against the wall, and brought out a charming smile. "Why is the desk a he, and not a she, Elizabeth?"

She exhaled, less as a sigh than as an exasperation. Tension fled from her neck to her shoulders. Resignedly, she walked to the cabinet corner, and traced the grain of the old cherry with the index fingers of both hands. "Sleipnir, may I present to you Mr. Hesha Ruhadze. Hesha—Sleipnir." She performed the mock introductions, and paused.

"Sleipnir," said her listener, sardonically.

"This desk, Hesha, has eight legs. Look here—" she pointed to the feet, originally carved to resemble vases on pedestals, "—eight hooves, chipped by steel-wheeled chairs and cloven by his handlers. Someone cared for him properly, once. You can see the difference between the finish by the center drawer and the finish farther away—there was a blotter to protect his hide; you can still tell the dimensions of it by feeling for them.

"But there was a right-handed owner who was sloppy with his coffee. There was a typist who liked their machine facing the same way as the rest of the desk, and who didn't bother to repair the case of their typewriter. Hundreds of lines of ink were tattooed in by the carriage return. Here and here and here—" she struck with her knuckles at dark, ovoid burns on the varnish, "he has seen fire; there were cigarettes left carelessly to die in his company.

"Vandals have pierced him with arrows—God only knows why they wanted to fire nails and screws into the poor thing, but there are the holes to bear witness. There is red paint that spots him like blood, and there is white that flecks him like froth. He is missing parts of himself; his drawers have been jarred to the very bones and were ready to collapse within him. He has been cut and burned, but he perseveres. He has seen battles and carried the writer through; he has probably survived more enterprises than will survive him.

"He is a war-horse, eight-hoofed. Sleipnir."

She finished defiantly, standing between a work light and the old desk. Her brown eyes flamed clear golden, and her profile was as sharp as the moon's.

Hesha Ruhadze stood watching her, and said nothing. The Eye was in his thoughts, and the death of Vogel and his retinue, and the memory of a daylight nightmare: Thoth with a woman by his side who was remembered, later, like the moon in Inundation. He waited, testing the moments before she spoke, or broke, or moved, but silence was no good weapon against her. "You picked up the art of a skald when you studied the Norsemen," he said.

Elizabeth searched his face. He seemed serious. "Thank you," she said, gravely.

"No," he began slowly, "thank you. And please pardon my intrusion into your privacy. I...felt a mystery here, and my particular passion is...detective work. Will you forgive me?"

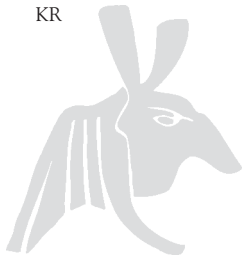
She waved a vague hand. "For my being incredibly silly and melodramatic over a typewriter desk? Of course."

But he could see that it still bothered her, and he considered carefully what next to say to the mortal. If he let it go lightly, the resentment would take root, and a useful tool perhaps be lost. If he took the matter too seriously, she would suspect mockery again, and resent that as well. Hesha took three measured strides to close the gap between them, and looked into the brown eyes of the half-lit woman. "Still. It was an intrusion, and I'm sorry." He paused, as if contemplating the scornful lips tilted up towards his own. "Where will Sleipnir go from here, Elizabeth?" asked Hesha, looking away, returning to a business voice.

"My home."

"Good." He started toward the front of the shop, and held the door to the show floor open for her. "You said the other day that no one uses typewriters anymore. I have to confess that I still use an old one, every now and then. I've nearly worn down the question mark; I'll try," he said, facing her across the table that held the collar, "not to wear you out with questions tomorrow." His black eyes held concern in lightly wrinkled lids. "If you're still available?" She smiled faintly, and nodded. "Meet me at Charles's Fifth at seven?"

She smiled more broadly and replied, "I'll be there."



Wednesday, 23 June 1999, 10:15 PM
Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York

“Hesha settled himself in the back seat of his car. He put the jewelry case and the folder that went with it into a hidden safe box. His driver waited in silence. “Thompson. I have further business in Queens.” The black car ceased idling, sliding into traffic like a shark into a school of lesser fish, and began to trace a path south off of Manhattan. “You’ll drop me off at a brownstone,” and he gave the address. “Take the necklace to our own place here. Have Alex take the shipment down to Baltimore tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Place a call to the agency. Use one of the corporate names; start a background check on an Elizabeth Dimitros, middle initial ‘A,’ residing in or around New York, currently employed by Rutherford House Antiques. I’ll send a note to Janet later with some details I’d like looked into.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Be back at the brownstone by three o’clock. I don’t expect that you will have to wait very long.”

Thursday, 24 June 1999, 2:51 AM
Interstate 40
East of Asheville, North Carolina

EG



Hardin squeezed the steering wheel so hard that his already pale knuckles turned bone-white. The truck shuddered and bucked. Discouraging sounds coughed forth from the engine. He smashed the dashboard with his fist until the plastic casing cracked and fell away.

"They'll probably take that out of your deposit," said Desmond, squished into the middle seat. On the far side of him sat Rojo, unconcerned. He picked his teeth with a fingernail—not his own; it was attached to a useful but disembodied digit.

Hardin glared at Desmond for the smaller man's attempt at humor. There had been no deposit, no fee of any kind, paid for this U-haul.

The cacophony beneath the hood grew more pronounced. Steam began to billow from the edges. Then, after a muffled explosion, the engine's labored whirring began to fade. The speedometer needle, already gyrating between 45 and 55, acknowledged the engine's death knell by plummeting toward single digits. Hardin turned the truck onto the shoulder, where it lurched to a halt.

Hardin stepped out onto the gravel. Desmond slipped past him. Rojo showed no inclination to get out of the truck. *And what good would it do?* Hardin wondered. What good would anything do?

There was not much traffic. Hardin glanced at his watch. They could spare a short break, he decided. No need to worry. Before long, someone would stop, a good Samaritan, and provide fresh transportation. And fresh blood.

Desmond, having wrapped rags around his hands, lifted the hood. After the smoke cleared, he stared for a moment at the engine. Then he stepped back, lowered his head, and made the sign of the cross.

"Gas?" asked Hardin.

Desmond nodded.

"Who put it in?"

Desmond shook his head this time. "Don't know."

"Rojo?" Hardin asked the darkly complected, red-haired passenger, who turned his malevolent gaze toward Hardin. "Who gassed the truck?" Hardin asked.

Rojo shrugged. "One of the gringos. They all look alike."

Hardin started toward the rear of the truck, but stopped and shielded his eyes against the light of the patrol car pulling over behind the U-haul.

"Break down?" asked the trooper as he stepped out of his cruiser.

At just that moment, the U-haul door, which had been closed but not fastened, slid open, and two more of Hardin's passengers hopped down onto the gravel.

A deep scowl creased the trooper's face. "You know it's not lawful to carry passengers back there." He reached for his citation pad.

“Yes,” said Hardin. “I know.”

The wide-bladed falchion thudded into the patrolman’s neck before anyone had even seen Hardin take the weapon from the sheath under his jacket. The trooper took an unsteady step backward in disbelief, then collapsed to the ground.

“Get him out of sight before that next car passes,” Hardin instructed the others. They hurried to obey, even though the other car was just cresting a hill several hundred yards away, and there was plenty of time. They lifted the body with ease, pausing only to return Hardin’s knife, and carried the trooper into the underbrush beyond the shoulder. Hardin could hear them fall upon the body like vultures and claim what the police officer no longer needed. Other passengers began to climb from the back of the truck. The car sped past.

“Jacques,” Hardin called to one of them.

“I am Jake.”

“Jake, who the hell ever you are,” snapped Hardin. “Who gassed up the truck?”

“That was Jacques.”

“Tell him to come here. Then you, Lonnie, Greasy, and Amber take the police car and bring us back three more cars.”

Jake did as he was told. As he and the other three were pulling away in the cruiser, Jacques ambled over to Hardin. Jacques was a short, squat man with thick hair. He never looked happy. Not that Hardin cared.

“You have diesel trucks in Montreal?” Hardin asked.

“Yeah.”

“You know the difference between gasoline and diesel fuel, you stupid, asshole Canuck?”

Jacques, looking increasingly unhappy, fidgeted about, but his answer was precluded by the falchion, which again zinged through the air, seemingly of its own accord. Jacques’s head fell back. A moment later, his body joined it. There was very little blood.

Hardin leaned down and wiped his blade on Jacques’s pants leg. “Nine *competent* vampires would be too much to ask for, I guess.”

As Desmond dragged the body away from the road, Hardin glanced into the back of the truck. This, the smallest of the Sabbat war parties, traveled light. They’d be fine in the cars instead of a truck. Except for a few gym bags loaded with sawed-off shotguns and shells, there was no gear to speak of.

Hardin didn’t count the heads as gear.

There was the Camarilla Prince of Columbia—*former* prince, that was. Then there were the three from Asheville: Prince Van de Brook—what a whiner. The young Gangrel had died better; even the Toreador, Stein, had gone with some small dignity.

Again, Hardin didn’t really care. *Piss on ‘em all.*

He had his itinerary, and he was on schedule. These backwater “cities” were hardly worth the trouble to clean out, in his opinion, but then again, they weren’t *that* much trouble. Still, Hardin was anxious to rejoin the main forces and get in on some of the real fun. Like Atlanta. Now *that* had been worth his time—burning the Tremere chantry house to the ground. Made easier, of course, by the fact that Vykos had already taken care of the Tremere head honcho.

Head honcho. Hardin glanced at the collection of wide-eyed heads in the truck and smirked. *I'll have to remember that one for Desmond.*

Atlanta had been a blast, all right. This other puny shit was just biding time. He wouldn't have to wait too long. Winston-Salem, Roanoke, Charlottesville...and then the Big Enchilada.

Headlights again. But this time they were coming from the opposite direction, down the wrong side of the interstate. Hardin recognized the car that had passed earlier, except now Amber was behind the wheel. Hardin didn't care for her face—it was too pouty—but she had nice tits. The car screeched to a halt next to the truck.

"Move over," said Hardin, as he opened the door and shoved her aside. She bared her fangs and hissed in response to his rough treatment. "Save it, sister." He stuck his head out of the window. "Get the stuff and let's go!"

"Throw the heads in the trunk," he added, to make sure they didn't get left behind.

Desmond and the other two Sabbath formed a bucket brigade of sorts and passed along the gym bags and the heads. One head got away and bounced around a bit, but Desmond scrambled under the car to retrieve it.

"What about Jake and the others, *jefe*?" Rojo asked, as he sauntered over and got into the car.

"We'll catch up to them," said Hardin. He didn't feel like waiting any more. "If we miss them, they know where we're headed."



Thursday, 24 June 1999, 3:00 AM
Thirteenth floor, Buckhead Ritz-Carlton Hotel
Atlanta, Georgia

Parmenides awoke. A moment later, he *realized* that he had awakened and he cursed the names of some seven and forty gods before he was forced to pause his maledictions long enough to conjure up the names of further supernatural oppressors upon which to heap scorn and vitriol.

He was not dead.

Well, that wasn't technically true. He was dead, of course. A vampire, a walking corpse. But he was still, as they say, among the living. To be more precise, he was in a luxury hotel in a very exclusive neighborhood of the city of Atlanta. In short, he was among over three and a half million of the living.

More significantly, he was still among the unliving. He was a prisoner of—in order of his ascending horror and despair—the Sabbath, the Tzimisce, and one Sascha Vykos.

From the time of his Embrace, he had heard tales of the depravity of the Sabbath—their unclean and mocking rites, their predilection for drinking the blood of their sires, their insane efforts to hasten the coming of Gehenna. It was all somewhat hard to credit. Why anyone would actively seek the Final Retribution of Caine, the Dark Father, he who is called the First Murderer and the Kinslayer, it was difficult to imagine.

As a newcomer to the world of the undying, Parmenides had suspected these rumors—like so many similar stories meant to frighten childer—were nothing more than old wives' tales. In this case, those of very old wives.

He was forced to concede, however, that these accounts were no more extraordinary than the wild assertion that blood-drinking predators stalked the world by the light of neon marquees and headlights. And he no longer felt himself in a position to judge those particular claims impartially.

In later years, he had on more than one occasion been brought into close contact with the Sabbath and had found nothing that would lead him to dismiss those disturbing childhood tales out of hand. Such encounters always left him with a lingering sense of unease—one which even the blissful rewards of mountaintop Alamut could not entirely expunge from the spirit.

In dealings with the oily Lasombra, Parmenides experienced an unsettling sensation, like having a viper slide across the sleeper's thigh. He had, of course, had ample opportunity to handle snakes in Alamut. Venoms were an ancient and revered part of the profession. He knew the touch of even the deadliest cobra to be cool and smooth and not unpleasant in and of itself.

The sensation he felt in the presence of Lasombra, however, was something quite different. Something shifting, hot and glutinous—the touch of a serpent from a childhood nightmare.

And then there were the Tzimisce. Parmenides understood that in the polite circles of Kindred society—the garden parties and ice-cream socials that made up the unlife of

his delicate Camarilla cousins—self-respecting vampires were embarrassed to even *think* about the Tzimisce. It would be a humiliating faux-pas, like bringing up the topic of lepers over tea. Except, of course, that lepers generally tended their own business, and that business rarely involved the torture, maiming and eventual (very eventual) death of respectable folk who would like to pretend that there was never any such deformed creature loosed on this green earth.

Parmenides had had few dealings with the Tzimisce. As a whole, the fiends tended to be withdrawn, solitary, obsessed with their disturbing experiments into the pseudo-scientific, the occult, the anatomical.

The Tzimisce were almost universally disinterested in concerns of politics, social climbing, and power-mongering—those pursuits that so intrigue their brothers in the Sabbat, the Lasombra. Not surprisingly, the Tzimisce seldom found themselves in need of the kind of services that Parmenides had to offer.

This Vykos was a notable exception. First of all, she was not freakish in the manner of her clan. The Tzimisce reveled in deformity. They made an art and a passion of it.

Among the ancient brotherhood of assassins, there existed sage advice regarding the fiends. It was said: “If, in the course of your duties, you come upon a monstrosity lurking in the shadows, it is a Nosferatu. You have been seen. The victim will be warned. Depart, and submit to the scourge of the masters.

“If, however, you see a monstrosity capering in the torchlight, *that* is a Tzimisce. Go your way and do not return until three full nights have passed—and then only to confirm that your target is already dead.”

Vykos was no capering monster. She was very human. And very female. Almost painfully so, Parmenides thought resignedly. She was beautiful in the same way a pouncing tigress was beautiful—all grace and inevitability.

Her other obvious departure from the predilections of her kind was her ambition. Vykos was preoccupied with the deadly game of Cainite politics—a game that slew with the same inevitability (if not always the same demanding standards of grace) as did the tiger.

While the game itself could devolve into the crude and merely bestial, Vykos maintained a reputation for an unflinching style and finesse that was rare among her clan. While most of her kinsmen were willing to leave the actual Sabbat leadership to their brethren Lasombra, Vykos had made a habit of besting them at their own game.

Parmenides knew that others of his order had been of service to Vykos in the past, and that she presently had an extensive portfolio of as-yet-unfulfilled contracts with the masters. The thought that she might jeopardize such a relationship...

He flinched away from the thought. There was something painful there, something he was not yet ready to touch, to examine in detail.

Parmenides was delighted that he could address these issues in such a rational manner. *The Sabbat, the Tzimisce, Vykos*. He repeated the words again, curious and not displeased at the utter lack of response they produced in him. He suspected that the part of his mind that was capable of registering pain and terror was otherwise occupied at present.

This revelation, however, was somewhat less than reassuring. In addition to raising some pointed concerns about his physical well-being, this discovery seemed to conjure up more uncertainties than it dispelled. He had more than a passing curiosity as to which of his higher cognitive functions were presently under his control. He decided upon a small experiment.

He was fairly certain that emotion and pain centers were not responding in the manner to which he had grown accustomed. He further suspected the immediate cause of this shortcoming was extreme physical duress.

Other reflexive reactions seemed to have short-circuited as well. From his very early training, he knew that his autonomic functions had been specially tuned to prevent the possibility of his capture during the course of a botched mission.

He had only witnessed this fail-safe mechanism in action once. It was in Venice, now some centuries ago. But it was not something one was likely to forget. One of his brethren, in an attempt to escape the Doge's palace, was interrupted in the act of diving to the relative safety of the canal. He was hauled bodily back over the parapet and vanished under a shroud of blows—the tender ministrations of uncounted fists, heels and pikestaffs.

From his vantage point at the edge of the labyrinth of narrow streets far below, Parmenides saw his brother fall beneath the throng. He started forward toward the wall. His guardian, however, put a restraining hand upon his shoulder. "Attend," he scolded. "Be vigilant now, lest you miss how our little brother accomplishes his escape."

Parmenides felt the reverberation of each buffet, fast and insistent, like a drenching rain. He was certain the downpour would drown its victim, or spill him over the parapet. But the son of the mountain, from his lofty perch high atop the wall, did not perish.

Or at least, he did not perish until after they had brought up the irons. From below Parmenides could see the flurry of activity; he could hear the metal bindings sing shut. But no sooner had the sound reached Parmenides' ears, than there also arose cries of alarm and cursing.

"Get that torch away, you fool!" someone shouted. But the torch was still held high aloft and it had never dipped down behind the crenellated wall. There was a magnesium-bright flash of light followed by a curl of oily black smoke from the pinnacle of the Doge's palace. Only then did his mentor allow the uncomprehending Parmenides to turn away, and together they melted back into the gathering crowd.

In later years, Parmenides had often wondered at the circumstances that had brought him and his master to the foot of the Doge's palace that night. He could never quite recall the exact pretext for the excursion.

His training was not accomplished, of course, amidst the decadence of the Italian city-states, caught between the excesses of the Medicis and the depravity of the Borgias. The rigors of the *khabar* demanded the unambiguously harsh necessity of desert wastes and exposed mountaintops.

Nor was it considered proper for a novice to be on hand to witness his brother's handiwork—even on a mission with a much more satisfying outcome. The presence of an apprentice introduced too many uncertainties, too many opportunities for misstep.

And yet when the Brotherhood was gathered upon some summer evening in that remote mountaintop haven, and the long amber pipes were lit and passed from hammock to hammock by exotic creatures with shy eyes the shape of almonds and navels like perfect diamonds—then some one among them would sigh contentedly and relate a most curious story.

As the story gradually unfolded, punctuated only by generous servings of honey, dates, persimmons and ambrosia, he would relate how, on a certain unforgettable night,

a much younger version of himself, accompanied by his master, had witnessed a marvel—the reciting of the fabled Words of Undoing.

He would retrace the tragic tale in its entirety, unwinding each familiar sight, sound, emotion—right up to the point that that one fortunate brother was conveyed into the heavens in a fiery chariot.

And after he had spoken, someone else would put by his pipe and speak in turn, telling his story of a night when he (a *he* that he hardly recognized across the span of years) and his master had witnessed that one forbidden something. And so it would go.

And all of their stories were one story, but whether it was because their words and memories had grown hopelessly mingled in the course of so many decades of long, slow summer evenings, or whether it was because there was really only one story that was given voice endlessly, through uncounted generations of their people—that he did not know nor could he say.

But these musings did little to reassure him. Parmenides possessed a driving curiosity and he had, of course, made discreet inquiries. The aspect of this matter which troubled him most was the fact that although, nearly without exception, all of his brethren could recount a singularly unsettling experience of witnessing the enacting of the Words of Undoing...he could never find one among them who would admit to having been a witness at any other mission, whether disastrous or not.

The situation had the unpleasant air of an object lesson. A very costly object lesson. Parmenides could not escape the thought (an irreverent and probably blasphemous thought) that these dramatic failures had been *arranged* for the edification of the neophytes.

Could the masters have foreknowledge of which missions would end in success and which were doomed to failure? No, not even the Old Man in the Mountain claimed such omnipotence.

Still, almost any of the masters would certainly have grown to be a shrewd judge of which tasks were most likely to end in destruction. Such discernment was necessary in sorting out which missions to accept and which to refuse.

But this, this smacked of something more sinister.

Parmenides shied away from this dangerously unorthodox line of thought. Who was he to question the masters, those who had ushered him into the earthly paradise? He was not sure how one might even go about repaying such a debt. The balance on his account was nothing less than one eternal life.

If the masters chose to teach him with hard lessons, to make him stronger, to forge him into a more reliable tool for their will, it was not his place to refuse them, to deny his sacred trust.

But now, it seemed, that the masters had chosen... No. The thought was too close to that place of pain and doubt which was, at present, denied him. The fiend was lying. There was nothing more to it than that. The very idea that the masters would abandon him to the clutches of the Tzimisce, it was unthinkable. It was a condemnation far worse than being chosen for some suicidal mission. In failure at least, there was glorious sacrifice and a quick end in the fires of purification.

And yet he had been unable to touch the secret place—the sheltered recess of his heart upon which were writ the Words of Undoing. He could not summon up the sacred spark to ignite the inner flame.

Parmenides doubted that even the precise neurological manipulations of the fiends could reach this inner sanctuary, much less bar the door against him. It was a place of spirit, not of the flesh, and hence not subject to their macabre arts.

How then, was the way denied him? Was it some lingering curse, some final malediction of the Tremere witch, Hannah? Had she, through some obscure and inscrutable dark magic, stolen from him his Final Death even as he ushered her to her own?

No, the execution of his mission had been precise, flawless. There was no room for error or even hesitation when stalking the Tremere. The warlocks held the uncontested honor of being the most deadly prey on the planet. None but the Brotherhood would be so foolish as even to attempt the feat. At the slightest misstep, their positions would have been dramatically and irrevocably reversed. It would have been his head decorating some trophy room of the Atlanta Chantry.

His head... Again, Parmenides ran up against the barrier, a wall woven from screaming nerve fibers blocking this line of speculation.

But if the change was not wrought by the witch, then that would mean that the masters had, knowingly or otherwise, sent him into the very heart of the Tremere's unhallowed lair unprotected—without recourse to the ultimate escape.

He was distantly aware that his body convulsed violently, shattered knees (perceived only as a throbbing mass suspended from his legs like a dead weight) curled upwards to thump against his chest. Someone cursed and pressed his thighs down hard against the chair, lashing them in place.

Vykos. The barrier of exposed nerve endings standing between him and consciousness was rent from top to bottom.

With great effort, knowing himself alone and abandoned among fiends, Parmenides opened his eyes upon nightmare.

Thursday, 24 June 1999, 3:04 AM
CSX freight yard
Atlanta, Georgia



Victoria stifled a scream. The pain was indeed intense, but it didn't quite demand this strenuous a reaction. Elford didn't seem to notice the exaggeration, though, and he cackled with delight.

The stringy Tzimisce sat upon Victoria's lap, straddling the Toreador. His unnaturally long and slender legs stretched past Victoria's bare hips toward the wall behind the chair. She couldn't fathom how there was room for them, but they seemed to fold at any angle, so likely they were looped back beneath the chair.

Elford's arms were bent at a half dozen elbows apiece, and they found purchase on a shelf made of Victoria's bosom as the Tzimisce leaned into her and performed his work on the side of her neck.

Victoria's forehead and neck were now bonded tightly to the chair, so she was unable to move her head even a fraction of an inch. Her body was another matter, and when she felt pain, she arched her back and tried to buck the Tzimisce off her lap.

The sick bastard liked that part, so Victoria kept doing it. Except this last time, because she was applying some torture as well.

Elford suddenly stopped his work and looked into the Toreador's eyes. His own orbs were filled with blackness, though a nimbus of madness lit their edges.

With a soft, punished-child voice, Elford said, "You're not resisting."

Victoria made a show of managing a grim smile. "I'm sure I will...when it really hurts," she said, feigning determination despite what was surely already overwhelming pain.

Elford's narrow mouth split with a smile. "Maybe this..." he whispered, as he returned his attention to her neck where he was threading filaments of bone from her spine to form an exoskeleton row of needle-sharp points.

He was like a laboratory rat, Victoria thought. Or one of Pavlov's dogs, she revised, when he began to drool a gush of warm liquid that ran down her naked chest and stomach. *Perhaps he'll be mine in six months.* When he slumped against her, his fat, rounded belly slopping against her own curved frame, she revised her thoughts again. He continued to slide down her until, a moment later, he was face down on the floor.

At the moment of Elford's slow descent, the door of the boxcar slid open several feet, revealing two figures standing outside. Even during the relatively short time of her captivity—short in terms of hours, perhaps, but interminable in the face of the horrors she'd endured—Victoria had almost forgotten the sensation of fresh air against her naked body—clean air, free of the taint of her jailer's fetid breath, or the odors of blood and sweat and torture.

The two figures climbed into the boxcar cautiously, surveying the interior in silence. They moved slowly toward Victoria and seemed to take no notice of Elford's sprawled, corpulent form, as if they were satisfied that he would pose them no risk. The pair, one male, one female, edged closer still; they stared intently at Victoria and, as if they shared one expression, deep scowls crossed both of their faces. Victoria was clearly not who or what they'd expected to find.

She could return their gazes only awkwardly, as her head was bound to the chair at a slightly uplifted angle. The man was very average looking, perhaps a bit taller than the norm; in his light safari jacket, he would've blended easily into a crowd—were it not for the visible scales covering his exposed hands, face, and neck, and the forked tongue that darted from his mouth every few seconds. He stared alternately between Victoria and the compact electronic device he held. Back and forth.

The woman was nondescript, pretty but not in a striking way, though perhaps that was not a fair distinction for Victoria to draw. Her eyes were hard and demanding, offsetting what beauty she did possess. Obviously impatient with her companion's indecision, she nudged Elford's body with her foot. No response.

"Is he dead?" Victoria asked. Then, effortlessly summoning and directing the snare of her potent charm at the perplexed male, she added, "Have you rescued me?"

He looked up at her immediately and stepped forward to work at her bonds. "Of course we have," he said, all but stating that to suggest anything else would be absurd.

Victoria smiled. This one, at least, did not possess the strength of will that had insulated Elford from such supernatural influence.

The woman's face registered incredulity. She spoke to Victoria's newly won servant with scorn: "What are you doing, Orthese? Do you *know* this woman? Listen to me! We have to find Vegel and his driver first. Does the cell-phone signal lead *here*? Stop that! You can go whoring later."

Victoria immediately understood the situation, if not the full explanation of why these Setites sought Vegel. She turned her attentions to the woman, who was, in Victoria's estimation, stronger—but not much.

"Vegel's phone is there on the floor," the Toreador said. She wagged a finger toward the dark corner where Elford had kicked the pieces. "I am Victoria, a great friend of the Setite clan and a great friend of Vegel's. Free me, and lead me to safety, and you may be my friends as well," she offered magnanimously.

The woman blinked, once, twice, then was busy helping her partner free Victoria. The Setites were now convinced that her rescue was more important than their original mission, presumably the recovery of Vegel—which meant that Hesha must have sent them. Which also meant they might have useful information about Hesha and Vegel and the party; information Victoria needed if she was ever going to see her way through the entanglements of that night. She still didn't understand the game Hesha and Vegel had been playing. But *someone* had betrayed her, had used and manipulated her, and that she could not abide.

But there would be time for that later. First things first, now that she was free of her bonds.

Victoria looked at the scaled man. "Break his neck," she said, indicating Elford's body, prone upon the floor. She wasn't certain how the Tzimisce had been felled—some poisoned dart, or a Setite spell, perhaps—but she'd rather he didn't awaken before she and her new coterie were gone.

The male Setite knelt beside the motionless Sabbath and wrenched Elford's neck until it was permanently skewed at an awkward angle—as much as any physical deformity was permanent for a Tzimisce.

Victoria's back ached terribly when she stood, but this discomfort and some lesser wounds were easily repaired when each of her new friends provided several mouthfuls of badly needed vitae, after Victoria innocently suggested the idea. She was tempted to take her due in blood from Elford, but her rescuers confirmed her suspicion that there was some type of Setite poison coursing through his body, and that was better left alone.

"Give me your jacket, please," Victoria told her scaled rescuer. He did so immediately, and it was just long enough to cover her nakedness. "How did you get here?" Victoria asked the woman.

"We have a plane waiting at a private airstrip. We must get back to Baltimore, to Hesha."

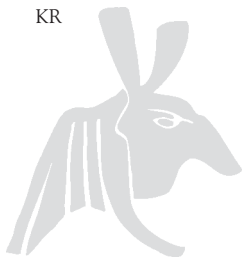
"Excellent." Victoria allowed them to lead her from the boxcar nestled in the midst of radiating rail lines. How many other victims of Elford's pleasures were secreted away in the freight yard? she wondered. And what fiendish arrangements secured them from mortal discovery during the daylight hours? There was no time to answer these questions, or to search for more prisoners. Even Vogel, from what the Setites said, might be here, maybe in one of the nearby boxcars.

That's his problem, Victoria thought. She and the Setites were getting out of town as quickly as they could, no detours for anything or anyone.

"Excellent," she said again. Prince Garlotte of Baltimore was an old *acquaintance*, another of those admirers whom she could call on in her time of need, and she might need some time to recover from this ordeal before she'd be ready to deal with a Setite of Hesha's acumen.

"Of course," the woman agreed. The man nodded his assent.

But as they turned to leave, a sudden urge took hold of Victoria. "Just a moment," she told them, and climbed back into the boxcar. It wasn't easy. She suppressed her desire to flee from the place of her imprisonment and torture. *Only a few seconds*, she promised herself, as she hunted for and found a pair of pliers that Elford had used to such grim effect on her. Victoria carried scars aplenty from her time with him—open wounds that didn't seem inclined to heal, painful protrusions of bone too numerous to count. She would carry his grisly visage in her mind for many years, long after she had healed the markers he'd left on her body. *If* she managed to heal them. But in these last few seconds before her escape, Victoria claimed a memento of her own choosing.



Thursday, 24 June 1999, 10:17 AM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York

Amy Rutherford walked into the bindery holding a mug of coffee in one hand and the check for the Egyptian collar in the other. "Lizzie?!"

"Yes, Mrs. Rutherford?" asked Elizabeth, glancing up from her silk work on the diary.

Her boss flinched, nearly spilling her morning cup down her dress. "Aunt Agnes is an ocean away, and so is *she*. You call me by my mother-in-law's name again, and I'll have you tarred and feathered. Oh, Lord. You didn't hear that. Do you realize I live in fear of your finding a job somewhere the Rutherford family doesn't demand the royal treatment from their own damn staff? Where the hell was I? The check. The collar! Liz? Have you any idea what you've done?"

Elizabeth looked up in shock. "Wasn't the price high enough?"

"The price? Do you realize you brought it in a quarter percent higher than we've ever gotten out of Ruhadze?" She shook her head. "You're going to have to teach me your sales technique."

Elizabeth stared at the diary for a moment. "I played it by the book, Amy. I swear. I followed Miss Agnes's instructions to the letter."

"Then they worked better for you than they ever did for Aunt Agnes."

"I just...went over the provenance and talked about the workmanship."

"Did he quiz you?"

"Yes," she said, emphatically. "It wasn't an easy sale, Amy. I felt like I was defending my thesis before the board again." She leaned back in her chair. "And then we got to talking about my desk—"

"That reminds me, dear, Antonio and the boys are making a delivery in your neck of the woods today. Is it ready to go?"

"It's fine. Solid as a rock." Elizabeth made a note on the pad beside the bindery phone. "I'll call the super to let them in. They can pick up the paintings while they're there; the three by the door are cleaned and crated again."

"Wonderful. The desk. Ruhadze was interested in the desk?"

"Sort of." Elizabeth pressed her fingers to her temples. "Amy, what do you know about this guy?"

"Why?"

"I'm having dinner with him tonight."

Amy Rutherford stopped with her mug at her mouth. A lesser woman, a woman who did not have Rutherfords as in-laws, might have choked or spluttered. "You deliberately waited until I had hot coffee in my mouth." She tapped her well-manicured hands on the chair's arms. "Do you mean dinner as in a date?"

"I'm not sure. I think so."

“Oh, Lord. Do you realize—no, of course you don’t. Look. We have five clients on our books for whom we will drop anything. Aunt Agnes and my sweet, sweet mother-in-law roll over and play dead for these people. One of them is royalty, three are corporations, and one is Hesha Ruhadze. He’s insanely rich, incredibly well-connected, particularly for...well, I hate to sound prejudiced, but, for a black man...and knows more about real antiquities than...than Mother. I think he made his money in the business.”

Elizabeth nodded. “But I want to find out about *him*, not his credit rating, Amy.”

“He’s supposed to be some kind of recluse. At least, he’s not showy. There are so many ‘celebrities’ grabbing the headlines that even the Ford heirs can’t make the news without a robbery.” She threw her hands into the air. “He’s polite. He’s charming. I don’t think he’s married.”

“That’s always nice to know.”

“Yes.” Amy shook her head, looking at her employee. She’d always thought of Liz as a plain-Jane, compared to the kind of fashion product New York turned out by the thousands and called beautiful. Bookish and intelligent, a quick learner with a cool head—whether in spite of or due to that bizarre imagination of hers—but that sort of thing seldom led to dinner invitations from millionaires. “Tell me all about it, dear. Oh, Lord. What on earth are you going to wear?”



Thursday, 24 June 1999, 6:58 PM
Charles's Fifth Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York

The taxi lurched to a stop at the awning of Charles's Fifth, and a doorman stepped smartly forward to attend the passenger. A young woman in a long, gunmetal-silver satin evening dress stepped delicately onto the pavement. She leaned into the window to pass a note to the driver. The sun, which was turning New York smog into something like ochre mist, brought out a few strands of copper in her hair, and turned her light tan deep umber. The cab pulled away.

As the glass doors were opened for her, Elizabeth took one last survey of herself. Amy had tried to drag her to some ridiculously couture boutique; Liz put her foot down at the idea of entering anything that couldn't call itself a store or shop and mean it. The gray gown would do, and although Amy had at last admitted it, she informed the younger woman that further dates with Ruhadze would mean that Liz would finally need more than one 'real' dress.

Elizabeth entered the salon, and after a moment's doubt, approached the man at the podium at the end of the room. He snatched upon the hesitation, and began before her: "Miss Dimitros? Mr. Ruhadze's secretary called ahead; Mr. Ruhadze has been detained slightly. He asked me personally to see that you were comfortable." He led her through the crowded restaurant to an alcove with a small, linen-covered table and two luxuriously upholstered chairs. A waiter appeared at his side, holding a tray; the tray held a water glass and a small phone.

"Would you care for something to drink, Miss Dimitros?" asked the patriarchal maître d', as his minion set the water and the phone at her place. "Our wine list—"

"No, thank you. Water will be fine while I wait."

And wait she did—for over an hour. When the phone finally rang, Elizabeth watched it for a moment as though she had forgotten what phones were for. She swallowed the last of the soda she'd finally ordered and picked up the tiny handset. "Hello?" she asked the machine.

"Elizabeth? This is Hesha. I'm terribly sorry. I'm at a business meeting. My lawyers have just ordered in and expect me to stay and finish the deal with them. I would walk out now, just to stagger them, but I'd only have to see these buffoons again tomorrow morning if I did. I'm afraid I'll be at least another hour."

"Oh. Well, maybe another time, then."

"No. You must be starving. Please, go ahead and have dinner. I recommend the boeuf bourguignon; it's the house specialty. Enjoy it and pity me with my cardboard Chinese takeout." His voice fell a note. "I won't stand you up, Elizabeth. I promise."

"Good luck with the deal."

"Thank you. I'll see you soon."

"Bye."

Thursday, 24 June 1999, 8:23 PM
Near Abingdon Square, Greenwich Village, Manhattan
New York City, New York



"Yes, Thompson?"

"Janet calling for you, sir. The agency came through with the report on Miss Dimitros," said Thompson, as the car emerged from the garage to street level. One eye was on the traffic ahead, the other on a blinking light on his console.

"Put her through."

"Good evening, sir. Would you like the highlights, or should I fax it to you?"

"Both, please. Go ahead."

"Full name, Elizabeth Ariadne Dimitros. Born September 28, 1970, to Christopher and Melissa Dimitros. One sibling; an elder brother, Paul Theodore Dimitros. The family is mostly Greek; the Dimitros children are the third or fourth generation in America, depending on which side you count from. 'Dimitros' is the Anglicized version of 'Dimitrouleas.' I'll spare you the rest of the genealogy."

"Thank you."

"Curriculum vita included in the fax; basically, she's an art historian with the practical skills of a museum restorer—she worked as an intern at the Met several summers running—and special interests in anthropology, semiotics, symbolism, and half a dozen other things. Her master's thesis and professional publications are also attached to the report. She's nearly completed her doctorate; her dissertation proposal was not available for copy at time of investigation. She's worked for Rutherford for four years as sales assistant, art restorer, appraiser and buyer. The older generation of Rutherfords seem to think she's still in training; the younger partners regard her as an equal associate—or as near as possible for an outsider. The agency didn't dig too deeply there; I presented the job as a full check for potential employee, current employers not to be alerted. I hope that's all right?"

"Fine."

"Now: There were a few...zingers."

"Zingers, Janet?"

"She has no permanent place of residence. Her mail goes directly to Rutherford House. Her driver's license expired two years ago; the address given on it is now occupied by a jazz musician with three cats and a drinking problem. Her passport was issued at about that time, so the agency expects it to be just as out-of-date.

"Second: Your note mentioned her father's displeasure with her career choice? Brace yourself. He really *did* have a fit. Christopher Dimitros died of a stroke two months after Elizabeth took her master's degree. His wife blamed their daughter for his death, and moved to California to live with her son's family almost immediately after the funeral. Paul Dimitros stays in touch with his sister, but the rest of her relatives won't talk to her—even the ones who still live in New York and Jersey."

"I see." Heshu stretched his legs, and regarded the speaker with calculation. "Other relations?"

Janet cleared her throat, and her employer could see, in his mind's eye, the exact look of disapproval on the woman's face. Janet Lindbergh was an efficient secretary and a model of discretion, but past middle-age, and of a generation that simply hadn't discussed these things over the phone. "She's not seeing anyone at the moment, sir."

"Go on."

"Three serious boyfriends; brief descriptions of the...affairs...are included in the dossier. The last liaison broke off two and a half years ago; the agency suggests a connection between her father's death and her change in habits."

"Thank you, Janet." Hesha tapped his fingernails on the armrest thoughtfully. "Commend the agency on their speed and thoroughness; laser letter on company stationery, but with the puppet president's signature in person. And be sure their investigation halts with this; I want her files and all hard copy removed from their offices."

"Will do." She paused. Just before the connection went cold he heard her mutter, "And have a nice date, sir."

Thursday, 24 June 1999, 9:57 PM
Charles's Fifth, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York



"Good evening, Elizabeth." His voice carried clearly through the restaurant's refined din—deep as a river and closer than her heartbeat.

"Good evening, Hesha." She smiled ruefully up at her host. "Won't you join me? They're just bringing dessert."

He sat down in the other chair, and waved a swarm of waiters away. "You look lovely."

"Thank you."

An awkward silence grew, broken by the arrival of the maître d'—himself carrying the tray—with an outrage of chocolate and cup of hot tea for the lady, and a small, steaming, silver liqueur glass for his patron.

"Dinner was wonderful," Elizabeth remarked when the entourage had departed.

"I'm glad to hear it. I wish I could have been here. You weren't too bored?"

"No. It was fun, in a way." He raised an eyebrow, and she continued. "A lady sitting alone in a place like this attracts...attention. I've had four rescue attempts from sympathetic gentlemen shocked to see me stranded. One family party tried to adopt the lonely wallflower. The waiters *would* keep dancing attendance—that was a new experience for me. And half a dozen tourists thought, because of the celebrity treatment, that I was someone they should recognize. They kept sending people past the table to get a better look."

Hesha chuckled lowly. He sipped from the silver cup, and watched as she slipped a fork into the chocolate confection.

"Oh. This is fantastic." Elizabeth closed her eyes and took another bite. She offered the clean teaspoon to her companion, with a flourish that indicated the dessert plate. "Would you like some?"

"Thank you, but the caffeine..."

"Even in chocolate? How terrible for you. I tried to give it up once—" she whittled away at the pastry parts—"but decided that skipping rope was less painful than skipping dessert."

Hesha watched her finish. She relaxed with the teacup into the depths of the comfortable chair, and seemed willing to sit quietly if he cared for it. He let the cup of tea pass by in silence, and when she was done, he rose and offered his arm to her. She knew how to walk escorted, and they made stately progress through Charles's Fifth to the exit. A low, black sedan pulled up to the curb within seconds of Hesha's arrival on the sidewalk, and he smiled down at the woman by his side.

"May I offer you a lift?"

She bit her lip, doubtful. "I don't want to take you out of your way. My house isn't exactly on the beaten path."

"Please," said Hesha, holding the car door open for her, "get in. We'll take you home."

The heat of the June air was enough to give his fingers a little warmth, and so he steadied her shoulder, too, as she nestled into the lush upholstery. Thompson came

around to his master's side of the sedan, and Hesha joined his guest in the back seat. Elizabeth gave her address, and the car started off.

Hesha glanced at the driver and pushed a button. Dark glass slid smoothly up to give them privacy, and he gazed at his companion as if distracted before he spoke. "This wasn't quite the evening I had planned, Elizabeth," he said softly, confidentially—though in truth, of course, it was. He had arrived as soon as the summer sun would let him, and had hardly hurried to her side.

She looked at him, and shook her head slightly. "What *did* you have in mind when you asked me?"

"On Monday? Recompense for first aid. You tried to do me a favor. I don't care to be indebted, particularly to strangers." His eyes flickered over her face. "After last night, I was looking forward to the experience. You're a rather unusual person."

Elizabeth let the statement pass without comment, though the tone of his voice suggested a profound compliment. She felt a flush start at her shoulders, and hoped it wouldn't show in the darkness of the car.

"I was also planning to show you a little mystery of my own," he said. She frowned slightly, not understanding, and he continued. "There's a piece I've been working on; a small statue that came into my hands without a great deal of history or background. I have some idea, now, where it might have been carved, but I thought I'd see if you could tell me anything about it."

"I doubt there'd be anything I could see that you couldn't." Elizabeth hesitated. "Amy told me you were something of an expert on antiquities."

Hesha gestured vaguely, modestly. "It was really 'Sleipnir' that convinced me you might have an insight. You might have thought of it as silly, but I was...impressed. What you did was an in-depth *forensic* study of a common typewriter desk.... The point, really, was to let you in on a tantalizing puzzle I thought you might enjoy."

"It sounds like fun. What period is the piece from?"

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?"

"I get no clues?"

"I don't have it with me," he explained, in mild disappointment. "The lawyers took too long."

"Oh."

"I don't suppose...I have more business tomorrow, *and* a formal dinner...would it be too much trouble to ask you to meet me somewhere, around ten or eleven or so? I'll bring the statue with me, and we can talk without all the waiters and tourists and gallants trying to rescue you."

"No trouble at all." Elizabeth swallowed a rush of hope, and brought out some of her business manner to bolster her courage. "But this time," she said, facing him with determination, "I'll be the host. I can't say that my place is anything like so nice as Charles's, but it is quiet, and comfortable, and it sounds like I'll need my full arsenal of experts' books behind me to cope with your puzzle."

"And if you're tied up by lawyers again," she finished wickedly, "I'll at least be able to get some work done while I wait for you."

And Hesha, who had had layers of subtle hints ready to persuade her to bring him into her home, allowed himself to be argued into agreeing humbly to her suggestion.

Friday, 25 June 1999, 12:17 AM
Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan
New York City, New York



"Thompson? You heard the number and the directions to her door? Arrange to have the apartment searched. Maximum discretion; no traces left to trouble her. In fact, I'd be obliged if you'd see to it yourself."

Thompson kept his eyes on the road, but his attention wavered. "Yes, sir," he said, but his reply had less than its accustomed crispness. "May I say something, sir?"

"If I didn't value your opinion, Thompson, I would have made it clear at the beginning of our association."

"You know I'd never stand in your way, sir, but...she seems like a nice girl."

"I am sure that she is, Thompson." Hesha reflected for a moment on the tone of his retainer's statement, and went on carefully. "Vegel and all that went with him are dead, Thompson. You are looking for replacements for his team—a driver, a plane, a pilot and crew. I am in need of an art historian...as well as a replacement for Vegel's other capacities."

"Which other capacities...sir?"

"I'm not sure yet, Thompson. There are weaknesses to her; under the right circumstances, they could be made...strengths our organization does not currently possess. But she need know no more of our real business than Alex, or the agency, or Patterson's." They drove in silence for a time, and the master spoke again, speculatively. "For that matter, Thompson, you might wish to consider whether you would care to replace Vegel in that capacity yourself." Thompson said nothing. "Think it over carefully, of course. You have been with me long enough to know that it is hardly an unmixed blessing; and you have seen firsthand what it can do to others. Of course you would have to change the nature of your activities, and I know you enjoy your work at the head of the security team as it is. But do think, and let me know whether and when you might wish it."

"Thank you, sir."

"And soon, Thompson. Keep in mind what happened in Atlanta. We are passing through dangerous times, and a 'living will' might be a good idea."



Friday, 25 June 1999, 3:41 AM
Thirteenth floor, Buckhead Ritz-Carlton Hotel
Atlanta, Georgia

“Awaken, my sweet young murderer. I am sorry that I cannot allow you to remain unconscious further. It is by far the simplest buffer against the pain, but you are at present dangerously close to delirium, and your legs will not knit if you continue to convulse so. I trust you had pleasant dreams.”

Vykos’s smile was innocent and her gaze intent upon him as if expecting, nay hanging upon, his response. She looked somehow different than he remembered from their recent confrontation. Her features had a certain fawn-like cast to them. Her eyes larger. Her face, warmer, softer. Her ears tapering gently.

No, not *fawn-like*, he corrected himself—*faun-like*. She seemed a wild creature stepped from some woodland bacchanal, still spattered with dew and over-enthusiastic libations.

He could not hold her intent gaze. “One thing only I wish to know,” he croaked, struggling to find his voice again. “The masters, you said the masters knew of this abduction, that it had been arranged, approved.” He hurled the words like accusations.

Vykos looked pleased. “Oh good. You do remember.” She squeezed his hand affectionately. “They had led me to believe that you would deny it, rail against it. But there is no shame in having been given. In fact, it is a great honor that has been lavished upon you.”

Parmenides could not believe what he was hearing. If the fiend’s words were to be credited, she would have him think that he was betrayed by his beloved masters—his wise and just mentors, his protectors, his spiritual guardians, his brothers—into the hands of devils. And furthermore that he was to be proud, to be honored by this casual betrayal by those he loved above all else.

“An honor? Is it an honor to fall unavenged among your enemies? Is it an honor to be sold into the hands of your persecutor? Is it an honor to be denied even the dignity of the final...” Parmenides broke off abruptly, fearing that in his rush of emotion he had said too much, strayed too close to revealing one of the sacred mysteries to an outsider, a barbarian, one of the unenlightened.

“I knew you would see it that way.” She beamed. “Your masters spoke very highly of you. They said that you were an instrument of keen perception and one which they could ill afford to lose. That is what makes their gift all the more touching.”

He laughed then. It was a barking and scornful laugh. “They would not betray me. They would not betray me and suffer me to live.” He realized even as he hurled these refutations against her that the two assertions were not at all the same thing.

With every new twist of this convoluted situation, he came face to face with the same realization. “I should not be alive.”

“Do not speak so, my young romantic, my *philosophe*. Can you not see that this whole complicated orchestration has been arranged so that you might yet live?”

Parmenides did not see it. He made no response, but continued to regard her with open suspicion. He was uncertain from which front this new attack would come, but he would not be taken unprepared. This time.

“Your masters would not see you fall victim to the retributions of the hated Tremere. There is no greater indignity—not only for you, but for them as well. It is within my power to help them, to help you, my dearest. But you must let me help you.”

“You will help me,” he said flatly. “You will shield me from the dread Tremere. You will keep me here indefinitely, confined to a wheelchair, serving as a guinea pig for your demented experiments. Here, I have no doubt, even the Tremere will not venture. Here, I am perfectly safe, my every need provided for. Shall I thank you now? Or are there other debts I owe you of which I am as yet unaware? I would not want to appear ungrateful for your hospitality.”

She regarded him quizzically. “You still do not understand, I think.” She walked around to the back of his chair and took hold of the handles. “Even I do not plan to be here for more than a week at the most. And I am wasting valuable time setting and resetting your legs. But I am willing to invest this time in you because you are so dear to me. I am hoping, in fact, that you will chose to accompany me when I depart.”

They wheeled around and began a slow circuit of the room. Apparently the servants Vykos had alluded to in their initial meeting had returned and hastily completed their unpacking. Or perhaps not so hastily. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious.

“I do not do these things so that you will feel indebted to me. I do them for the sake of the growing friendship between our peoples. Or at least, that was the reason I initially agreed to ‘recycle’ you for your masters.

“After you had arrived, of course, I had the additional pleasure of doing it for the sheer pleasure of your company and for the affection I hold for you. Do not shake your head. You are a rare jewel, my sensitive young killer. All cold calculation and poetry. I find your outlook, which I must admit is quite foreign to my own, refreshing.

“We are not so different, you and I. We are joined by our common passion. Our undying enmity for the foul Tremere will be a bridge between our two peoples. You will help me by removing certain obstacles—certain sorcerous obstacles—from my path. I will help you and your people in return by rehabilitating those of your brothers who are experienced at such dangerous work but who are put in dire peril by the very fact that they have succeeded in such a mission.

“Our peoples will forge an alliance before which the entire Cainite world will tremble, and we—you and I—shall be the peace-hostages, the ambassadors of good will, the glue cementing that relationship. It is a great and terrible responsibility. You have been honored above all of your kind, young Parmenides. Your name will, no doubt, echo through the secret places of the mountain many generations after your passing.”

She is deranged, Parmenides thought. He had always been told that the Tzimisce were unhinged, warped from the moment of their Becoming. Rumors of the Sabbat’s dark initiation rites, of neonates being buried alive and having to claw their way up out of the grave or spend eternity entombed in the earth’s arms—such mind-rending torments were parceled out even to the delicate Lasombra. The forging of a Tzimisce was an ordeal made of sterner stuff.

Parmenides was no stranger to harsh discipline. The rigors of his intense physical, mental, and spiritual training had left uncounted scores of his fellow novices—every

one already enhanced with the supernal strength and endurance that were the birthright of his brotherhood—dead or begging for Final Death.

Even Parmenides, however, would rather summon up the Words of Undoing than undergo a single night of a Tzimisce apprenticeship.

The fiends' reputation for both physical and emotional sadism—and their unsettling power to inflict their demented predilections not only upon their own bodies, but upon those of their neighbors—made them universally feared and shunned.

If the Tzimisce were hard on outsiders, however, they were even more fearsome to their own kind. They were fiercely proud of their clan's mastery of the physical form and delighted in demonstrating their art and mastery at every opportunity. A Tzimisce novice was literally a captive audience to such inhuman experiments.

"And if I will not cooperate with this 'alliance'?" Parmenides challenged.

Vykos paused. "Oh, I will be so disappointed. I have already invested so much in your rehabilitation. I think you will be pleased. And your masters, they are relying upon you as well. It is a grave responsibility you must bear, as well as an honor. There is no honor without responsibility."

She wheeled him around to face the large hand-carved looking glass. It was made of blackened bog-oak and stood easily seven feet high. Parmenides recoiled in apprehension.

"Oh, I know it's a bit much. Overly dramatic. But I always keep several largish mirrors about the office. It has such a disarming effect on visitors, especially when one has numerous business contacts among the Lasombra. Makes them uncomfortable. Puts them off their game.

"Oh, you must forgive me. You are unfamiliar with their ways. I assumed that such interactions with our brothers in the Sabbat are commonplace to you, but I see that is not the case. I hope you will soon have the chance to meet them. Yes, I will have to arrange it at the earliest opportunity.

"The Trojans would have appreciated this dubious honor. For them, however, it would have been sufficient to beware of Greeks bearing gifts. With the Lasombra, you must have a caution of even of those of indifferent bearing. But you will see them for yourself and then you can judge whether I have spoken rightly."

Parmenides' gaze was locked on the mirror in open incredulity. He cursed himself for a fool, knowing he should have been prepared for just such an eventuality. But still, he could not stop himself from gaping.

The face that stared back at him was not his face. *Of course it's not our face*, a distant part of his mind scolded him, *our face is still sitting on the desk—draped over that war-trophy we carried from the Tremere chantry and laid at her feet like a sacrifice, an offering.* "A peace offering," he muttered aloud.

The fact that the internal voice seemed so rational, so composed, terrified him. The face that mouthed the words *a peace offering* belonged to the ghoul. The ghoul he had struck down and strode over when first entering this foul den. What had Vykos called him? Ravenna.

Parmenides' skin was no longer the enviable true ebony that was the trademark of the Assamite line—the legacy of decades of unrelenting, moistureless, desert climate

working upon a complexion devoid of the normal healthy, ruddy undertone that was the outward sign of the humble miracle of circulation.

His new complexion was not unpleasant. It was the uniform olive of a gentler Mediterranean clime. His features deceptively placed his point of origin somewhere on the Italian peninsula. Parmenides found himself thinking, uncomfortably, of Venice.

“Well, what do you think?” Vykos prompted. “You must admit that even the devilish arts of the Tremere will not be able to penetrate such a disguise. Because it’s not a disguise, really, when you come right down to it.”

Parmenides nodded absently. Then his gaze traveled downward. He braced himself against the first glimpse of his maimed lower legs, but a neat red woolen blanket draped across his lap spared him the worst of it. Although he could not feel his feet he noted, with some distracted gratitude, that they were no longer fused together.

Taking the arms of the chair firmly in hand, he tried to push himself to his feet. He succeeded only in unbalancing the chair, tilting it dangerously forward. But Vykos’s steadying hands did not allow him to overturn.

“No, do not try to rise, my dearest. You are still bound to the chair. Your legs will not bear you up and I have not the leisure at present to dedicate the coming nights to setting things right. Great things are afoot. I am afraid you will have to remain in the chair until,” she paused as if carefully considering her words. “Until you have recovered enough to stand on your own.”

Parmenides did not relish the thought of spending weeks, more likely months, in such confinement. He threw the blanket in his lap to the floor with the intention of loosing the restraints that held him to the chair.

He immediately wished he hadn’t. There were no restraints. He could not tell where the grisly chair ended and his lower body began. He sat unresisting as Vykos recovered the discarded blanket and smoothed it back into place. He stared blankly straight ahead.

“There, there. Soon you will be able to walk again. You have my word on it. I will not permit you to damage yourself beyond the point where that damage can be undone. But you must control your extreme emotions. Your passion will be your undoing. You must focus your impatience, your rage, your will upon remaking your broken body. Only then will you ever be free of this....”

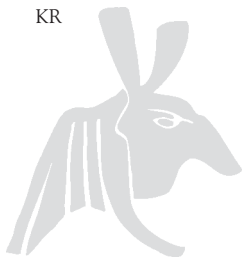
She made an open gesture which might have been meant to indicate this chair, this room, this situation, or even this broken shell of a body.

“In the meantime, I have important work I need for you to do. No, do not argue. This work requires no great feats of leaping and bounding. You will do quite well with your current means of locomotion. Now listen and do whatever I shall tell you.”

No response.

“If you will not do it for my sake, or for the sake of your own recovery, I am instructed to tell you this: that you will do it for the sake of the one who, diving toward green waters, catches his heel. You are given to know that he is a stone dropped upward into the river of night.”

Parmenides bowed his head in resignation. Nor did he stir until he had received all the words that she had to entrust to him.



Friday, 25 June 1999, 11:12 PM
Red Hook, Brooklyn
New York City, New York

The black sedan glided smoothly to a halt at the entrance to the old warehouse. Streetlights were rare, there was little traffic, and though a few lit windows shone in buildings on both sides of the street, the rooms within were sterile. Blue-tinged fluorescent bulbs burnt late and coldly for janitors and night guards; desk lamps warmed small patches of overtime for corporate slaves.

A tall, broad, grizzled figure in a loose-fitting raincoat left the shadows of a fire escape. He approached the right rear door of the car, waited for the locks to click open and climbed in without a word. The locks clicked back and a touch of the tension left his creased, red face.

"Good evening, sir," Thompson said. He nodded acknowledgment to the man behind the wheel, and added, "How're you doing, Asp?"

"Never better, Ron," said the driver.

"Report, Thompson."

Ronald Thompson took a small flip-over notebook from his raincoat pocket. It was a habit, from his time as a cop, from a memory of what an ideal policeman was supposed to be. A younger Ron Thompson had found that, in this world, the reality was less than ideal and had walked away from a dirty job in search of something...cleaner. Now he sat in the back seat of a monster's car and felt no remorse as he laid a young woman's home bare before his master's eyes.

"Here's the layout: door, a little closet and walk-in space. Open kitchen: counter and stools here—but it doesn't look like she does much entertaining. Library starts here: there's an iron rolling-door behind the bookshelves; probably from the warehouse era, probably why she keeps her books over it. Library runs into office, which runs into living room—there are books everywhere, though. This area is raised up a step, and full of your kind of stuff—antiques, I mean, sir. Her workshop, I assume. Bathroom facilities walled off here. Bedroom curtained off here." He stopped, and said meaningfully, "This entire outer wall is windows, sir."

From the front seat came a sniggering chuckle. "I guess you won't be staying the night, then, boss."

Thompson shot a scornful glare into the rear-view mirror. Hesha ignored the Asp completely, and the detective went on: "Weapons check: Usual assortment of kitchen knives. Further collection of little blades and awls in the workshop. Lots of small, heavy grenadables. No real guns; there's a flintlock in the shop next to a Xeroxed article on stabilizing wood found buried in peaty soil. Non-operative.

"There are," he sighed, "a hell of a lot of spray cans and flammables. She's not a smoker, though; no lighters anywhere. Electric stove. Matches, candles and that sort of thing on a bookshelf in the office area, but not many. Fire shouldn't become a problem.

"I found out why she has no address; she sublets the loft from Rutherford House. The paper on the place was a little convoluted. I snapped a photo for Janet, on the off chance you'd be interested."

"Thank you, Thompson."

Hesha flicked the latches open, and as one, the three men left the vehicle. Thompson kept watch on the street; the Asp took a bottle, a package and a raincoat from the trunk; Hesha accepted the items and turned to go inside the old building.

"Your time is temporarily your own. I anticipate being here at least two hours, but less than five. I will call. If your phone rings, Asp, you both should come back immediately, expecting trouble. If yours rings, Thompson, it's a straight pick-up."

Thompson took the keys and the driver's seat; the Asp took the passenger side. Neither took themselves off guard until the intercom buzzer sounded, the little door to the warehouse opened, and the steel bolts had snapped safely into place behind their master.

Hesha paced slowly along the dimly lit corridor. His steps slowed at each door, and he read the names taped, tacked, or painted on them: Kelvin Photographic; Herlin, Inc.; Malay Imports; a row of ten doors labeled with the name of a law firm he knew and marked FILE STORES along with the alphabetical range kept within.

He climbed stairs and made turns; he passed by the rest of the law firm's alphabet. At the end of a bare metal catwalk, he came to her door. A faded notice on the wall beside it informed him that these premises were owned by Rutherford House and gave him a number to call in case of emergency or accident. There was no trace of light from within, and no sound. He tested the air before knocking—rust, turpentine, old paint and grime surrounded him, but through the cracks around the jamb he could detect a trace of smoke. It was good sandalwood and frankincense, complex and not cheaply come by.

He rapped on the door with one knuckle.

On the other side, there was light—warm and relaxing light—and sound—faint strains of something Celtic—and Elizabeth, waiting for him in a dark-blue denim dress and a nervous smile.

She took the wine with thanks and exclamations at the vintage; at his instructions, she propped it on the counter to breathe and to settle. She offered him a drink or something to eat; he declined politely and drifted into what Thompson called the living room. He draped his raincoat strategically—near the center of the loft, easily reached from the sofa or the workshop but out of the way—over an old, walnut office chair and put the package down on its seat. He made a point of gazing around him, to check his retainer's report, to make his own assay of dangers and exits and to seem to admire.

The windows that bothered Thompson by day were concealed by night; the same floor-to-ceiling curtains that walled her bedroom rolled down from the joists and kept the bleak city at bay. Hesha tendered his compliments on the apartment and found an opening to ask for a tour.

Friday, 25 June 1999, 11:30 PM
Pier 13, Port of Baltimore
Baltimore, Maryland



The limousine cruised slowly through the port facilities. What light there was failed to penetrate the tinted glass but reflected sharply from the spotless chrome and other well-polished surfaces of the vehicle. The automobile eased to a halt before the gangplank of a small freighter—small compared to the mammoth beasts that every day graced the docks, loading and unloading tons upon tons of cargo. The nighttime skeleton crew of warehouse workers paid little attention to the limousine. It was not so rare that a wealthy investor or ship owner made a personal inspection of his holdings, though the hour was somewhat peculiar.

One of the car's rear doors opened. "Wait here," said Alexander Garlotte before climbing from the air-conditioned interior out into the salty night air. His deathly white face shone like a beacon in contrast to his thick, raven-black beard and the hair that draped over his shoulders. He stood tall, like an English lord of centuries past surveying his manor; the limousine next to him took the place of a powerful and well-groomed charger. Most wealthy gentlemen would have harbored misgivings about frequenting this part of Baltimore so long after dark, but Prince Garlotte was unconcerned. This was his city.

He climbed the gangplank onto the ship, *El Vigoroso*, a Peruvian freighter that had entered the harbor without proper papers. Straightening out such documentation problems, with the bureaucratic hoop-jumping that it required, could take at the very least weeks, and Garlotte's people in the customs office and the port authority were in no hurry to expedite the matter. In the meantime, Garlotte had found a suitable use for ship and crew—a sad collection of unpaid and malnourished sailors, who were simply glad not to be turned away to starve on the high seas.

All was quiet on board. Garlotte made his way inside and along a few tight corridors to the cabin that had served as the captain's quarters. The prince rapped lightly on the door.

"Come in."

Her voice was like the music of the tides, though Garlotte could hear an unaccustomed edge in her tone even now. He opened the door and gracefully stepped inside. She stood behind a large wardrobe that she'd turned away from the wall to form a dressing screen of sorts. The cabin itself was cramped and unremarkable, badly in need of fresh paint, cleaning, and probably fumigation.

"You were too kind, Alexander," she said from behind the wardrobe.

"Nonsense. I would do anything in my power..."

His words died away as Victoria stepped into view. She wore the elegant, black evening gown he'd had delivered and the matching velvet gloves that rose to just below her elbows. Not overly formal, no sequins or feathers. As Garlotte had accurately recalled, she needed only finely crafted simplicity to complement a radiant beauty that would outshine any accoutrements.

"My God, you are ravishing," he found himself saying. Victoria smiled demurely with a subtle batting of eyelashes. Garlotte basked in the obvious danger of her appeal. Her considerable beauty was both more and less than it seemed: more than mere physical perfection, less than completely candid. Her mystique was the crux of her powers. This Garlotte well knew. Yet the stirrings of sentiment that her mere presence aroused in him were intoxicating. Passions moved that he had not felt in...well, in many years. He moved closer, like a moth circling an open flame.

"How can I ever repay you for this exquisite gown, Alexander?" she asked.

He slipped around behind her, but then paused. There it was again, the slight tension in her voice that he did not remember from their previous encounters.

"Feasting on the sight of you in it," he said, "is more than payment enough, my love."

My love, he repeated in his mind. *How I indulge myself.*

Only because he was attuned to the mysterious strain in Victoria's voice did he notice the muscles of her bare shoulders tense slightly at the word *payment*.

She has debts outstanding that must be repaid, Garlotte speculated. *Perhaps I can be of assistance; perhaps there is a way to bind her to me.* But the prince paused for only a brief moment.

"I have taken the liberty..." he began, as he produced two golden earrings, intricately engraved. He reached around Victoria and placed them in her hand. "Would you do me the honor?"

She turned a ruddy cheek toward him and smiled as she put them on.

"And of course..." he continued, taking the matching necklace and locket from his jacket pocket.

"Alexander, you flatterer."

"I am too smitten by your beauty to offer anything so disingenuous as flattery." He lowered the necklace over her head. The locket was relatively flattened and rather large, about the size of an open palm. Like the gown, it was elegant in its simplicity of form, yet it shared the intricate markings of the earrings. For many women, the locket would be too much, not so with Victoria. Garlotte lowered it against the hollow of her breasts as he fastened the clasp behind her neck. Victoria's skin radiated warmth. The prince breathed in her luxurious fragrance. He had neither touched nor laid eyes upon the necklace in many years. It had belonged to his wife, to the beloved companion of his mortal years, and had been shut away with her effects for quite some time. But he had felt the urge—the desire, the *need*—to bring it tonight. As Victoria turned to face him, Garlotte breathed the sigh of a cleric who had long contemplated sacrilege and was relieved finally to have given in.

She placed a tender hand on his cheek. "Alexander, it is beautiful."

Garlotte felt tears coming to his eyes. He leaned and kissed her lightly on one cheek and then the other. His cold lips burned with her fire.

It was no coincidence that the ship was completely silent aside from the conversation in the captain's quarters. When Garlotte had responded to Victoria's call last night, he'd found her wrapped in robes that concealed her face and body completely. She'd not allowed him to look at her, and she'd barely spoken to him. Hardly characteristic behavior. He'd heard the pain in her voice, the fear, and when she'd refused to be taken to any of his several havens and implied that she needed blood, he'd arranged this out-

of-the-way sanctuary for her. Now the crew of fourteen was nowhere in evidence, and Victoria's skin was flushed with vigor. Fourteen men. Could this angelic creature have given herself so to debauchery? Surely she could never have utilized such a volume of blood, though the prince found the idea vaguely erotic.

"Just a moment, Alexander, and I'll be ready to go." Victoria stepped again behind the wardrobe, where she tended to some hidden possession. The slight tension in her voice was the only indication of her previous difficulties.

The prince was aware she'd arrived from Atlanta, but he didn't know how she'd escaped the bloodshed there, or how she'd come to his city. And now, as he heard the locket click shut, and Victoria rejoined him, he refused to broach the subject. He preferred simply to bathe in the nimbus of her glory.

A few moments later, Victoria slipped easily into the limousine and took her seat between Isaac, who was waiting in the car, and Garlotte, who followed her. The prince observed with satisfaction that Isaac stiffened somewhat in Victoria's presence, even before she almost imperceptibly, and certainly with complete inadvertence, brushed against the younger Kindred's leg. Isaac was obviously aware of their guest's charms and was on his guard.

The childe may be rash, Garlotte thought, but he's not ignorant. A subtle irony, however, lay in the fact that, where Victoria was concerned, preparation really meant next to nothing.

"Victoria," said the prince, "may I present Isaac Goldwin, sheriff of Baltimore. Isaac, Ms. Victoria Ash." *Most recently of Atlanta*, he did not add. He would save his barbs for later, when the novelty and heady excitement of Victoria's presence had worn thin.

As Isaac kissed the offered hand, he pointedly ignored the swell of Victoria's bosom as she leaned toward him. The highlights of shadow in the dim interior served only to accentuate the curves of her form.

He thinks he's doing so well, Garlotte thought, amused. Of course, Victoria would be intentionally clumsy in her half-hearted attempts at seduction. A victim confident in his belief that he'd fended her off would be that much easier prey in the future.

"Sheriff Goldwin," said Victoria. "I'm so very impressed." A deep—and quite unnecessary, Garlotte noted—breath again brought her bosom to Isaac's direct and deliberate inattention.

Dear God, Garlotte thought, *she'll brain him with the locket if she's not careful.*

"I serve my prince as I'm able," said Isaac.

"Such modesty," said Victoria, patting his knee.

Garlotte resisted the urge to roll his eyes. She was laying it on a bit thick, but her antics would make for a valuable Socratic dialogue with Isaac later. The prince couldn't help but wonder if his sheriff-childe would underestimate the fetching Toreador after this initial introduction, as was no doubt her design. Watching the encounter with a certain amount of detachment, Garlotte appreciated Victoria's stratagem and also recognized the slightest twinge of jealousy in his own breast as she offered her attentions to another.

My God, she's devious, Garlotte thought, *but she makes me feel alive again.* Though the prince was pleased that Isaac was vigilant against the sway of Victoria's charms, Garlotte was not prepared to deny himself the pleasures, nor the dangers, of her company. *I could turn away from her any time I wanted*, he told himself, knowing the lie for what it was but not caring.

“What a relief to know that I can step out-of-doors in complete safety,” said Victoria to the young sheriff.

Listening to her banter with Isaac, another undertone of the conversation reached Garlotte’s ears. The hard edge that had lined Victoria’s voice on the ship, the fear, the vulnerability, was completely absent now. Plying her trade, as it were, she was as self-assured as ever she had been. Perhaps the sport of a young Kindred led her to forget her troubles, or perhaps the vulnerability was a side of her she shared with Garlotte, but not with others. At the thought, he felt hope blossom within himself, but he did not allow it to take hold. Instead, he plucked it from the fallow ground and turned it over in his hand, seeing it for what it truly was—self-delusion. Now he flattered *himself*...but what could be the great harm, he wondered, if he was aware of that fact?

Regardless, the prince had seen and heard enough of Victoria’s flirtatiousness with his childe.

“I hope you’ll allow me to provide you more comfortable accommodations,” said Garlotte to Victoria. His innocent suggestion was mined with unvoiced questions—*What was wrong with you last night? Have you bled dry enough sailors?*—that the prince was too tactful to ask outright. “A suite at the Lord Baltimore Inn, perhaps?”

Victoria turned to him; her brow furrowed and her lip pouted just enough to be tastefully imploring. “But I’ve imposed on you so already, Alexander.”

“Nonsense,” Garlotte continued, ever the dutiful host. “Should I send someone for your bags?” He knew full well that the only belongings she had on the ship were the clothes and toiletries he’d sent her, nothing irreplaceable. She’d arrived in his city a pauper, though certainly she could access bank accounts now that she was...recovered.

“I think not,” said Victoria. She laced her hand around his elbow. Isaac was forgotten, discarded, for the time being. “You’re too good to me, my prince.”

“Nonsense.”

The limousine made a stately procession around the harbor, from the working docks west and north, then east again along the upper edge of the Inner Harbor with its grand public and commercial buildings.

“You’ve done so much with the place since I was here last, my dear,” Victoria said admiringly. She paused and gnawed lightly on her lower lip, obviously trying to recall: “There was some unpleasantness at the time, I believe. Was it the Civil War?”

“War of 1812,” Garlotte reminded her.

Victoria shrugged. “I suppose you’re right. You men always enjoy the wars so much more.”

Shortly after midnight, the limousine turned onto Thames Street and came to a stop before the Lord Baltimore Inn. Garlotte assisted Victoria from the car. She stood by the open door for a long moment and admired the eighteenth-century structures overlooking the restored waterfront. The trinket shops were closed, but a handful of pubs still buzzed with music and activity. Victoria ignored these more modern contrivances and focused on the refurbished architecture and the period sailing vessels tied to the pier.

“How marvelously quaint, Alexander. I can tell you’ve made yourself right at home here.”

“Indeed. Fell’s Point.” He briefly regaled her with a bit of the obligatory history of the area, then began to offer his arm, but stopped. “One moment, my dear.”

The prince leaned down into the car, where Isaac quickly perked up after having been ignored for the latter portion of the drive. "Isaac, the ship Ms. Ash was staying on...see that it's taken far out to sea and scuttled."

Isaac reached for his cell phone to make it so.

Garlotte nodded curtly to the chauffeur, who'd been standing unobtrusively by the open door since they'd stopped, and then turned back to Victoria. "Shall we?" She took his arm, and side by side, they entered the Lord Baltimore Inn.

Friday, 25 June 1999, 11:58 PM
Oregon Hill
Richmond, Virginia



Three staccato crashes cut through the night. Don Carlos immediately recognized them as gunshots. They were fired several blocks away, but he had no way of knowing who had fired them. Were the mortal drug dealers, who refused to give up this neighborhood to the young couples who had moved in and renovated block after block of the turn-of-the-century homes, settling some score? Or was the gunplay part of the grand drama that was playing out with Don Carlos at its center?

He supposed that as long as everyone assumed the former, there was no danger to him. And wasn't that the whole point of this exercise that was unlife—to accumulate as much power and wealth while subjecting himself to as little actual danger as possible?

Don Carlos marched toward one of the houses that most distinctly had *not* been renovated. Prince Thatchet was patently resistant to the concept of progress in any guise. The old fossil, Don Carlos surmised, would prefer the entire city to crumble around him. He had probably felt right at home when the Yankees had bombarded Richmond to within an inch of its life a hundred and thirty-odd years before. Don Carlos had not been around back then, not even as a mortal, but from what he'd heard and from what he could see with his own eyes, those glory days of the Confederacy had been the last hurrah for this city. Yes, it had been rebuilt, but history had passed it by. Only constant pressure exerted by the primogen and by the prince's own clanmates, those Ventrue enmeshed within the world of corporate banking and high finance, kept the city moving forward and keeping pace—falteringly, at that—with other emerging centers of vitality in the New South, such as Atlanta and Charlotte.

Otherwise, a larger portion of the city would more closely resemble the house Don Carlos approached, the prince's primary haven. Decades had passed since ever a paintbrush had touched those walls. The roof was intact, for the most part, and several windows retained actual unbroken panes of glass. The two obviously armed men standing guard on the front porch—Don Carlos knew them to be the prince's ghouls—lent the building the air of a crack house, but since the police department answered to the prince's beck and call, there was no danger of harassment on that front.

But other fronts remained available.

"You are sure he is there?" the albino had asked.

"I am sure," was Don Carlos's confident response.

The albino was a profoundly disturbing creature. Perhaps it was his eyes of the palest pink that added to his mystique and made him somewhat unnerving even to other undead, those who had seen enough of the unnatural and the macabre that they should long ago have ceased to be squeamish about anything. Don Carlos had observed how the albino's own followers glanced uneasily at him, how they kept a certain distance as if his touch might be poisonous. And they were anything but normal themselves. Don Carlos had, of course, heard of the Sabbat since shortly after his Embrace, but he'd

always considered the tales to be the Kindred equivalent of bogeyman stories intended to frighten unruly children—or childer, in this case—toward acceptable behavior. Now, having come face to face with actual specimens of the subject of those tales, he was no longer so sure. The vampires with whom he had associated previously had been members of the Camarilla, and while many of them were certainly monstrous in their own right, there was something...*different* about the albino and the few of his followers whom Don Carlos had seen: Something more—and something less.

More menacing. Don Carlos had survived as long as he had among more powerful Kindred because he had a knack for anticipating their wants and pleasures. More than once he had performed some minor favor for an elder before she even realized that she wanted the favor done. In so displaying his own ingratiating and foppish nature, he ensured, to a degree, his safety. Not that the elders or the prince trusted him, for they rightly perceived that his fealty rose from a self-serving appreciation of their station rather than any particular loyalty to their person. Indeed, none of them would be surprised in the least to find Don Carlos taking the side of any prevailing faction. To the victor would go the spoils. Always. The trick was twofold: to know in advance who the victor would be and to survive long enough to enjoy the spoils. The elders, constantly locked in schemes of conquest and one-upmanship, and knowing Don Carlos's transparently opportunistic nature, did not trust him. But they trusted that they could predict his actions, and thus in their eyes he was disarmed as a threat. He reaped the benefits of their struggles as surely as any vulture on a recent field of battle.

But this albino, this creature of the Sabbat, he was a wildcard, and knowledge of his actions gave Don Carlos an advantage over even his aged brethren of the Camarilla. The albino was more menacing because he was not part of the static power structure that provided Don Carlos's security. As an unknown, the creature was more dangerous but also potentially more useful. Either eventuality stemmed directly from the second half of the equation—the albino was less predictable. Don Carlos had been constantly weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the developing situation since he was first contacted by agents of the Sabbat months ago. Was the body half empty or half full? He had decided that the possible benefits of cooperating with the Sabbat outweighed the dangers, and despite his qualms while in the actual presence of the disturbing albino, he still believed that to be the case. For the Sabbat to establish a presence in Richmond, they would need the assistance of someone who knew the city, who knew the habits and havens of those Kindred residing there. That someone was likely to receive certain considerations in return: the disappearance of a rival, inside information that would allow him to eliminate a “threat” to the prince. There was no shortage of ways, in Don Carlos's mind, that he could help the Sabbat, and they him.

The brief meeting with the albino merely served to introduce even loftier aspirations into Don Carlos's thoughts.

“We require a demonstration of your unfettered access to the prince,” the albino had said.

Now, as Don Carlos trod closer to the prince's haven, a small microphone strapped to his chest beneath his shirt, his mind was full of the possibilities revealed to him. *They want to know how to get to the prince!* The audacity of the Sabbat amazed him. Not only did they wish to strengthen their presence in Richmond, they were laying the groundwork for what could only be the assassination of the prince at some future date. Knowing

what was going to happen, Don Carlos reasoned, he might be able to position himself so as to influence the selection of the next prince. Looking farther down that road, he might be able to assume that mantle himself at some point. The mere thought made him giddy. Never before in his nights of endless scheming had Don Carlos felt so completely alive, so completely aware of the pulse of his city.

As he climbed the front steps, the ghouls on the front porch returned his nod. They were expecting him. Earlier that evening, he'd sent word that he had discovered important information that he must deliver to the prince at once. Respectfully, he petitioned for an audience. *The survival of the city may hang in the balance*, Don Carlos had included at the end of his note, resorting to a level of hyperbole he normally avoided, but thereby securing timely acceptance of his request.

The porch creaked under Don Carlos's weight. *How unseemly*, he thought, *for a prince to comport himself in such a manner. I will arrange things differently*. The ghouls seemed unaware of the tight-lipped smile that Don Carlos could not quite restrain.

He quickly mastered himself and was met inside by more ghouls, at least a half dozen. They were a sorry-looking lot, shabbily dressed, unshaven, foul in both odor and demeanor, unconcerned with or unschooled in the most basic facets of decorum. But they were no less lethal for their ramshackle appearance. Prince Thatchet selected them—his corps of ghouls, for he trusted his own kind so little that he would have no Kindred for his bodyguard—for their adeptness with knife or gun. Theirs was not to receive dignitaries, and they maintained no illusions in that direction.

The interior of the house was as dilapidated as the exterior and smelled of mold and urine. Don Carlos walked past the hired toughs, ignored the more obvious stairs leading to the upper floor of the rickety structure—he'd been upstairs before; the rancid quarters where the ghouls rested were unpleasant to contemplate, much less to see first-hand—and opened the door to the cellar. This door, he noticed, was reinforced and remarkably sturdy compared to the rest of the building. He descended into the dank basement, harshly illuminated by one naked bulb hanging on a wire, and was greeted by Terrence Hill, personal assistant to the prince. A ghoul, of course.

"Don Carlos, the prince is expecting you." Noticeably well-kempt among the squalor, Hill tweaked the curled ends of his moustache as he spoke. The mannerism irritated Don Carlos to no end, but he nodded deferentially. This ghoul, after all, was older than Don Carlos and many of the other Kindred in Richmond. Apparently Prince Thatchet valued Hill's abilities so much that he would not Embrace him for risk of losing the service of a most loyal servant.

How demeaning to be a servant throughout eternity, thought Don Carlos, even as he waited patiently for the ghoul to announce him.

Hill slipped through another heavily reinforced door, his fleet manner belying the speed of his movements. Don Carlos's keen ears caught the muffled introduction: "My prince, Don Carlos of Clan Toreador to see you." And then the door was open again, and Terrence was ushering Don Carlos through into another dimly lit room.

"My prince." Don Carlos bowed deeply with a flourish—so low that he could clearly see the layers of black and gray mildew covering the hard-packed, earthen floor—and maintained that position. The door clicked shut as Terrence let himself out.

"Rise, Don Carlos." The prince's words were a throaty, nearly inaudible whisper.

The ghouls in the prince's employ, to the untrained eye, were fairly indistinguishable from normal, unadulterated mortals. The prince himself, however, could certainly be mistaken for a ghoul, in the classic sense of the word. Don Carlos, as soon as he rose, averted his eyes, as was the custom insisted upon by the prince. But even the most cursory glance at the seated figure was more than enough to refresh Don Carlos's memory of that sickly, yellowed skin, so pale as to seem translucent. Thatchet's sparse, patchy head of hair was somewhat reminiscent of the spines of a Venus flytrap, and despite the impression that the years—decades, or centuries, according to some—had not been kind to the prince, Don Carlos had heard many stories confirming that the prince was as deadly to Kindred as that plant he slightly resembled was to insects.

"Don Carlos," said the prince in a whisper that his petitioner had to strain to hear.

Does he speak like that on purpose? Don Carlos wondered. *Is he trying to intimidate me? Well, it won't work.*

"What news could be so important?" asked the prince. "Why do you trouble me?"

If Thatchet's voice had failed to unnerve Don Carlos, the words the prince spoke sent a chill down his subject's spine. Don Carlos had expected a warmer reception from the prince, perhaps interest if not enthusiasm. Instead, the Toreador now felt that he was the fly noticing only belatedly the ring of spikes and the rapidly closing exit behind him. Don Carlos cleared his throat, measured his words carefully.

"I bring news of the most vital importance to the welfare of the city," he said.

"So I have heard."

A drawn-out creak of wood indicated that the prince had shifted his weight in his chair, but was he settling back to listen, or rising from his seat to strike down the impudent childe? Don Carlos, straining the limits of peripheral vision, could not tell, and the prince said nothing else.

Or did he? *Did he say something, and I missed the damned whisper?* Don Carlos wondered. Just then he heard footsteps from upstairs, someone moving above. Maybe that was also the sound of a moment ago—footsteps, not the telltale shifting of the prince. The possibility did not, however, ease Don Carlos's mind overly much.

"I have received word from reliable sources," he said at last, unable to stand the weight of silence, "that the Sabbat has plans to overrun the city."

There. He'd said it. Don Carlos had planned all along to use that bit of information as a gambit to gain access to the prince. It was an incredible exaggeration of the truth that Don Carlos had deduced, but Thatchet would thank him, perhaps even ask him to look into the matter further, which would provide cover for Don Carlos in future interactions he might undertake with the Sabbat. Also, the albino, listening in on the wire tonight and in future meetings, could gather information about the prince and his defenses, information that Don Carlos could confirm or clarify after the fact.

Ah, he congratulated himself, *playing one side against the other, while I am the true master of both—as it should be.*

"And you believe that you have access to spies beyond my reach?" asked the prince.

Hearing the words, the veiled challenge and scorn they conveyed, Don Carlos suddenly felt his confidence sucked dry until it remained little more than a desiccated corpse. The prince's icy voice soaked down into the cracks of Don Carlos's courage.

Thatchet, the Toreador realized, was a master in what he left *unsaid* as well as what he said, and the unsaid was poised like an axe above Don Carlos's neck.

The prince's brief, whispered question hovered in the air, daring Don Carlos to respond. The Toreador felt his knees trembling; he prayed that his nervousness—his *fear*, fear of this aged Kindred whose mere words unnerved him—was not completely obvious. *How could this interview have gone so wrong from the start?* he wondered.

Perhaps there was a reason this sickly, palsied creature had been Prince of Richmond for so long. Don Carlos had seen the awed reaction of mortals faced with his own undead magnificence. All reason fled; they were prisoners of their own trepidation. Now he began to recognize the same strange power that his prince held over him. But even recognizing it, he was no more able to combat it.

Frantically, Don Carlos struggled to divine some way to salvage his plans. Then his racing mind seized upon the answer. *I will tell him everything!* Don Carlos decided. *Instead of warning him of some potential future attack, which is undoubtedly the case, I'll tell him about the albino, about the other Sabbat monsters with him. The prince will know what to do.*

But then he realized the illogic of this plan—the wire beneath his shirt; the albino would flee, and Don Carlos would look the fool. The fearful trembling that had taken hold of his knees now spread throughout his body, or so it felt to him. He closed his eyes tightly, fought for self-control.

Calm yourself, he thought and reminded himself that only seconds—not the hours that it felt like—had passed since the prince had asked his question.

Delay...but be bold about it, he chastised himself. *Answer, but give yourself time to disable the microphone.*

Don Carlos bowed his head, trying to take advantage of the fact that his eyes were already closed, in a solemn display of deference. "My prince, certainly your reach and your knowledge extend further than mine. In this case, however..." Don Carlos faltered. He was seized by the sudden fear that he'd brazenly contradicted his prince, that he was signing his own death warrant.

Spit it out, man! he thought. *You've crossed the line. Go the full mile!*

"Yes, my prince." Don Carlos swallowed hard. He hoped the gulp was not audible except in his own ears. "I believe I have access to sources that would be..." *beyond your reach*, he almost said, but the impertinence of the words choked his throat shut. "That would be hidden from one of your station."

Don Carlos sighed inwardly, congratulated himself on that tortured turn of phrase, implying as it did treachery on the part of others rather than imperfection on the prince's.

A moment passed, then stretched longer, but the prince did not respond. Don Carlos opened his eyes, but did not raise his face. From that position, he saw only the prince's foot, firmly upon the floor.

Why doesn't he say something? Damn him! The trembling was resuming, growing more pronounced. Don Carlos was sure he would be unable to control it, to hide it from his liege. The silence gnawed at the Toreador's nerves, drained the last of his patience.

I will tell him everything! he resolved. *I will throw myself on his mercy.*

Don Carlos forced open his mouth to speak, but the words he heard were not from him, nor were they from the prince.

Instead, the voice was that of a man, a large man with a deep rumbling baritone, but trying to mimic a small child: “Can I play too?”

For the moment, forgetting himself and all protocol, Don Carlos whirled to see Terrence Hill’s head protruding from behind the door, which was only slightly ajar. But the voice was not the ghoul’s, and his expression was wrong: his eyes bulged; his mouth, hanging agape, bobbed up and down, but not in time with the words.

Then the door swung the rest of the way open, and Don Carlos saw the clenched fist around Hill’s neck, and the hulking figure to whom the fist belonged. The creature had to duck to enter the room and dragged Hill like a lifeless doll, which was more or less the case. Behind the behemoth stood the albino, a stern look on his face, and behind him, others still, darting back and forth to look over his shoulders.

The fact of Sabbath vampires standing in the prince’s lair was too much for Don Carlos to comprehend at first. A full three seconds passed before he thought to look to the prince. Surely the elder Kindred would strike down the intruders.

Another moment passed, however, and the prince did not move. Not when the albino pushed his way into the room, not when the behemoth threw Terrence’s body to the ground, revealing that the ghoul’s neck had been wrung much like an unruly gamecock’s—his head looked to have made two full rotations.

Only at second glance did Don Carlos notice that the shadows enveloping his prince were too dark; they intruded where the light of the one small lamp in the room should have fallen. And though the lamp was stationary, the shadows moved. They writhed in coils around the prince’s body, wriggled like snakes of pure darkness, constrictors holding Thatchet’s arms and legs to his chair. A flowing band of oily black covered the lower portion of his face, but his wide eyes and the faintest of gagging sounds from his throat suggested that the shadows given life delved internally as well. For the first time in his undead existence, a vague queasiness began to rise in Don Carlos’s gut.

The albino, a hacksaw in hand, stepped past him. The behemoth moved further into the room and the space, which had been quite adequate before, seemed suddenly very small. Two other Sabbath creatures followed the albino in: one, a spidery, bow-legged thing—emaciated to the point that it seemed every bone was visible—with darkened skin, as if it had been burned to a crisp but then removed from the oven at the last second before total immolation; the other, hidden almost completely beneath a long-sleeved coat and brimmed hat pulled low, despite the summer heat.

“My prince,” droned the albino, mocking the conversation upon which he’d electronically eavesdropped, “forgive the intrusion, but your assistant said that we could see you.” He gestured toward Terrence’s blankly staring body, and then raised an eyebrow at Thatchet’s nonexistent reply. “Perhaps he was mistaken,” he said in the same dry tone, completely devoid of emotion. “He does seem a bit wound up. Perhaps a vacation is in order.”

Don Carlos could only stand and blink, dumbfounded. The spidery creature tittered at the albino’s poor joke. The behemoth seemed unaware of the attempt at humor, but laughed once because his companion did.

The ghouls? Don Carlos wondered. *Where are all the guards?*

“There will be no further intrusions,” said the albino to Don Carlos, as if telepathically aware of the question.

Don Carlos glanced again at Hill. *All the guards...and no sounds of struggle.* The *coup d'état* he had envisioned was not going to occur at some future date. It was happening now.

"You Camarilla types all have the same problem," the albino said matter-of-factly. He stepped to within a foot of the captive prince. "You fear your elders too much." He raised the hacksaw, briefly inspected the blade in the dim light, and then placed it against Thatchet's left arm just below the elbow. The confining shadows, without freeing the prince's arm, parted before the saw teeth.

The albino began to work the saw, forward and back, forward and back, and it sliced neatly through the flesh. Don Carlos looked away—he might feast on mortal blood, but that was a far cry from this raw butchery—but he could not hide from the nerve-wracking sound of the hacksaw blade as it grated against bone.

"Hmm," said the albino to himself. "Radius or ulna? I can never remember. No matter. They'll both have to go."

The grating sound resumed, more forcefully this time. He finished the first bone and began the second. This time, however, the rhythmic sawing ended with a ragged snap.

"Damn. I'm afraid I've made a mess of this one," the albino muttered. "But you know what they say: practice, practice, practice."

A dull thud by Don Carlos's feet attracted his attention. He looked down to see the prince's left hand and forearm, a jagged splinter of bone protruding where the elbow should have been.

Don Carlos jumped back and, against his better judgment, glanced at the prince, not where the albino was beginning to saw on the other arm, but at Thatchet's face. If he'd tried to scream, the sound had not penetrated the veil of shadow enclosing his mouth. His eyes were wide with pain, but that was not all. Don Carlos expected to see fear and regret at the end of what might have been eternal existence. Instead, all that mingled with the pain in those straining eyes was hatred. Thatchet stared not at the albino or the progressing ruin of his own right arm. He'd fixed his glare on Don Carlos, and the hatred in those eyes was as much, or more so, for the Toreador as for the beasts of the Sabbat.

"There." The albino held up the prince's right hand. "You see, my Camarilla friend. Your elders are nothing to fear once they're properly disarmed."

The spidery thing twittered again. Its laughter was like fingernails along a chalkboard. The behemoth guffawed like a giant idiot-childe, and all this time the Sabbat obscured by coat and hat stood in silence.

"Delona, fetch my toolbox and an extension cord," said the albino. His white skin was speckled with blood, though there was little enough on the floor, all things considered. Apparently the prince had not fed recently, for little blood ran from the stumps, which were already beginning to heal over thanks to the potency of vampiric vitae.

The spider-thing loped out of the room, but the albino abruptly changed his mind and called her back. "We don't have that much time, I'm afraid."

Just as abruptly, the albino's attention and his disturbing, pink-eyed gaze shifted to Don Carlos.

Don Carlos was trying mightily to deny that which he'd seen. But the severed arms, the second of which the albino now dropped to the floor, would not go away, and the Sabbat monsters stood undeniably all about.

"You're leaving, then," Don Carlos asked, finally finding his voice, but trying not to sound too hopeful.

The albino nodded. "There's little else to be done in Richmond. Within the hour, not one Camarilla elder will survive here."

The bold statement took a moment to sink in. *Not one Camarilla elder...*

Again, Don Carlos realized his mistake. Just as this was no covert scouting mission in preparation for a future coup, neither was it a mere surgical strike to leave the Kindred of the city leaderless.

Not one Camarilla elder will survive here.

If what the albino said was true, if every elder were destroyed, such a purge would leave those of Don Carlos's generation to take hold of the reins of leadership. He was willing to begin his ascent to power as a pawn of the Sabbat, for a pawn, in time, could be converted to a queen—or in this case, a prince.

"You will need someone to stay behind here, to keep tabs on the new leadership in the city," suggested Don Carlos. "They will be weak at first, but a contact on the inside will be invaluable in time."

And in time, Don Carlos thought, I will squeeze you out.

The albino didn't respond, but instead turned back to Prince Thatchet, still prisoner to the shadow incarnate. Grabbing one of the wisps of hair and pulling the prince's head back, the albino placed the saw blade on the top ridge of his captive's larynx—"I'm afraid the blade is a bit more dull than it was"—and began to saw.

Slowly.

Each stroke, back and forth, sent tremors through the prince's body. His eyes bulged until Don Carlos thought they would pop from their sockets. But still the shadow held the prince functionally immobile, helpless.

Don Carlos closed his eyes, and when he opened them the albino, a pale Perseus having vanquished the gorgon, held aloft the head of the prince, his face finally free from shadow.

"I need no contact on the inside," said the triumphant albino, smiling for the first time that Don Carlos had seen. The sight struck cold into his undead heart. "For there will be no inside. We do not strike here and destroy the elders of your city, only to move on and allow you to continue, with only the names of the Camarilla weaklings in charge having changed.

"Tonight we stomp you out. All of you."

Don Carlos began to protest, but there was a great pressure on his neck. He was being lifted off his feet by the behemoth's hand around his throat. And already the albino had forgotten him, discarded like so much rubbish.

I can help you! Let me help you! Don Carlos wanted to say, but the voice was choked out of him.

"This should be enough to put me ahead of Hardin in our little wager," said the albino as he stared at the prince's head. Then he turned and looked thoughtfully at Don Carlos. "Maybe one more."

Saturday, 26 June 1999, 12:03 AM
A studio apartment in Red Hook, Brooklyn
New York City, New York



“No, wait.” Hesha laughed, and twirled a finger clockwise. “You have it upside down. Now it’s only backwards. There.”

Elizabeth steadied the package on what felt like its base, and slit open the packing tape with a razor blade. She peeled paper and bubble-wrap away like layers of onion, and was rewarded by a misshapen, unwieldy mystery still swathed in black velvet.

“Close your eyes,” said Hesha, and he slipped the shroud away from his prize. “All right, open them.”

It was inky-blue, and red, and jet-black. It was perhaps sixteen inches tall, and might have been larger had it retained all its limbs, weapons, and trappings over the years. It was fierce, and it seemed to writhe in anger, and it defied with a monstrous grimace those who looked upon it.

Elizabeth stared at it, and Hesha watched her face change as she took in the details. First, there was the frank appreciation of an expert in the presence of the unusual. Her mouth corners twitched as her eyes flickered over the grotesqueries. She reached forward to touch the chipped tip of a broken ax, and her brows furrowed in doubt. Suddenly, her hand darted to the workbench’s side. A halogen light blazed into Hesha’s eyes, and he flinched away. “Sorry,” said the historian, distractedly. She swung the lamp and its attached magnifying lens into position over the raw edge. The Setite blinked back rage—the light stung him, and he lost sight of her face in the red miasma that hovered before his eyes.

Her voice spun through the fiery void: “Is this a trick question?”

He left her there and walked to the kitchenette. The microwave blinked 12:01 just as he passed it. “No. You were thinking forgery?”

“I wanted to eliminate the possibility.” Elizabeth took up a pad, and began making notes. “Particularly after the spectacular build-up you gave the ‘puzzle.’ One of my professors tried that on me. Bet me lunch over it. I made him pony up steak and cocktails.”

Hesha browsed through the cabinets. “Good for you.”

“This coloring is amazing.” She frowned down at the enlarged ax and arm in the lens. “Made me think it was art glass, to begin with. The carver was a real master.”

“And why do you say that?”

“Aside from the fact that the physical surface of the piece is exquisite? Wine glasses are under the island. Rather dusty, I’m afraid. It’s the red. Look where he’s chosen to leave the red...it’s like an optical illusion. Seen from below—the figure is a warrior lording it over the viewer. He’s come home from the battlefield absolutely *dripping* blood from weapons, hands, and teeth. Seen from above—it’s a demon rising from the fires of hell. His arms and armor ripple with the flame, but the fight hasn’t started yet. It’s fascinating. And where the black is bluest, that’s where he’s designed metal trappings. I can’t understand how...”

Hesha washed the glasses and poured for two.

"What are the rules, Professor Ruhadze?"

"The rules?" He set her wine before her, and pressed his own glass to his lips. "For the puzzle...just tell me what you see. Make statements, and I'll tell you if I know them to be true or false. Think of questions I've already looked into, and I'll tell you the answers. Think of questions I haven't looked into...and you get an A for the course."

"It is carved from a solid piece of stone, except for this—" and she pointed to the white of the creature's sole remaining eye. It had begun with three; two empty sockets beneath it attested to their former occupants' existence.

"Yes." Hesha pulled a soft chair into the workshop.

"The stone is chalcedony. Specifically, the kind of agate the jewelers call 'apache flame.'"

"Yes."

She sipped her wine and said sharply, "It isn't a modern artifact."

"How are you sure?"

"Because," she began and then outlined her position decisively. He granted her the arguments, and the game continued for hours.

Saturday, 26 June 1999, 12:44 AM
Thames Street, in front of the Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland



Movement was still excruciating. It was a struggle for Victoria to keep the grimace from her face as she slid out of the limousine. In standing, the needles of pain—no, the *iron spikes* of pain—had at her anew. She thanked the gods for Garlotte's long-windedness. By her side, as she fought to maintain her composure, he lectured her about the renovated buildings, the old ballast stones that were used to cobble the streets in the historic facsimile, and...well, she wasn't sure what else. His words seemed to run together into one long, monotonous drone. And all the while, Victoria could smell the vital fluid of the mortal driver standing not two feet away, but she was unable to do more than smile and nod politely.

Surely one more would sate my thirst, she thought, catching sight of the chauffeur in her peripheral vision. But she'd had that same notion on board the ship...again and again and again.

At last, Garlotte extended his arm, and she allowed him to escort her into the inn. The facility was a magnificent reconstruction, full of natural-grain woodwork and hardwood floors, brass fixtures, oriental carpets, and of course the attendants—*employees*, she must remember to call them—were all dressed in period garb. A minor sideshow for the typical tourist or businessman, but for many Kindred, such attention to detail afforded the opportunity to escape the oh-so-confusing modern era and luxuriate in self-delusion. Victoria suspected that Garlotte must spend a great deal of time here.

Partway across the lobby, she stopped, closed her eyes, and drank in the fragrances of her surroundings: A-positive, the bellboy; B-positive, the desk clerk; B-negative, the housekeeper....

Don't I just have the one-track mind tonight, she realized, but she couldn't help it. Her escape from Atlanta had left her debilitated—not the escape itself, but the several nights of her preceding imprisonment. Elford, that Tzimisce fiend, a mockery of humanity, had... She shuddered at the mere thought.

"Have you caught a chill, my love?" Garlotte asked her quietly as he led her toward the elevator and rubbed her shoulder. His fingers were ice against her skin, but she fawned reassuringly at him.

Elford had...mistreated her. Badly. His ministrations had left her damaged in ways she'd been unsure would ever heal. But despite the lingering discomfort, heal they had, for the most part. Enough that she could wear the revealing gown the prince had presented her. The gloves were a fortunate accessory, and luckily the back did not swoop too low. She was continually amazed by the power of blood—the very stuff of life itself—once it entered her undead form. Even so, the sheer amount of blood that had been required had appalled her...afterward, when she realized what she'd done.

But spilt milk and all that, she thought.

The elevator had buttons for the first five floors. Garlotte inserted a key that allowed access to the sixth and seventh.

"I issued the summons, as you requested," said the prince, turning to business at last.

Victoria, too, set her mind to the matters at hand. She squeezed his arm playfully. “*Invitations*, my dear. *Invitations*. We’re not holding these darlings for trial.” As she chided him for his authoritarian manner, her thoughts were ranging in another direction.

Fourteen. There had been fourteen sailors. She could move forward with her plans. The ship’s register had listed nineteen crew members, which would have been disastrous, or if not disastrous would at least have caused Victoria to abort her current course of action. The captain, with some gentle encouragement, had admitted to her that he’d fabricated five sailors in the records so that he could draw their wages for himself. Good old-fashioned, South American industry and graft. Victoria had been quite heartened.

Before Garlotte had left her on the ship, she’d asked him to call together whatever Kindred he could, especially survivors and refugees—such as herself—from the Sabbat attacks to the south. Her dear Setite rescuers, before she’d abandoned them at the airport, had told her more of the irresistible attacks that, from nowhere, had swept across much of the Eastern Seaboard over the past nights. Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston, Columbia—all had fallen in short order. Whatever Kindred had survived—and from Atlanta, as of yet, she knew of none other than herself—would find their previous domiciles patently inhospitable, she imagined. Some might flee west, to Chattanooga, Knoxville or, more likely, New Orleans. But many would head north, especially if they were unaware of the northward progression of the Sabbat forces on their heels, which was also likely.

Such forced migration, Victoria knew, would result in chaos—princes were destroyed or, at the least, turned out of their cities; the masses were uprooted and fearful—and whoever managed to reassert order in the midst of bedlam would achieve significant laurels indeed.

So she’d asked Garlotte to call the Kindred together, and he’d done her bidding in this. She would rally the troops, so to speak; she’d selflessly provide herself, refugee in her own right, as the shepherd of lost souls...and they would adore her. They would beg her to lead them. She had been so close to the reins of power in Atlanta, only to have them snatched away by the damnable Sabbat interference. The players had all been assembled and primed. It had been obvious that Prince Benison would either have fallen to Julius, or would have been deposed by the Camarilla if he’d managed to destroy the Brujah archon. Thelonious and Benjamin had come together in an uneasy alliance; the prince’s whorish wife Eleanor would have met an unfortunate end, and perhaps taken one of the conspirators with her. The doors to the halls of power would have opened wide, and Victoria would have stridden in unopposed.

If the thrice-damned Sabbat hadn’t crashed her party (quite literally) and churned all of her careful preparations to ruin.

More troubling, however, than the failure of her plans, more frightening than the torture she’d undergone at the hands of the vile Tzimisce, was a vague suspicion she couldn’t shake from her bones—namely, that she was a mere pawn. True, it was a concern she’d carried with her for many years, and a justifiable worry it was. Just as most mortals were completely unaware of the shadow-society of undead beings who held sway over the night and greatly influenced through mortal agents the events of the day, most Kindred had little to no inkling of the far older and more powerful forces in the world, those who pulled the strings of those who pulled the strings. Victoria was not so ignorant of the elder beings. Not that she had definitive proof...but then no one did. Her intuition in the matter, however, was so strong, so undeniable, that the knowledge passed as a certainty for her.

And so she had long guarded the integrity of her actions and sought to insure that her plans were her own, not the whim of some unseen player in the Jyhad—that struggle of the hidden powers, to whom even the Camarilla and the Sabbat were but mere pieces on the board. Victoria had determined to be unpredictable, to make sure than no person, no creature, could idly count on her to play a certain role in any endeavor. On the surface, those around her expected a mistress of Clan Toreador to be flighty. So much the better if, in fulfilling their shallow expectations, she secured a much deeper purpose.

Even her most simplistic, low-risk, high-yield schemes were subject to the gauge of randomness. As was her custom, she had held her plans in Atlanta up to such a test of independence. The giant embellished doors covered with friezes at the High Museum of Art had served that purpose. Heaven and Hell. Victoria had watched who entered and by which door. Leopold, the pathetic fop, had chosen Hell, and so as dictated by her elaborate formula involving that and other criteria, Victoria entered the gallery through Heaven.

Yet the evening had turned against her, and in a quite dramatic way. Coincidence? Victoria put very little stock in that concept.

Luckily, she changed, discarded, and tried on new plans as easily as she did clothes or lovers, and since her more Byzantine test of randomness had failed her in Atlanta, Victoria undertook a much simpler test to validate or preclude her Baltimore plans. Rather than a complex equation of minutiae, she had determined to rely solely on one unambiguous factor—the number of sailors on the ship: odd or even. If it had been odd, she would have skipped this gathering of Kindred altogether, never mind that she had instructed Garlotte to arrange it. But there'd been fourteen—not only an even number, but equally divisible by seven, the number of clans making up the Camarilla. How much clearer could the result of her test be? Victoria divined that she was destined to rise to greatness leading her fellow Kindred in the aftermath of the vicious Sabbat attacks, the first of which had dashed her earlier plans. So in a way, the destruction of her efforts in Atlanta had led directly to her current opportunity. Perhaps she had merely descended into Hell so that she might now ascend to Heaven.

“Don’t you agree, Victoria?”

She looked up at Garlotte for a moment, realizing that she’d completely missed whatever he’d just asked. She patted his arm. “Of course, my dear.” It didn’t really matter. Garlotte never asked important questions.

The elevator stopped at the sixth floor. Beyond the doors, a dozen men in tuxedos conspicuously lined the corridor. Security. Ghouls, no doubt. Garlotte escorted Victoria past them, and though handsome to a man, none of them cut as fine a figure as the prince in his dark, tailored suit. She labored to keep from her face any betrayal of the physical pain that plagued her with each step.

At the far end of the corridor stood double doors behind one final sentinel. This was no ghoul, but Kindred—a disheveled, wild-eyed creature who looked very much out of place in the posh surroundings, despite someone’s attempt to dress him up in a blazer and khakis.

“Victoria,” said the prince, “may I present to you Malachi, assistant to the sheriff, and respected representative of Clan Gangrel.”

Scourge, thought Victoria. It made sense. Obviously, this one was the teeth behind Sheriff Goldwin. Isaac was no enforcer; he would make the political decisions. Probably

Garlotte was grooming his childe as his eventual successor, but the dirty work they would relegate to this unfortunate. A Gangrel retainer, if one of the beasts could be enticed to serve, generally proved as loyal as any dog, twice as useful and more intelligent than most breeds.

Victoria ignored the Gangrel and straightened Garlotte's tie. "Shall we join the unwashed masses, my prince?"

She took his arm again, and they entered the small auditorium, leaving Malachi to close the doors and sniff at the air.

Saturday, 26 June 1999, 1:44 AM
McHenry Auditorium, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland



Chaos. Sheer, unadulterated chaos.

The auditorium was more a glorified conference room, modeled after an amphitheater, with five ascending, curved rows of ten to eighteen seats each, and nearly every seat, at present, was filled with a screaming banshee straight from the pits of hell. Or so it seemed to Garlotte. After an hour and a half, the mood of the “conference” was growing only more ugly.

“You might see my point,” Victoria insisted over the din to one of the Brujah back-benchers, “if you weren’t such an obstinate, imbecilic, disrespectful cad.”

The young Brujah wagged his tongue through the “v” of his index and middle fingers. The rest of the rabble roared approvingly and took up his gesture as well.

Perhaps, Garlotte surmised, *Victoria is not completely in her element*. One on one, she could undoubtedly wrap any of these whelps around her little finger, stake him out for the morning sun, all only to have him beg for more. In this more public forum, however, with each insurgent supported by his comrades, she seemed somewhat at a loss. Seeing that neither charm nor reason was destined to carry the evening, she had proceeded onward to pure invective.

“Why should we expect any of you to understand, you bilious collection of lobotomized perverts?”

Garlotte stood front and center. Victoria was off to his left, near the edge of the well of the auditorium. She’d initially taken a seat as Garlotte had commenced the conference, welcomed the guests to his city and proceeded with introductions of the notable attendees. The preliminary niceties having concluded without incident, Victoria had risen and briefly ruminated upon the recent unpleasantness initiated by the Sabbat, and the need for a unified response from members of the Camarilla. When one of the Brujah ruffians, all testosterone beneath his too-tight T-shirt, broke in and voiced his support for “busting the balls” of every Sabbat vampire within a thousand miles, Victoria had questioned the prudence of such a strategy.

“Like we need advice from backwoods refugees who already got their asses kicked,” the Brujah had replied, and the discourse promptly deteriorated from that point.

Though Garlotte was unsure why Victoria had allowed herself to be drawn into such an acrimonious and ill-focused debate, he was growing increasingly perturbed with the behavior of the rougher element. Most were Brujah, of course. Generally, they led the existence of anarchs, roaming freely between Baltimore and Washington, shirking clan responsibilities and only bothering to show up at Kindred functions when there was trouble to be made or what they considered entitlements to be claimed. To this point, Garlotte had allowed them to express their views unhindered for two reasons: first, he himself was uncomfortable with some of the implications of what Victoria suggested, and he didn’t wish to create the impression that he supported her unconditionally; second, to quash the incendiary element prematurely might draw the ire of conference’s most notable participant.

Perhaps *participant* was too generous a description. Thus far, Theo Bell had not uttered a word. He sat in the right end-seat on the third row, though as archon to Brujah Justicar Pascek he was entitled to a central seat on the first row. Only partially hidden by his mirrored sunglasses and black, low-pulled baseball cap was the seemingly perpetual scowl on his ebony face. He was a big, muscular man, and his bulky leather jacket and crossed arms heightened that impression. His very presence necessitated restraint in dealing with the other Brujah. Even so, Garlotte's patience was near its limit.

The back-benchers were again directing indelicate gestures toward Victoria. In their midst, someone began to stomp and, within seconds, a score of booted feet had joined in.

Garlotte stepped forward and raised a hand. The uproar quickly died down to a few lingering stomps. One of the less unruly among the Brujah—Garlotte recalled her as Lydia—smacked the offender on the back of the head, and the stomping ceased altogether.

"There are those," said the prince calmly, at the same time his iron gaze bore into the anarchy crowd, "from whom we have not yet heard." He intentionally avoided looking in Victoria's direction—she would be displeased that he had not come to her aid earlier—as he then turned to the other side of the auditorium with a most inviting expression pasted on his face.

In response, Maria Chin, the sole representative of Clan Tremere ordered to the gathering, stood and coolly surveyed the chamber to make sure she had the attention of at least most of those present. The Brujah rowdies were cowed, if not rendered completely reticent, by the prince's intervention. "Ms. Ash," began the witch from the clan's Washington chantry, "you speak of a unified response, or concerted action, but it seems to us that at present we lack a complete assessment of the situation."

Victoria's spirits rose noticeably. "A remarkably insightful statement...at last," she added, glancing toward the upper reaches of the chamber. A collective hiss emanated from that section, but quickly died away with a pointed glare from Garlotte.

"If we are to respond to these incursions of the Sabbat, *as we must*," Victoria insisted, "we must first gather as much information as possible. I imagine you might be able to enlighten us regarding how the Tremere have fared over the past nights...?"

Chin measured carefully the words of her response. No trace of emotion crossed her eastern features. "Like every other clan, we have suffered ...some damage."

Garlotte was not surprised by the vague nature of Chin's answer. The Tremere was not about to reveal to anyone outside her clan the degree to which the warlocks might or might not have been weakened by the Sabbat's attentions. *Victoria must know that*, he thought.

Now another Toreador, and one of Garlotte's own subjects, spoke up. "Certainly no clan has navigated the past week unscathed," Robert Gainesmil conceded. "But how many chantries still function among the aggrieved cities?" he asked more pointedly. "If we are to stand against the beasts, then we first must know where we ourselves stand."

"Screw the warlocks!" one of the Brujah shouted, and a new uproar of support filled the auditorium.

Garlotte waited patiently this time. He also took note of the fact that Gainesmil, a longstanding and staunch supporter of the prince, was supporting Victoria, for whatever good it would do them. The secretive Tremere would not, on the grounds of sect loyalty or anything else, be berated into giving away what she—and more importantly, her superiors—considered to be privileged information.

Chin, meanwhile, remained as unruffled as the plain, gray skirt suit she wore. The caterwauling of the anarchs affected her no more than the insinuations of disloyalty to the Camarilla from the two Toreador.

"We agree," said Chin, "that assembling the proper information is vital."

Proper, thought Garlotte. *There's the rub.*

"Do we have a reliable listing of the cities that have fallen?" Chin asked.

"Atlanta, Savannah." The new, deep and powerful voice instantly gained the attention of all present, rowdies in the back notwithstanding. Theo Bell matter-of-factly ticked off the cities on his fingers. "Charleston, Columbia, Greenville, Asheville. Raleigh and Wilmington, North Carolina, fell last night. Norfolk is under attack tonight; the press'll call it labor unrest with the shipbuilders. Communication is broken with Charlottesville and Fredericksburg."

"Dear Lord," Gainesmil whispered in awe at the recitation as he slouched in his seat. "The barbarians are at the gate."

"Bring 'em on!" shouted the same Brujah who'd disparaged the Tremere before. His kin echoed his sentiments. Theo crossed his arms again and returned to his earlier impassive attitude.

Chin resumed her seat as well, now that the focus of the conference had shifted from her perceived recalcitrance to the frightening progress of the Sabbat.

"It should be obvious," said Victoria, seizing the initiative again, "that we must stand against them."

"What exactly do you propose?" Garlotte asked. He had a suspicion, but had heard only generalities so far. "Surely Prince Vitel in Washington and Prince Thatchet in Richmond, and others, are taking the necessary precautions. As am I."

"But can any one prince," Gainesmil interjected, "prepare sufficiently, considering...?" He waved his hand, as if tracing a line of the fallen cities, and looked uneasily back and forth between Garlotte and the again silent Theo Bell.

The prince suppressed a scowl. That his subject would question his ability to protect the city was galling, though it appeared that Gainesmil's blunt questioning stemmed from worry rather than from any desire to damage Garlotte's standing.

"My point exactly," said Victoria. "One by one, our cities will fall—"

"They can't keep doing like they been doing," interrupted Lydia the Brujah. "They don't have it in them."

"They seem to have had it in them so far," Victoria said. "They had it in them enough to kill Archon Julius."

The resulting shocked silence quickly gave way as the back-benchers erupted at this insult. As the rougher element of Brujah hurled unflattering epithets at Victoria with reckless abandon, Garlotte cast a wary glance toward Bell. The leather-clad official of their clan seemed to have taken no umbrage at Victoria's throwing the demise of his fellow archon in their faces. Then again, Bell was notoriously difficult to read.

Victoria somehow made herself heard above her detractors. "This assembly must take responsibility for the resistance to these attacks. We must coordinate a defense. Otherwise, our cities will fall like dominoes."

"Just like South-fucking-east Asia?" ruefully cried an anarch who, by the look of him, could well have been a Vietnam veteran.

"This isn't supposition," Victoria snapped. "You heard the list; you heard what Theo said." Her implication that the archon supported her position gave the other Brujah pause. "If we don't take action, city after city will fall."

A shabbily dressed, strange old bird with a beard long enough to tuck in his pants, shot to his feet and thrust a finger into the air. "They will never take D.C.!" he asserted. His equally unkempt companion nodded vigorous agreement.

Garlotte was surprised by their sudden, passionate interest. Both of the Malkavians, known only as Roughneck and the Quaker, generally kept to themselves. But the prince also knew that he should never let himself be surprised by *anything* one of the lunatics did.

"I never thought they'd take Charleston," piped up one refugee.

"Or Savannah," agreed another displaced southerner.

"We must take control of the situation," Victoria asserted.

"By what authority?" All eyes turned toward the speaker, Prince Garlotte. Here was the crux of his reservations. Obviously something had to be done, but an arrangement that trampled on his sovereign rights as prince was unacceptable.

"By the authority of necessity," said Victoria. "By the authority of survival. I was in Atlanta. I barely escaped." She cast a glare so cold at the anarchs that none of them dared defy her or mock her on this point. "I will not be a victim again."

A long moment passed in silence, as every Kindred in the chamber constructed in his or her own mind what it would mean to be a victim of the Sabbat.

But of all of them, Victoria knew. And barely repressed emotion leaked to the surface in her voice: "We must decide what is needed, and then we must call on the clans, the princes, the Inner Circle...." She paused, collected herself. "We must do *whatever* has to be done."

Just then, the double doors at the rear of the auditorium crashed open. Malachi stood to the side as Isaac Goldwin strode into the chamber. He passed, none too gently, several of the anarchs who had, over the course of the evening, spilled from the seats to block the aisle and made his way to Garlotte's side.

"My prince," the sheriff bowed respectfully, "there is trouble in Washington."

Deathly silence gripped the chamber.

Garlotte quietly seethed. First, faithful Gainesmil had publicly sided with Victoria before Garlotte had clearly indicated his stance. Now, the prince's own impudent childe was making a public show of delivering information that, most likely, should have been conveyed in private.

"What trouble?" the prince asked grimly. He could hardly put the genie back in the bottle at this point.

"Violence," said Isaac ominously. "Gunfire in the streets—more than is usual even for *the capital*." He spat out the last words with distaste, as if the very idea of that city occupying a loftier position than Baltimore offended him.

A din of an order to put all the previous disruptions to shame immediately erupted. Cries of "The Sabbat! They're here!" and "Kill them! Kill them all!" filled the room.

"Jesus long-haired Christ!" shouted Roughneck. "Washington has fallen!"

Next to him, the Quaker broke into despondent tears. "I knew it would happen...knew it would happen...."

Victoria tried to harness the sudden surge of adrenaline. “You see? This is what I...” But no one was listening.

The anarchs were boiling over. They stomped up and down in outrage, ripped seats from their moorings, pounded on one another’s shoulders, and in general, whipped each other into a collective frenzy.

“Stinkin’ bastards!”

“Kill every last...”

“Gonna split open their...and pull out their ...and kick in their...”

Those who hadn’t already, poured from the seats into the aisles. There, for a few moments, they milled in obvious agitation—some shredded the wallpaper with clawed fingers; others tore at their clothes and wailed menacingly—before filtering out through the doorway. A trailing chorus of “Gotta get to D.C. ...gonna kick some ass...stinkin’ bastards!” slowly subsided into the distance.

The tension was no less for the absence of the militant faction. Garlotte ignored his sheriff-childe, while Victoria tapped her foot in an irritatingly smug way. Theo Bell had not left with the lesser ruffians; he sat, arms crossed, as inscrutable as ever. The sullen Tremere, Maria Chin, looked as if she’d bitten into a lemon. Roughneck was gone with the anarchs, leaving the Quaker hiding (not very successfully) beneath a chair. Otherwise, various refugees milled and chattered nervously. They reminded Garlotte of lowing cattle.

Victoria drifted toward the prince. “We must contact the justicars,” she said, “so they can notify members of the Inner Circle.”

“You don’t think they know what’s happening?” Garlotte asked.

“I suspect they do. Do I know if they care?” She shrugged. “Am I willing to gamble that they’ll send aid unless prodded to it? Are you willing to gamble that—with Baltimore as the ante?”

Garlotte looked over at Bell. The archon, it seemed to him, might be the one to offer some insight in the matter, but Theo appeared inclined to keep his own counsel. Chin, Garlotte knew, was a nonentity among the Tremere; she was a middle-management type sent, because she happened to be nearby, to keep tabs on the other Kindred. If important decisions were to be made, he would have to make them. Victoria stood very close to him. He felt her warmth, caught the glint of light from the locket, his dear wife’s locket.

“I will contact Lucinde,” he said at last. As much as he hated to call the attention of the Ventrue justicar and the Camarilla powers-that-be to his city—who knew what they might decide?—he would do it. The Sabbath was in Washington. He had to do it.

Garlotte turned away from Victoria. “Isaac, show Ms. Ash to her suite,” he instructed his eldest childe, “then come to me. I would speak with you.”



Saturday, 26 June 1999, 2:13 AM
Near the waterfront
Washington, D.C.

The Big Enchilada.

Hardin wasn't too impressed with D.C., not yet anyway. It was too quiet, too tranquil, for his tastes. There were sirens blaring in the distance, at least every ten or fifteen minutes it seemed, and though he was twenty yards from the squat little bar across the street, the bass line of some old Sammy Hagar song reverberated in his chest. Still, something was missing.

Hardin had heard that everything in Washington was either squalor or splendor, that there was no middle ground. This was a rough, working-class neighborhood, the kind that clung to the fringes around places of power. The low buildings were mostly cinderblock or old brick, and all sported either bars or metal doors to cover any glass. He suspected he'd like the splendor even less.

The handful of bystanders outside the bar didn't take much notice of Hardin as he crossed the street. With every two steps, the neon sign in the window flashed on and off:

Purgatory

Purgatory

Purgatory

How fucking cute, he thought. *Isn't that just like a Camarilla crowd?* They huddled behind their little Masquerade for protection from mortals—*Mortals! Fucking ATM machines for a blood bank*—then couldn't resist leaving nudge-nudge-wink-wink clues for those in the know.

Purgatory

Purgatory

With each step, with each flash of the sign, Hardin grew more pissed off. *They're just too stupid—too fucking cute—to live.*

There were enough motorcycles parked out front that Hardin would've pegged the place as a Brujah hangout even without the "Vampires 'R' Us" flashing sign. *At least you know what you're getting with Brujah*, he thought. *Somebody that wants to kick your ass. Maybe he's got a reason, maybe he doesn't. Doesn't really matter.*

At least the Brujah had guts. And the anarchs, some of them had guts, the ones that weren't whiny little pissants. In fact, Hardin preferred some of the rough-and-tumble Camarilla types to his own Lasombra elders, who tended toward the high-falutin' end of the scale. The Brujah might have a chance—in general—but not the ones inside the bar tonight.

Purgatory

Purgatory

"Purgatory, my hairy ass," Hardin muttered as he stepped into the crowded bar.

He stopped just inside the door. The music, loud when he was across the street, drowned out all but shouted conversations, and the smoke in the room served nearly as well as any shadows Hardin might summon. He didn't attempt to shove his way farther in.

Instead, he relaxed and let his vision lose focus—distinct forms became less so, lines blurred and the many figures before him took on quite different aspects. The scene was not completely unlike a twisting kaleidoscope; the thick smoke seemed to take on different colors and patterns, further confusing the already chaotic atmosphere, but through this clouded filter, Hardin saw what was hidden from normal sight—which figures were mortal, or ghoul, or Cainite. The distinctions were not always clear or precise, some requiring more interpretation than others. The colors and patterns shifted, one into another into another, and many of the patrons in the bar were moving about as well.

But Hardin didn't need exact information, just a broad impression.

The front of the bar was filled mostly with mortals, maybe a ghoul or two thrown in. Toward the rear of the establishment, amidst the densest of the smoke and shadows, were vampires. At least six or seven, maybe a couple more.

Hardin let his eyes refocus, then turned with a tight smile to one of the patrons closest to him, who might've been a ghoul, a watchdog for the Cainites toward the back, or not. Hardin wasn't sure that she was, this woman in cut-offs and half-shirt, but there was a chance. With a deft flick of his wrist, a now-open butterfly knife appeared in his hand. He placed his other hand on her shoulder, and then plunged the blade into her abdomen just below the navel. Her face registered surprise at first, and above the noise and confusion, no one else in the bar seemed to realize what he had done. Even when he sliced upward with inhuman strength and speed through her belly, bra, and throat, and she collapsed to the floor, there was only confusion from other patrons, not alarm—another drunk puking or passed out. If some noticed the blood, their warnings were drowned out by the music.

Desmond and Rojo pushed past Hardin, as did Jake, Greasy and Amber, forming a wall across the width of the bar. As one, they pulled out their sawed-off shotguns and opened fire.

The first blasts cut a huge swath through the clientele. Bodies, glass, tables exploded. The second volley had much the same effect. Hardin marveled at how quickly the front half of the establishment had emptied without anyone getting out the front door. Those customers who weren't dead were lying wounded or diving for cover.

For the first time, screams rose above the music, which had moved on to the crooning of the Righteous Brothers.

"And there's no tenderness, like before, in your finger-tips."

Two howling Brujah launched themselves like missiles from the shadows in the back, but the gunmen had missed not a beat in reloading, and the concerted blast of five shotguns stopped the two Kindred and sent them hurtling in the opposite direction.

"You're trying hard not to show it, ba-by...."

Hardin's men concentrated their fire on the rear of the bar, but with the spray and rapidity of the shots, not an inch was free of the devastating fire—only behind the bar. And Hardin was ready when the bartender rose with a shotgun of his own.

"You've lost that loving feeling, whoa-oa, that loving fee-ee-ling...."

Hardin's falchion split the bartender's Adam's apple before he could pull the trigger.

"You've lost—"

Amber blew through the bar with her next three blasts, just in case, and the music stopped. From out back, more gunfire erupted. Hardin smiled. Lonnie and the others were doing their job, blocking the rear exits from outside.

A few more rounds finished it. Even those, Kindred or kine, who'd been cowering behind overturned tables were shredded. Rojo and Desmond pumped round after round in the prone bodies—no sense giving a vampire a chance. None of the Camarilla sots present, assuming they were armed, had even gotten off a shot.

A noticeable silence settled over Purgatory.

“Two minutes, boys,” said Hardin. “Get what blood you can, then we’re gone.” He thought for a moment about collecting a few more heads, but he didn’t want to stick around and fight the police. Besides, there were plenty more Kindred in D.C., and the fun was just beginning.

Saturday, 26 June 1999, 3:37 AM
A studio apartment in Red Hook, Brooklyn
New York City, New York



"Oh, damn." Elizabeth held her head in her hands, and shook it.

"What's wrong?" Hesha Ruhadze asked.

"I had a theory," she moaned, letting him refill her glass. "I had a perfectly lovely theory. And then I went and made putty casts of the sockets. And my theory's ruined. I'm no expert, Hesha. I can't place this blasted thing in a civilization, let alone a time or site."

He put an arm over her shoulders, and pulled his chair closer. "What happened to the casts?"

"Look at this," she said. "I used polymer putty—stable enough to get the shape of the holes and flexible enough to pop out of the sockets without damaging your friend here. And I didn't need to." She handed him half a putty eyeball. There was a small plastic dowel rooted in it as a handle. "Watch this."

With thumb and forefinger, she twisted the remaining cast out of its seating.

"And I'll bet you anything you like," she said, touching the third socket gingerly, "that the last one—yes." She handed him a small, pale stone—the white of the demon's sole preserved eye. There was a hole in the center for the iris, which remained in the statue's head.

"The whites screw into the sockets. There's the stumps of irises broken off in these two. You can see the 'negatives' in the casts. The bases were black; I'd imagine that the 'whites' were red. Yours is the spirit eye; white with a red iris."

She laid her head down on the workbench, cushioned by her left arm, and looked up at the inexplicable marauder.

"Find me a near-Indian civilization with the belief structure to give this thing three eyes and four arms, the war craft to put those styles of weapons in his hands, the mechanical knowledge of even primitive screw threads like these as *fasteners*, and the tools to work carnelian like *that*—and I'll tell you where he came from. I'm sorry, Hesha. I can't even think of lost civilizations this poor devil could be from. Did the little man who sold him to you come from a spaceship?"

Hesha turned the burning lamp off. "No." He stroked her hair away from her face and pulled her to her feet.

"Have you had him carbon-dated? There's black grime stuck in his mane and tail."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you what happened when I tried."

"Inconclusive?" she mumbled, drowsily.

"Something like that."

Elizabeth stumbled down the step into the living room. She leaned heavily against the almond-painted column in the center of the apartment and began to fall. He caught her, held her and carried her behind the curtains into her room. Along the way, she tried to speak, and he closed her mouth by kissing her. She kissed back with a kind of sleepy surprise, and then he laid her out on the bed.

He took her sandals off and untied the sash of the dark-blue dress. She made no noise; the hour and the strong, drug-laced wine had overcome her. Hesha looked down at the quiet body and studied her intently. After a moment's deliberation, he lifted her up again, turned down the quilt and covered her with it. Satisfied by the effect, he toed off his own shoes and strode noiselessly back through the apartment.

He took putty and made casts of the demon's eye sockets for himself. He wrapped the statue into its velvet, plastic, and paper and set the package by the door.

He went next to her desk—a modern creation of particleboard and laminates, not the heavy antique that stood empty in the studio area—and went through her papers. He pored over her dissertation notes, her address book, her finances. He read with interest the sympathy cards on the death of her father, the venomous words of Elizabeth's mother, the friendly correspondence of brother Paul and his wife, and nodded as the tone grew terse and strained over time. There were what passed for love letters; he gleaned what he could from them as well.

A small silver clock on the desk told him about the sun, and he collected the bottle and glasses. He rinsed the dregs and drugs from them in the sink. He took a flask from his pocket and poured away what little wine he had had to pretend to drink himself.

He found a small blue juice glass in the cabinets; a rubber band, pen, and scrap paper in a drawer; and plastic wrap in a rack on the pantry door. He flexed his left index finger. The claw hidden there slid forward in its scaly sheath, and with it he sliced open the topmost vein of his right wrist. A slow drop of red-black ichor welled up from the cut. Hesha forced his blood forward, and the thin stream filled the little glass quickly. The wound closed over.

He tore a sheet of plastic loose and covered the draught. In fine, small handwriting, he wrote *Hangover cure* on the scrap of paper and snapped it to the glass with the rubber band. He placed his blood on the top shelf of the refrigerator.

From his raincoat, he took a notebook. On a torn-out page he constructed a note. When he had finished, he brought it to the bedroom and propped it against the mirror. Elizabeth lay motionless, in precisely the position he had left her.

Hesha sat on the edge of the low mattress. He took her fingers in his, and watched her face to be sure she knew nothing. He lifted her hand to his lips and bit.

He drank from her quite slowly. He had hunted earlier, to sate the hunger, but this was better. Her blood coursed gently into him, and the warmth was sweet. He closed his eyes and let himself enjoy the taste. It was a wonder...the difference in savor between mortals...that the blood should never pall...

The Beast stirred slightly, curiously strong. Hesha had long practice wrestling it, and was well fed—he fought it down. It twisted and turned on him; for an instant the surprise allowed a second duel, rare for the Setite. He knew it was too much to expect truce, but decades of disciplined tending and watchfulness had given him a little slack with the thing. Hesha beat it back again.

Uneasily, he took Elizabeth's life from between his teeth, and licked the tiny wounds closed.

Something light touched his cheek, and his eyes snapped open—it was her other hand, reaching up to caress him. He dropped her wrist, startled, and stared at her as she moved—and kept moving, despite wine, drug, weariness, and the Kiss. She was asleep;

she couldn't possibly be conscious. He relaxed as she began to turn. She *was* only moving in her sleep, but she rolled into the sole sliver of light that came through the curtains, and her neck lay bare and pale against her dark hair.

The Beast stretched and roared, and Hesha scrambled to find his shoes in the dark.

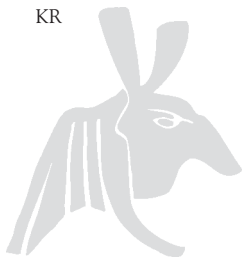
He snatched up his overcoat and the statue, slammed the door behind him and ran down the hall dialing the phone.

"Thompson."

"Sir."

"Baltimore."

"Yes, sir."



Saturday, 26 June 1999, 1:16 PM
A studio apartment in Red Hook, Brooklyn
New York City, New York

Elizabeth woke to the uncomfortable warmth of clothes in bed. Groggily, she threw off the quilt and sat up. Her mouth tasted terrible, her hair hung into her eyes, her dress was twisted around her, and her bra poked into her ribs. She planted both feet on the floor, stood up and started toward the shower, shucking her dress and the rest of it along the way.

Thirty minutes later she poked her head back out of the bathroom—cautiously. It had occurred to her that she didn't remember the end of the evening. The apartment felt empty, sounded empty... she crept to the edge of the curtains and looked out. No sign of Heshia, she saw with relief. She shrugged into an old, comfortable T-shirt and sweats and reached for a hair band from a pile on the dresser. The note lay next to them.

Dear Elizabeth—

Good morning—I hope you slept well. The wine was apparently a stronger vintage than expected. I brought you in here—I hope you don't mind—you looked rather crumpled in the living room. I'm afraid you'll feel rather crumpled in the morning, too. My father's secret hangover cure is waiting in the fridge for you. Whatever you do, don't sip it. It tastes worse than it smells.

Thank you for the 'consultation' on the statue. You get the 'A' and I owe you steak dinner and cocktails, if you like. I'm not sure how much longer I'll be in town, but 202-555-7831 will catch up with me eventually, no matter where I go.

Hope to see you again soon.

—Heshia

Elizabeth stuck the note by magnet to the freezer door. She stacked a hangover-friendly breakfast on a tray, added the blue juice glass, and balanced the lot across the room. Sleipnir's broad back took breakfast from her.

She nibbled absent-mindedly at a muffin and started drawing the long curtains up to the ceiling. Her reflection stared back at her, paler and more fey than in her mirror. She cranked open the windows, and the images slanted away, disapproving crookedly of her slothfulness. Elizabeth turned on the fans, plopped down on a stool in the workshop and turned to her assignment for the day, an American Colonial painting that had been, unfortunately, varnished for its own protection several times.

Most of the afternoon later, picking out another solvent took her past the bench where the putty casts lay, and on the way back she took them with her. She stared at the little eyes, and tried to remember where she had seen their like before. She abandoned the easel to search her office desk. It was a journal article, she was sure now—something the statue had reminded her of—but she couldn't put her finger on the issue or even the year in which she'd read it. She thought of a place in the bedroom shelves that held a bundle of old Xeroxed references. She flew to them and spent half an hour eliminating the possibilities of the shelves, the magazine rack, the bedside table.

“Damn.”

Then she saw *it*—just a corner sticking out of a pile of magazines—the cadet-blue paper cover of *The Southern California Archaeological Digest*. Elizabeth leaped for the couch, sent the stack sprawling and seized the journal.

The article, entitled *Further Notes on the Sur-Amech Burial Site*, was considered ‘further’ notes because the digs had been disrupted by border wars and travel sanctions to the nation that laid claim to the patch of desert the old necropolis occupied and because the grave under study was set apart from the main cemetery. Elizabeth looked at the atlas and the dates given for the research—the author had to have returned to his excavations under threat of fire, if he’d worked when and where he claimed to.

There were photographs of the grave and diagrams in three angles of the location of each artifact uncovered. Two pieces merited their own diagrams: a beautiful, unbroken example of the pottery native to the time and region, and a carnelian bead the corpse had worn on a thong around her neck.

Elizabeth pored over the writer’s description of the little jewel and walked over to the workbench. She measured the putty casts with calipers, string and a ruler. The left eye was a perfect match. She grinned, propped her elbow on the bench and bit her thumb in satisfaction.

Flipping the blue-gray journal over to its cover and contents page, she found the author’s name: Dr. Jordan Kettridge, Professor of Archaeology, University of California, Berkeley.

Of course. Kettridge was the kind of man who would rather dig during war than peace; she’d heard of his exploits in Iraq. She’d heard complaints, too, from her own professors and the staff at the museum. Kettridge wouldn’t specialize properly. Kettridge wouldn’t stay with an expedition, not the way real archaeologists worked the field. Kettridge would waltz in after someone else had been carefully running test trenches and stratification holes for ten years to establish culture and diet and timeline and everything that was *important*, get permission to do a foundation study on some farmer’s outhouse, and immediately stumble across the high priests’ personal quarters. Some said it was luck, some said it was instinct, but everyone agreed it was goddamn annoying.

Elizabeth found UC-Berkeley on the net, ran through the faculty e-mail to Kettridge and shot off a query.

Dear Professor Kettridge,

I recently had occasion to review your article on Sur-Amech in the Fall 96 SCAD. I was particularly interested in the pattern of striations found on the carnelian bead from grave d-24. Do they, as they seem to in the diagram on page 138, spiral counterclockwise in relation to the flatter side of the bead?

If so, I believe I have a client interested in purchasing this artifact. The piece is not described as a part of Berkeley’s museum collection in the article; I assume that, being a minor item compared to the pottery found during the expedition, it has passed into a private collection. Could you inform me of the final disposition of the bead? Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth A. Dimitros

Associate, Rutherford House Antiques

That done, she took to the kitchen phone and punched Hesha's number in from the note he'd left.

"Hello?" It was a machine; eventually it beeped. "Hesha, this is Elizabeth. It's Saturday evening. Thanks for, um, carting me to bed. Anyway. I found something in one of my journals about your statue, I think. Give me a call when you can. Take care. Bye."

She set down the phone and began scavenging her cupboards for dinner, clearing the remains of breakfast away as she went.

The forgotten contents of the little juice glass went swirling down the sink.

Saturday, 26 June 1999, 9:14 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Near Columbia, Maryland



Hesha woke to darkness and the silence of the tomb. Lethargy lifted from him, and he felt the last light of day leave the earth. He wondered if the face of the sun had changed in the centuries since the curse had been laid on him. He wondered if Set fled Ra's glory as he traveled the underworld, or whether the dead god were forced by the curse to attack his grandfather's barge every night, or if Set slept, as Hesha himself did, and fought the curse in the land of the living.

Hesha, childe in the seventh degree from Set, the son of Geb, the son of Ra, stirred in his chamber, and lights hidden in the ceiling glowed dimly at his first movement. They threw the carved walls into deep shadow; shallow relief stood forth like sculpture in the round. Farmers, fishers, hunters, artisans, scribes, priests, nobles and royalty performed their daily tasks in the friezes. Beneath the arched body of the sky, they marked the hours with ritual, work, prayer and pleasure. They were copies of the most beautiful art of Egypt, blended into a single masterpiece by modern hands. Hesha ran his night-black fingers over the smooth stone and traced the outline of the cartouche in the wall to his right: a rope, bound into a loop by thinner cords, filled with the signs of Set's name and the simple title, "Lord of the Northern Skies."

Set's descendant rose and paced the walls, admiring the work. He touched his own cartouche above the lintel of a door and walked on. In a crooked corner of the irregular cave, he came to the only unfinished section of the work. Chisel, hammer, brush and charcoal lay neatly in a box at the base of the stone. He picked up the stick of charcoal and drew a last cartouche on the gray rock. Within the oval, he scribed a horned viper, an open tent, a vulture, a man and an ankh—VGH—Veget, the artist. His work was over. Hesha chiseled the rock away from the sign and laid the tools down again. The unfinished panel would remain that way forever.

"Thompson," Hesha said into the dimness.

A small speaker among the lights clicked on. "You called, sir?"

"Conference. Half an hour. You and the Asp in person. Have Janet and the doctor call in on secure lines."

Hesha pushed lightly on a papyrus plant carved into the rock, and a door opened to more mundane apartments. He returned clean and clad in a simple robe, the *gallahbeyah* of his native North Africa. The amulets that had been hidden by western garb swung freely from cords at his neck and waist.

Thompson was waiting for him. A door to the upper areas of the house swung open as he entered, and the Asp made his way into the room. Hesha sat at the foot of the stone bench on which he had spent the day.

"Janet? Doctor? Are you with us?" Hesha asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm here, Hesha."

"Let's begin, then. Reports. Thompson?"

"The bodies of Vogel's team are all accounted for, sir. Transportation arrangements are under way; and we've made funeral provisions for their families. I'd like tomorrow and Monday afternoon free to attend services." Heshia nodded approval. "There wasn't much left of the car, but Atlanta police identified it yesterday as a wreck left in Cabbagetown early Tuesday morning. In their opinion, it was stolen for a joyride and then deliberately crashed."

"Probably true," said Heshia, "as far as it goes. Asp?"

"Six of the Family have come to the townhouse looking for shelter—one from D.C., two each from Charleston, Richmond, and Atlanta, all separately, all in a hell of a hurry. I found them crash space here and there and put them on field rations, per your orders. I gave them your number here; calls have been piling up, but so far they've lain low like good boys and girls."

"That won't last much longer."

"I'm afraid you're right, Heshia," said Doctor Oxenti from her office. "D.C. hospitals and the Red Cross were on our backs for rare types before the riots, and now we're low on everything. Plasma's cleaned out completely; whole blood is in short supply."

"I see." Heshia placed his hands flat on the stone beneath him. "It's going to get worse," he began. "By now you all will have gathered that these riots are Family business. My own branch is neutral, but that won't make a difference to either faction. We support both sides against the middle, and they will take any opportunity they can to use us, to trap us into allegiances we can't afford or to rend us in the general slaughter."

"Washington, D.C. is now under attack." He drove on, ignoring the expressions on the faces before him and the gasp—Janet's—that whistled through the speakers. "Assume, based on the war's progress so far, that Baltimore is not only a target, but the *next* target in a line north up the East Coast."

"Our open business and the townhouse are almost certain to be ransacked or firebombed. Begin removing the most valuable and portable pieces, slowly. Fake buys, arrange shoplifting, send things out for recycling and make small shipments, but don't let it be too obvious that we're withdrawing. Warehouse the goods in the deep country—the Appalachians would be best, I think."

"I want the staff out of the buildings well before sundown every day until further notice. If we don't have more information by autumn, we'll keep later morning hours as the day gets shorter."

"Janet, you're coming out of the city center. Choose whatever files and equipment you want to bring with you, but hurry. You move to new quarters at dawn tomorrow. Asp, you're moving her yourself. We'll pick a safe zone after this meeting, and the location doesn't go beyond the three of us."

"Doctor?"

"Still here, sir."

"Can you leave your research at this time?"

"No." Heshia heard the tapping of Yasmine Oxenti's long, manicured nails on the phone receiver, and then, "A week. I need a week, at least."

"We'll try to give you the week. After that, I want you to take a holiday. Janet, book passage for the doctor to Alaska, one week from tomorrow."

“Alaska?”

“The sun isn’t setting there. I’d send you all if I could afford to do without your aid, but blood banks are particular targets, and you are particularly resistant to efforts by Thompson’s people to protect you.”

“But—”

“In the meantime, order the usual shipments for the next month. Have your second-in-command coordinate emergency blood drives with the Red Cross. Start at our own open offices, in fact. And put your staff on daylight hours, same as the other businesses.”

“How in hell am I going to rationalize that?”

“Convincingly,” Hesha frowned, “if you want to save their lives. Should the enemy take the clinic while the staff are still there, our people will be massacred. Understood?”

There was a pause. “Yes, sir.”

“And all of you: Cut communications between branches of the organization to a minimum. Close what channels you can. I want our holdings concealed from onlookers as much as possible. I want the four of you speaking to each other as little as possible. Thompson has briefed you all on the emergency procedures; start using them.

“Any questions?” Silence fell. “Further business?”

“Yes, sir.” Thompson darted up the stairs and back again, holding several plastic-wrapped bundles on a tray. He wore gloves to handle them. “Family letters for you and a few others that Mrs. Lindbergh had a feeling about.”

“There are messages waiting on your private line, as well,” said Janet. “And I show a call from Miss Dimitros’s number.”

The Asp snickered.



Sunday, 27 June 1999, 12:05 AM
The Arcanum Chapter House, Georgetown
Washington, D.C.

Chancellor Abraham Yrul made sure that the front gate clicked securely closed and then turned toward his car parked on the street. The security of the chapter house was no small matter. That was an issue he harped upon with some regularity to the other Arcanists.

"What about our *personal* security?" Geoffrey Truesdell had asked earlier that very night. "We should build a below-ground parking garage, so we don't have to walk along the street late at night."

It was true that the Arcanists tended to come and go at all hours of the day and night. Research, even lacking an all-too-rare breakthrough, could so easily displace one's sense of time, as Abraham well knew. This had been a long day—three long days, in fact, since he'd left the chapter house. Some associates swore that he lived in the chapter house, and Abraham wondered himself sometimes if they weren't correct.

But an underground parking garage was most certainly not the answer.

"Do you know how many Byzantine zoning ordinances and bureaucratic offices we would have to negotiate to do something like that?" Abraham had asked. "In addition to which, we would have to relocate the vaults, expose the chapter house to outside contractors, devise security for a *larger* access...." He'd counted off his reasons on the fingers of one hand and moved onto the second.

Of course, they were all aware of and concerned about the violence that had broken out in the southern portions of the city last night—no, that wasn't true, he realized; there were several Arcanists who were completely immersed in their studies, who had been for a number of days, and had absolutely *no* idea whatsoever about happenings in the wider world beyond the chapter house walls. But the *majority* of the Arcanists had heard about the apparently drug-related violence that had broken out down toward the waterfront and then spread like wildfire. Furthermore, there were reports that more bloodshed had erupted tonight.

Abraham scanned the empty street. The situation was certainly one to keep abreast of, but this was Georgetown, and none of the incidents had been within five miles of the chapter house. Abraham felt better, nonetheless, when he was safely within his Jaguar and the electric locks sank down, securing the vehicle.

The tap on his window startled him. There'd been no one else on the street, but here was a strange man patiently tapping his index finger on Abraham's window. The man's finger was stark white, as was his face. His pink eyes loomed just beyond the glass.

How did I miss seeing him? the chancellor wondered. How indeed? The man, obviously an albino, practically glowed in the dark. Regardless, Abraham had no desire to lower his window and speak to the man; conversely, he didn't want to appear rude. In way of compromise, Abraham nodded politely, but then continued to insert his key in the ignition.

The white hand smashed through the window in a spray of glass and latched onto Abraham Yrul's throat. The Jaguar's horn sounded briefly as the chancellor's knee pressed against the steering wheel.

Silence quickly returned to the empty car, the keys still in the ignition.

Sunday, 27 June 1999, 12:49 AM
Reagan National Airport
Washington, D.C.



Barely had the plane come to rest on the tarmac before Parmenides-Ravenna and Vykos were whisked away in the waiting limousine. “A lovely evening for a tour of the monuments, don’t you think?” Vykos asked, tracing a finger along the inner edge of Parmenides’ knee.

She was quite proud of that knee, having constructed and reconstructed it numerous times over the past few nights. He could walk now, with some difficulty and the aid of a brass-crowned cane. Even so, the degree of his recovery had been remarkable.

“I know it’s dreadfully uncomfortable, but it is your own fault,” she had reminded him time and again. “I had planned for you to be completely recovered, up and about, your old self again—so to speak—by this time.” His lengthy and vehement resistance to her affections, she pointed out, had “needlessly complicated matters and caused unnecessary pain.” This last she had said with a certain beatific smile playing across her features.

Parmenides had ignored those comments, and he ignored her question now about the monuments. He was well aware that it would be a lovely evening for whatever Vykos wanted it to be a lovely evening to do.

“Oh, no sulking, now.” She touched his chin. “I can put a smile on your face,” she said slyly.

It was true, of course. She could—and would—do anything to his physical form that she pleased. He imagined a smile would be only a slight matter, but assumed she would not take the time at present, though more than one of her passing fancies had proven (to her) worth the investment of several hours over the past nights.

Despite her playful threat, Parmenides busied himself staring out the window, ignoring not only his hostess but also the reflection in the glass, the image that was, but was not, his own. He had taken to silence, to whatever solace he could find there, since his transformation. Vykos be damned. But of course, it was Parmenides who was damned more completely, handed over to the fiend by his own. His mind was still unable, perhaps *increasingly* unable, to fathom the situation. There was no firm purchase, not even his own reflection, around which to construct a reasonable version of reality. And so he stared silently, silence being his only fortress, his only defiance—knowing full well that if his new master wished, she could with little difficulty pull down those walls as well.

They passed the Washington Monument, “a lovely mortal trinket,” he heard Vykos call it. She seemed able and more than willing to carry the conversation on her own. Her voice trailed in and out of Parmenides’ awareness, much as it had since that moment when he had felt her teeth at his throat. Was that really only a handful of nights ago? It seemed to him longer than the arduous years of his training, longer than the span of his mortal and undead years together. He no longer knew if the sounds he heard were words actually spoken or the echo of her voice filling the gaps of his addled mind. He tried to retreat further within, but was drawn back to her by firm pressure on his miraculous and semi-functional knee.

"There is a true monument," she said.

The limousine had slowed to a near crawl. Parmenides looked beyond the glass, beyond that other face, but saw only a large house gutted by fire. Vykos's admiration of the rubble puzzled him, but less so than had she been anyone else in the world. As intimate as their contact had been, he could no more unravel her thoughts than return to his mortal life.

They continued on their way, the limousine winding through narrow streets tight with parked cars on either side. Parmenides had not noticed when they'd left behind the part of the city crowded with monuments and museums—sometime before the burned building—but they were well away from it now.

Shortly, the car slowed again and then stopped. The reflection of dancing lights drew Parmenides' attention. He turned from his window to see another scene of destruction, this time, however, still ongoing. At the end of the next block, a row of brownstones burned uncontrollably. Fire engines blocked the street; sparkling arcs of water erupted into the night and fell with little effect amidst the flames. Sweating men in helmets and thick jackets busied themselves. Perhaps they would be able to contain the blaze to that block. Perhaps not.

Vykos's breast rose and fell with a deep sigh.

"The destruction of mortal architecture is a trivial thing," said Parmenides. His words, less biting than he intended, sounded vaguely pathetic. Their strength seemed blunted by the confines of the limousine, the insulated nature of the compartment that muted the sounds of the nearby inferno almost completely.

Vykos turned to him with an endearing smile. "You do live, my *philosophe*." She gently cupped a hand to his cheek. "And your mind quite intact. I knew you were made of sterner stuff." Sterner than what, she did not say.

She returned her attention to the blazing building. "You are absolutely correct, of course. So insightful." She turned from the fire long enough to pinch his cheek. "One of the reasons you're so dear to me.

"Mortal constructs are so fleeting," she added. "But this..." she tapped the window for emphasis, "this is a *true* monument—a monument to the Ventrue prince of this city."

Her words plunged Parmenides into chaos. He had the feeling again that Vykos's words had danced through his mind without first crossing the space between them. The fire and smoke gave way to a swirling mass of colors.

Vitel.

The name rose of its own accord, as if from the hidden flames.

Vitel.

"Yes," Vykos said gently. "Marcus Vitel."

Parmenides didn't realize that he'd spoken the name aloud, but she had answered. And now he found himself with his head in her lap, a childe seeking comfort. She stroked his hair.

"This was his haven," Vykos said. "One of his havens."

"And the other building..."

"Yes, dearest. But don't worry yourself yet."

Her fingers massaged his temples, soothed the pounding that he'd come to accept as a part of consciousness.

Vitel. Marcus Vitel. Prince.

Soon enough, he was sitting upright beside Vykos and the limousine was again moving. They traveled mile after mile: residences gave way to professional buildings gave way to strip malls gave way to pawn shops and liquor stores....

Alongside the shifting external scenery, Parmenides shifted through the mileposts of his mind, trying to pin down the thoughts that had exerted themselves.

Vitel. Prince Vitel.

But there was more. Somewhere in the depths of his mind, there was more. Of this he was certain—as certain as he could be of anything anymore. The car pulled to a halt. Before Parmenides could completely separate himself from his internal landscape, Vykos opened the door, and the world beyond assaulted all his senses at once.

The limousine had been so calm, quiet, a tranquil world of its own. Beyond those confines, chaos raged. The smell of smoke demanded his notice at the same instant as did the sound of distant sirens. They had stopped at yet another burning building. *Another haven—Prince Vitel.* How many hidden lairs might the prince of such an important city have? Possibly dozens, Parmenides knew. This building, or what was left of it, appeared to be some relic of the quaint history the Americans prized so highly.

Climbing out of the limousine was neither easy nor painless, but Parmenides felt compelled to follow Vykos. There were others on the scene—all Sabbat, most notably an expressionless albino and a shorter Cainite absently twirling a knife between his fingers. They paid no attention to Parmenides, a slight at which he began to take umbrage before realizing that he was no longer a representative of Clan Assamite in their eyes—perhaps even in his own. He was Ravenna, ghoul and servant to Lady Sascha Vykos. Unacknowledged, he hobbled to her side.

“This was the stiffest resistance yet,” said the albino. He handed Vykos a large sack, which was conspicuously blood-soaked. “One of the prince’s bitch childer. Now you’re only one up,” he said to his companion with the knife.

No one seemed to be worried about witnesses. Parmenides spotted several figures darting in and out of the shadows up and down the block. Apparently, potential witnesses were being taken care of. Parmenides noted, too, that the sirens he had heard were actually receding into the distance.

“It’ll be a while before police or fire crews get here,” said the albino, guessing Parmenides-Ravenna’s thoughts. “They’ve got plenty to keep them busy.”

As these words were spoken, it became apparent to Parmenides that there were other fires, *many* other fires, some burning nearby and probably others spread across the city. The smoke formed an ever-shifting shroud across the sky. He could taste the ash that coated the ground like a fine dusting of snow.

Prince Vitel.

One of his havens.

“Very good,” Vykos said. “Finish up here and move along.” Still looking at the albino, she handed the bloody bag to Parmenides—“Come, Ravenna”—then turned back to the limousine.

Once they were inside, Vykos barely glanced at the head in the sack. “They’re just like little kittens bringing me a trophy mouse,” she said of the albino and his companion. If she’d made the same comparison of Parmenides upon their first meeting, she did not mention it now.

Since the sanctuary of the limousine had been broken, Parmenides could no longer block out what seemed to him a world of violence that faced him from just beyond the reflected visage in the window. He was accustomed to violence, of course and death—at least he had been—but the fires, the billowing smoke, the sound of gunfire, the bodies in the street, all served to disturb him. Perhaps it was the faint but incomprehensible voice in the back of his mind, droning endlessly, that unsteadied him. Or perhaps Ravenna was not so immune to such atrocities as had been Parmenides. The miles and minutes fused hopelessly together.

Vykos sensed his unease. “It is only the second night of Sabbath rule,” she pointed out with a dismissive flourish, as if to imply that her benevolent reign would soon restore peace and order.

When the limousine again stopped, they were back near the Mall. Vykos gazed admiringly at the Washington Monument for a moment. “I doubt I could have done better myself,” she said. “Who but the Americans would erect a giant phallus in honor of the father of their country?” She shrugged and opened the door.

The street before the Presidential Hotel was a scene more normal than most of those Parmenides had seen this long night—normal at first glance. A uniformed doorman stood before the main entrance of the hotel. There was an unusual amount of activity, as every few minutes a police car or ambulance raced past, lights flashing and siren wailing. Parmenides’ practiced and preternatural vision, however, picked out details that any mortal and many Cainites would have missed: a heavy shadow clung to the sides of the hotel, a coat of black in addition to the regular darkness; and near where the limousine had stopped stood another uniformed man—not the uniform of the hotel doorman, or a D.C. police officer, but the dark, battle panoply of a legionnaire of Cardinal Ambrosio Luis Monçada of Madrid.

The legionnaire bowed slightly. “Councilor Vykos.” Like the others, he paid no attention to the ghoul Ravenna. “We have him trapped inside.” His words were grim and tinged with but a hint of professional pride.

“Trapped?” said Vykos with raised eyebrow. “I think not, Commander Vallejo.”

Vallejo seemed taken aback by her casual dismissal of the situation as he knew it but didn’t let this sidetrack him. “We’ve had him cornered for just over an hour but have not closed in—as per your orders.”

“I see.”

“He has requested a parley, Councilor Vykos.”

Both eyebrows rose this time. “Has he now? That devil.”

Vallejo clearly objected to her flippant manner. He even deigned to glance at Ravenna briefly, perhaps seeking reinforcement of the seriousness of the situation.

“Shall I give the order to terminate, Councilor?”

Vykos ran her tongue over her upper lip. “I think not yet.” Then, “A parley...”

“Councilor Vykos,” Vallejo said quickly, suddenly very concerned, “you can’t be considering—” He stopped in response to Vykos’s pointed stare; he knew better than to tell her what she could or could not consider.

“Pull your men back, Commander. I shall face the Prince of Washington.” She held up a hand to forestall Vallejo’s protestations. “He has nothing to gain by killing me.”

“And nothing to lose,” Vallejo added, but beyond that, he did not try to dissuade her. “What do *we* have to gain?” he asked.

"We," Vykos said, "might gain a captive—perhaps even a cooperative—Camarilla prince, rather than another corpse, of which I believe we already have a sufficient supply."

"Ravenna," she said abruptly, "get the phones and the...trophy from the car."

Parmenides-Ravenna hurried to do her bidding, though each step was agony, and the support of the cane did nothing to relieve the stiffness of every muscle from his feet to his hips. There were, in fact, two cell phones in the limo, and the trophy he was quite familiar with already.

"Now," said Vykos, sliding one phone into a deep pocket, "I will parley with the prince. I suspect he will want to see his childe," she gestured toward the bloody sack, "one of his *daughters*, as I believe he refers to them. How quaint."

She paused and thought for a moment, then continued. "I will call down shortly. If I have ascertained certain weaknesses, I will ask for Vallejo to bring up the prince's daughter. In that case, Commander, give your legionnaires the order to advance, and we will capture him."

"Yes, Councilor."

"Otherwise," said Vykos, "if I wish to speak with him further, I will call for Ravenna to bring up the prince's daughter. Then, when we leave, you may attack and destroy him."

Vallejo nodded again.

Parmenides took a step back, a strange, rubbery feeling taking hold of his legs. Only the cane kept him from toppling over in the street. Neither Vykos nor Vallejo seemed to notice his sudden infirmity. The pounding was at his temples again, from nowhere, suddenly more painful than it had ever been.

"Do you understand?"

The words echoed in his mind. Or had Vykos just spoken them? Parmenides couldn't tell. He stared at the sidewalk, fearful that if he looked up, it would shift beneath his unsteady feet.

"Do you understand?"

He nodded his head, still not sure whether he responded to sound or memory.

"Good."

Vykos was no longer by his side. She walked past the doorman, who didn't acknowledge her, who actually looked the other way as if he hadn't seen her at all. Quite possible, Parmenides knew. Not such an extraordinary trick of the undead.

Vallejo, too, had stepped away. How far, Parmenides didn't know. The world was spinning. He was doing his best merely to remain upright. And always the words; always they were telling him, calling him....

I will call for Ravenna.

Vitel. Prince Marcus Vitel.

The voice in his mind was speaking to him, was moving to the fore. It was a familiar voice, a soothing voice.

I will call for Ravenna, and you will kill Vitel. Prince Marcus Vitel.

Vykos. She had told him all this before, what seemed so long ago. And still the words were with him.

You will kill Vitel.

Parmenides reeled. The cane. If he could just hold the cane tightly enough, he might not fall. His fingers gripped the brass head, brushed over the unobtrusive latch that, if he pressed it, would spring the spike from the ferrule. The cane would become a three-foot oaken stake with a brass tip and, at the far end, a brass handle to aid in driving home a blow. He had known but not known.

You will kill him, my philosophe. She had touched his face. *You will kill him for me.*

A police car rushed past. The lights shone through Parmenides' eyelids. He didn't remember closing his eyes. The siren's wail pierced his fog of recollection, rattled in his ears, but could not drive away the voice that was closer than his innermost desire.

You will kill him for me.

Where was Vallejo? Parmenides wondered. Could the Lasombra tell that something was wrong? Could he tell that Parmenides was going mad? Would the legionnaire catch Ravenna if the ghoulish collapsed to the sidewalk? *Why not him?* For a moment, Parmenides was afraid that he had shouted the question into the night. He couldn't be completely sure that he hadn't. *Why not the legionnaire? He could kill Vitel.*

Vykos's playful laughter struck him like a blow—or was it another siren, an ambulance racing by or a fire engine?

Yes, Vallejo could kill him, she agreed, but he is the cardinal's man. The glory would go to the cardinal. If I am to reap the rewards of the city, then the telling blow must be struck by my hand—or by my assassin. My philosophe.

Parmenides had raged against her then. Again, he'd torn his bonds, though they were crafted of his own flesh. How dare she have treated him so, and for so petty an end!

Oh, that is not the end, my young romantic. That is merely the beginning.

His heart burned. He would tear it from his breast and cast it into the fires of hell before he laid it in her hand.

But I've already held it in my hand. Hush, my Ravenna. You have tired yourself. Rest, my Ravenna.

Rest, my Ravenna.

Rest. Ravenna.

Ravenna.

"Ravenna!"

Vallejo gripped his shoulder, dug his nails into Ravenna's skin. "The phone." The Lasombra spoke firmly. There was no cruelty in his voice, in his face; he merely could not abide weakness. Neither could Parmenides...before.

"The phone, Ravenna."

The phone, indeed, was ringing. Ravenna held it before him as if revealing a murder weapon for all to see. Vallejo stared at him, waited.

Damn you. You don't know, Parmenides thought. Then strangely enough, standing there before the hotel, buzzing phone in hand, an unfamiliar sentiment rose within him, one he had not known in centuries—compassion. *You don't know...may you never know.*

He looked into Vallejo's face hoping to find pity in return for his unspoken compassion but was greeted by the hard expectation that duty be fulfilled. The will drained from Parmenides-Ravenna. The phone moved closer to his face. His own hand had raised it. He pressed the "talk" button, but did not, could not, speak.

“Ravenna, the prince would like to see his daughter. Do bring her up.”

The phone was gone. Vallejo took it from him. Ravenna bent toward the sidewalk, his weight fully upon the cane, and retrieved the sack. He’d set it down at some point. It left a bloody mark on the sidewalk.

The doorman took no more notice of him than of Vykos before. Parmenides, even in his early nights, could have affected the mortal similarly, but tonight there was no strength left in the Assamite-ghoul. He moved stiffly past, each step confirming the imperfect alignment of ligament and bone. The hotel lobby was deserted save for the attendant behind the front desk, and she paid him no heed. Ravenna followed a trail that Vykos had laid down for him, and mortal eyes could see neither trail nor the traveler upon it.

He followed the trail past the darkened gift shop, past the elevators of the masses and came to a private corridor and an elevator set apart from the rest. The doors stood open, awaiting him. Ravenna turned the key protruding from the console and began his ascent.

I will call for Ravenna, and you will kill Vitel.

Time stretched out before Ravenna. The hotel was not particularly tall—the sixth floor served as the penthouse—yet the light above the door seemed only grudgingly to move from G to 1 to 2. As the numbers slowly increased, so too did Ravenna’s agitation. He thought of Vallejo. The Spaniard would not hesitate to kill the prince if Vykos but asked. But for the games of power, Ravenna had been bred to this task. He gripped the cane as if it were his salvation. The tiny latch was at his fingertip. He was on his way to kill—it was the art he had studied for years upon years, an act he had performed countless times. Yet that which was natural to him, that which was his purpose and passion, now filled him with dread. He recoiled from the task set before him.

Because she wants it of me, he realized.

You will kill him for me.

Vykos wanted him to do this thing, and Parmenides-Ravenna was loath to serve her whim. For what she had done to him, for what his masters had let her do, he should slit her throat and burn her black heart. His hate for her burned fiercely, almost as fiercely as his hate for himself—for he knew he would do what she asked.

You will kill him for me.

“Be strong, young Assamite.”

The voice didn’t startle him, didn’t alarm him. It floated down, surrounded him like whispering moonlight.

“Be strong, your masters have not forgotten you.”

For the second time this night, Parmenides-Ravenna was unable to speak.

The small light, so labored in its advance, moved from 4 to 5.

“I will come to you, I or my brothers.”

Parmenides-Ravenna gazed toward the ceiling of the elevator. What creature lay on the other side, calling to him, speaking of his masters? Parmenides would have smashed through the hatch, demanded to face whomever accosted him so—but Ravenna’s body was broken, his legs barely suitable for the simplest movement.

“Do you have news for me to give your masters?”

Parmenides-Ravenna stared blankly; he gazed at the light.

5 to 6.

“Speak, young Assamite.”

The chime sounded. The doors began to open.

His lips parted but were drier than the most punishing desert of his early nights. “I am...strong,” he whispered at last.

The doors stood open. With faltering step, Ravenna entered the sumptuous haven of Marcus Vitel, Prince of Washington, D.C. Vykos’s deceiving smile greeted him.

You will kill him for me.

Vitel was a striking figure. The fine quality of his suit was not lost on Parmenides, nor were the strong lines of his face or the wisps of gray in his hair. Parmenides looked into the prince’s dark blue eyes. A confident assassin could do that—look into the eyes of even an aged Kindred elder and not give anything away—but Parmenides’ confidence in the most basic foundations of his previous existence had been shaken. He froze. In the face of this Camarilla prince, this creature accustomed to commanding awe, Parmenides could not go forward. His joints gripped and would not move. It was all he could do to keep from dropping the sack he carried. The mere contemplation of such a faux pas was mortifying.

“Now look what you’ve done, my prince,” said Vykos in the most singsong, conversational of tones. “You’ve frightened my poor ghoul. What if he were to drop from fear on the spot? You have no idea the lengths to which I’ve gone to secure good help.”

“Come, Ravenna,” she said, stretching out a hand to entice him closer.

Vitel watched in silence as Parmenides forced his body to move forward. Indeed, the prince’s gaze locked on the sack Parmenides carried and did not waver.

He didn’t have far to where they stood—they had not proceeded into the penthouse proper to converse in comfort, as decorum might normally dictate—but with each step, under the prince’s unrelenting gaze, the bag seemed to grow heavier, as if the unfortunate head had sprouted a body, and the full weight of the prince’s childe now rested within.

With movement, however tortured, Parmenides thought less of the head slipping from his grasp and the sickening thud it would make against the floor. His mind raced with possibilities; his finger rested by the latch on the cane. The prince, whether he wished to acknowledge the fact or not, undoubtedly knew what was in the bloody sack. Parmenides could toss it to Vitel. Certainly the prince would instinctively catch the head of his childe, and in his moment of distraction, Parmenides could strike. Yet that scenario lacked a certain dignity. He could strike as he handed over the bag—

“Come, Ravenna,” Vykos said again as he reached them.

I will call for Ravenna, and you will kill Vitel.

Her words shook him, revealed to him how easily he’d fallen into the accustomed pattern of thought when faced with the prospect of the kill. A sudden wave of doubt washed over him and at its heart was defiance. He felt the urge, the *need*, to plunge the cane, not through the prince, but through Vykos.

She watched Vitel, observed with thinly veiled pleasure the sorrow rising in his eyes, which were rimmed with tears of blood. The bag was close enough for him to touch; he had but to reach out.

You will kill him for me.

Parmenides could not hear for the pounding at his temples. He saw in his mind Vykos smiling, staring down at her impaled breast. His heart leapt, but his hand upon the cane was stayed, as surely as had been his legs when their sinews and bones were fused one to another.

You will kill him for me.

The prince, grappling with his sorrow, sighed deeply. Parmenides pressed the latch—the spike sprung into place—and he struck. But a moment too late. Vykos howled with outrage as the prince knocked aside the blow aimed at his heart. The cane pierced his shoulder.

The back of Vitel's hand caught Parmenides across the face. The assassin-ghoul, hobbled by his infirmity, lost his footing to the powerful blow and crashed to the floor.

Vykos screeched and flung a clawed hand at the prince, but already he'd turned and thrown himself from his attackers. His body, impaled by the cane, shattered one of the large picture windows overlooking the Mall. Before Parmenides could struggle to his knees, Vitel was gone. Deathly silence reigned.

A great trembling overtook Parmenides. The weakness in his legs prevented him from standing. Vykos turned from where she'd followed the prince to the broken window and rejoined her charge. Bloody tears flowed down his cheeks, dripped and soaked into the luxurious carpet.

I am strong, he had said to the messenger of his masters. So strong that he could not free himself; so strong that he could not defy his new mistress; so strong that his pitiful defiance had led only to utter failure in that which was his calling.

Vykos placed a gentle hand to his face. There was no ire or recrimination in her touch. She could not know the treachery that burned in his heart still, his hatred of her...and his love.

She pulled him toward her, pressed his fevered skin to her cool belly.

"I am weak." His words were muffled against the fabric of her gown. Sobs wracked his rigid body. "I am weak."

"There, there, my *philosophe*. Have no fear." She stroked his hair, soothed the pounding at his temples. "You will redeem yourself."

Sometime later, Vallejo stood before the shattered window and reported that the prince had escaped.



Sunday, 27 June 1999, 9:57 PM
Roma Classico Import/Export
Brooklyn, New York

Frankie Gee had said Las Vegas, so Vegas it was. His exact words had been, "Talk to Milo and find Benito." Chas Giovanni Tello thought it would be easy.

Chas talked to Annie, the girl who handled the travel arrangements, and she took care of it.

"You're a pretty girl, Annie, but a bit wrong in the head to be hanging around hardcases like Frankie fucking Gee. A lot of you kids today, you like to mix with bad elements. You think it makes you tough. It doesn't make you tough, Annie. It just wears you out early." Chas lit a German cigarette—Shepherd's Hotel—and blew a puff of smoke over Annie's head.

"Fuck you, Chas. I can take care of myself. Your badass gangster-act doesn't fool anybody, by the way. I bet David could drop you like a bad habit, you and your suit and case." David was Annie's boyfriend. Chas, head tilted up to finish exhaling smoke, looked down at Annie through slitted eyes.

"David's a punk-ass piece of shit, Annie. He looks like a fucking broom, what with those skinny shirts and giant pants he wears. You little boys and girls—your fads don't mean shit. One night—one day, you'll finally grow up and realize that you wasted all your energy and youth on being dumbfucks. If you don't have a suit and case by the time you're thirty, you got no fucking sense." Chas tapped his temple for effect. "I was young like you once. I thought I knew everything; I had that ignorant invincibility that being young gives you. And you know what? I grew up. I'm not so much older than you, Annie," Chas said, smirking inwardly. Well, maybe he didn't *look* that much older than Annie. "This mind still remembers shit like foolish youth."

"Fucking-A, Chas, you want these tickets or not? I can't fucking call the travel agent with you here yelling at me. Now shut the fuck up, so I can get this done." Annie looked up at Chas with an expression of boredom, chewing her gum with her mouth open.

Chas wasn't interested in backtalk from this little bitch, though. "Annie, maybe you forgot. Maybe you're a little confused, here. I'm your fucking boss, as far as you're concerned. Yeah, yeah, you work for Frankie Gee, but so do I, and I pull a little more weight than whatever cunt in a tight skirt answers the ad this month. You talk to me like that again, and I'll fucking slap the smart right out of your goddamn mouth."

Annie, for all the pretty she could muster, was just another dumb kid. Chas wondered how long it would be before something accidentally happened to her—something like Frankie or himself.

"And make sure the flight lands *at least* three hours before sunrise, Annie."

Annie popped her gum, rolled her eyes and waved Chas away.

"Girlie, you don't know who you're fucking with. Gimme the goddamn phone. Gimme the phone, Annie." Chas grabbed the receiver and punched a number into the telephone.

“Jerry? Chas. I need a favor. You know Annie down here at the office? Red-haired girl?” Chas stared at Annie, who crossed her arms and curled her lip at him. “Yeah, you remember her boyfriend? Guy we sent down to Sallie’s to pick up that thing? Yeah, him. Find him. Find him; cut off both his pinkies. Send ’em to the office here, attention Annie. Put the fingers in some kinda jewelry box. Annie needs to know I’m not fucking around over here. Thanks.” He dropped the phone in Annie’s lap.

“Now get my tickets, Annie.” He stubbed out the cigarette on her desk and flicked the butt in the trash.

Later that evening, the tickets arrived. “Who the fuck delivers tickets at night?” Chas asked no one in particular. “Ah, fuck it. Who cares?”

Frankie, Victor and Chas shared a nip of vitae and anisette while Frankie made sure they knew what they were supposed to do. Victor, a ghoul in Chas’s service, was to meet the Rothstein contact in Las Vegas and apply whatever pressure was necessary to locate one Benito Giovanni, missing for five nights going on six. If Milo Rothstein proved too difficult, Chas would lean on him, too. If he still wouldn’t crack, Milo would take the big nap. No guns, no onlookers, no police.

Las Vegas was a crab-ridden crotch of the undead—vampires from the Camarilla laid some kind of bullshit claim to the city; anarch punks from California sowed their oats there; the Giovanni had as many operatives along the strip as they had in all of Boston; and the Followers of Set maintained some freakish temple beneath the sands of the valley desert.

Vegas. Bright lights, big city. A population large enough to host maybe a dozen vampires reasonably, but the very nature of the town drew thirty times that number. Benedic, prince of the city, didn’t mind, so long as those transient vampires acted in accordance with the traditions. Not that he was any staunch supporter of the Camarilla, but rather, he understood the purpose behind all those old and seemingly arbitrary laws.

Las Vegas claimed perhaps a score or so “permanent” Kindred who made their havens there. The Giovanni were a constant thorn in Benedic’s side, however, for a faction numbering so few. The local branch of the family, the Rothsteins, had claimed a stake in the city ever since Bugsy Siegel had gotten the idea in his head to build a gambling paradise in the middle of the desert. Now, Benedic was no slouch—he had his vast array of contacts keep him constantly apprised of Vegas’s winds of change—but he couldn’t seem to get ahead of the Giovanni. To his credit, he kept the “race” fairly even. Indeed, many of the Las Vegas Kindred suspected that, if Benedic didn’t have to worry about the minor, pressing details of princedom, he would have edged the Rothsteins out years ago.

It was only this sketchy knowledge that Chas Tello took with him to Las Vegas during his trip to “find Milo and Benito.” Frankie Gee had requested that Chas do everything by the book—present himself to the prince upon arrival, state plainly what he planned on doing there, do it and fly back home. “With any luck,” Frankie Gee maintained, “those Rothstein fucks will never know you’re there, except Milo. Unless you have to talk to them, don’t. Let Victor do all the work. This isn’t any of their business.”

“Gotcha, Frankie. And if things get ugly?” Chas asked.

“Don’t let them get ugly. Get the fuck out of the way. Don’t let them roll over you, but don’t take anybody out of the picture unless it needs to happen. Milo, I don’t give a damn about—if Milo gets hurt, nobody’s going to be upset. But don’t go there thinking you’re going to deal with Milo. You’re just the insurance.”

“You’re the boss, Frankie.”

Chas knew that Frankie had people above even him. He wasn’t quite sure how the hierarchy worked out—apparently the “family affair” the Giovanni had going on went outside the old limits of organized crime. More than once, Chas felt like a very small fish in a very big pond. After all, if vampires—the existence of which was tough enough to wrap his mind around, even if he was one—older than Frankie pulled *his* strings, how far back did the ranks go? He’d spoken before with Giovanni who weren’t part of the American *Cosa Nostra*, but he didn’t know who they worked for or what they did.

Chas’s cousin Robert had told him that once you got past the Mafia part of the family, the rules became very different. In fact, most of the family—which wasn’t Mob-connected—looked down upon the “goombas” who were happy to “waste” their unlives playing gangster. Those old ranks of the family had their own interests and hobbies, for which the Mob branch seemed only to generate income. It worked like the old system always had, with the Giovanni big shots taking their *pizzu* from the guys who ran the rackets themselves in exchange for protection. But Robert had told Chas that the whole thing was more like an investment company, and that “this thing of ours” was only one entry in some old guinea’s ledger somewhere. Neither Chas nor Robert even knew how the Giovanni had become involved with the Mafia, given that the family had its ancestral estate up north in Venice while the wiseguys were still centralized in Sicily.

But such problems weren’t part of Chas’s list of current situations to solve. Do the Benito thing and keep the money rolling in. Easy as pie.

Monday, 28 June 1999, 2:47 AM
The townhouse of Hesha Ruhadze
Baltimore, Maryland



The townhouse was everything Hesha hoped outsiders would expect of him. It was expensive. It was in a good, traditionally black neighborhood in an historic district of Baltimore. It blended perfectly with the houses on either side, except in the little details. There were dark, shining eyes set behind the colonial-style shutters—camera lenses and other useful things. The doorknocker was a coiled brass snake.

Cainites who cared to (and many did) could find that the deeds to all four houses in the row belonged to him. That was expected, as well.

A small, dark, lisping servant who seemed to speak little English always opened the front door. He always showed guests into the old drawing-room parlor, furnished in traditional American style, but accented with genuine Egyptian antiquities. With special care, Hesha had selected papyri illustrated with savage battles, slavery, wild festivals and naked dancing girls. In gilt frames they adorned the walls. On the tables and shelves here he placed the instruments of mummification, the corroded hilts of weapons, fragments of the dead themselves, and—of course—snakes from every dynasty and sect in the Old Kingdom.

Hesha sat in a large, comfortable armchair beneath the most alarming scroll, and listened with apparent boredom as one of his guests tried to bargain for her lodgings.

She wore antebellum costume, soiled by her escape. Her hair was long, and Hesha remembered that she had always affected the complex coiffure of a plantation “lady”—the kind of style achievable only when one has another’s hands in service and hours free to spend beneath them. She’d shoved a few combs into the tangled mess but in Hesha’s opinion would have done better to hack it off completely at dawn and hope for better luck at sunset.

“While I appreciate your hospitality, sir,” she said, in the deepest of Southern drawls, “I would not wish to leave myself beholden to you. My family has never been one to take charity; may I offer you some of these as tokens of my gratitude in exchange for your gracious service?”

She held out a velvet box. Hesha opened it and found her jewelry to be as tangled as her hair. There were quantities of gold, precious stones, pearls, and silver—even the necklace he knew to be her trademark, a present from her sire. He held it up to the light: Huge pigeon’s-blood rubies set in platinum the color of her skin, arranged to drip down the side of her neck like drops of blood. He saw her fingers tighten their grip on her chair, but she said nothing. If that were the price of safety, she was willing to pay it.

“No, thank you. I have gems enough in my possession, madam.” He let the essess hiss just enough to disgust her.

“Perhaps, if I may be so crass as to mention it, you would allow me to gift you with some of my worldly goods?” She named a sum, quite high.

Hesha looked at her and then looked around the richly decorated room.

“Again, I’m afraid I have a sufficiency of what you offer.”

She bit her lip and some of her elegant veneer dropped away. “I have shares in a company, sir, that might intrigue you—controlling interest, of course.”

“No, madam.”

Her jaws clamped together, and he watched her attempt to control herself. The fabric of the chair’s arms tore, and Hesha thought he could hear wood crack under the padding.

In an ice-cold, wrath’s edge voice, she spat out, “What in Caine’s name do you want from me?”

Hesha studied her. His calculating gaze brought blood to her face, and the other arm of the chair met with destiny.

“Nothing,” he said.

Her eyes opened wide in fear.

“You will need all that you have, madam, and more, to set up your new establishment. Your choice of cities has been radically reduced of late, and I believe that you will find your precious princes—those that retain their thrones, of course—too busy to hold court and admit you to their domain. That is, if they admit you at all. Fleeing survivors are frequently mistaken for turncoats.”

“You would blacklist me? You would lie to the Camarilla, betray me to my only allies, dishonor my name and my line?”

Hesha cut through her mounting hysteria. “You’re not listening.

“Stay here as long as you like. Set yourself up again wherever you choose. Survive, madam. Prosper. When you find that you can do me a suitable favor, do so.”

“And you will hold my debt over me until then, I suppose,” said the Ventrue, bitterly.

“No, madam. You will. I am quite sure that you won’t have a good day’s rest until you have found an appropriate service you can do me.” He gazed into her gaunt eyes. “It’s your nature. Knowing that you owe a Setite, a *‘niggrah’* Setite, Abigail, such a favor will bore into you like a maggot into a corpse, my dear.”

She stood, white as a sheet, and staggered to the door. The little man hurried to open it for her, but Abigail Woodruff cuffed him aside and fled.

Hesha picked his servant up off the floor. The Asp smirked as the clicking heels of the vampiress faded away into the night. When they were sure that she was out of earshot, the two men laughed quietly together.

“Good one, Boss.”

“Thank you. Replace her chair, if you would.”

“Sure,” said the Asp, but before he even touched the now-sagging antique, the knocker rapped sharply. He flew to the hallway, opened a panel in the wall and watched the waiting visitor on a monitor set inside. “Mahmoud, I believe, sir.”

Hesha slid open a tiny screen of his own and confirmed the identification.

“Let him in.”

Mahmoud was tall, olive-skinned and black-haired. His features were hawkishly attractive, yet saturninely unsavory. He looked to be in his early twenties. His Embrace was hardly fifteen years past, and by Setite standards he was younger even than his appearance.

“Hesha,” he said, respectfully standing just within the parlor door.

“Welcome, my cousin. Please come in and sit down.”

Mahmoud hesitated a moment longer. “I hope that you remember me; it’s some years now since Diamondback and I visited Baltimore?”

“I know you.” Hesha filled his voice with reassurance. “Please, cousin, relax.”

The younger man perched himself on the edge of a straight chair and looked back at the door. He smiled. “Was that the late, great, Abigail Woodruff running away from here just now?”

“Indeed,” said Hesha, smiling back as warmly as he could.

The neonate took the smile, leaned back in his chair and seemed finally to settle down. “My congratulations, sir. She looked terrible. Dear old Chahlstahn will never be the same again. Tell me, what gives?”

“She came to pay me for room and board.”

“Oh, my sleeping Lord. What in hell did you ask her for to make her look like that?”

“Nothing.” Hesha smiled. “Now she’s not only exiled and poor, but paranoid. And I do believe she’s beginning to starve.”

“Isn’t little Miss Abigail getting room service with the rest of us?”

“Mahmoud, my friend, you have a great deal to learn about the bluebloods.”

“So clue me in, cousin.”

“In a moment. First, I’d appreciate any news you can give me of the battle in Atlanta.”

“Shit, I didn’t see a whole hell of a lot of it. I was running a little crack house near North, really sweet setup I’m fucking sorry to see wasted, let me tell you, and we monitored the police bands from there. Well, first their sweet stinkin’ Elysium got trashed. I was ready to jump any direction, with the big boys on the hop. When the calls started coming in Tuesday night, I read between the lines and drove straight out to Clarkston. I sold my car and my stash for folding money, threw an oil drum onto a boxcar and climbed in under it. Figured wherever the hell that train was going was better than a war zone, you know? Woke up in your neck of the woods and thought I’d stop by, for old Diamondback’s sake.

“But your boy Vogel was in the thick of it. I talked to him the night before, and he said he was in on this party. Can’t you get the dope from him?”

“Vogel never reported back.”

“Shit, man, shit.” Mahmoud shook his head. “He was the goods. Shit! I’m fuckin’ sorry, sir.”

“He didn’t make any kind of contact with you Monday?”

“No, man. I never heard from him after Sunday night. We went out drinking together. Buckhead. Damn easy pickings.”

“I see.” Hesha leaned his head on his hand. “Can you tell me anything else—even the slightest bits of gossip—about the situation in Atlanta before the crash?”

“I can try,” said Mahmoud and did so for a badly rambling hour and ten minutes. Hesha frequently had to stop him and ask for more detail, or clearer words, or better identification of the principle actors in the soap opera that was Kindred politics. At the end, still not sure he had everything he wanted, he let the boy run down.

“Mahmoud, your education has been seriously neglected.”

“Yeah.”

Hesha looked up sharply. There was a note of resignation in the neonate’s voice and genuine regret.

“What, hadn’t you heard, Hesha? Diamondback got himself ass-necked in Vegas. He’s stored away safe enough, but out for the count. It was during the epidemic, so I guess it wasn’t exactly headline news.”

“I see.” Hesha thought ahead. “I would offer to instruct you myself, but I fear my current project would entail more danger than education. Tomorrow night, if you like, I can fill in the greater gaps. In a year’s time, perhaps, if Diamondback is still sleeping, I will teach you the finer points of Ventrue weaknesses and Tremere treacheries. Agreed?”

“Yes, sir. I gotta say, Diamondback always said you were high class. Had a lot of respect for you.”

“Do you need anything at the moment?”

“Uh. I’m all right for cash, and I’ve got connections. After my lessons, could you get me a safe route into California? I’d like to set up with the cartel trade first hand this time, and maybe put a little capital into one of those basement chemists. Crystal meth is on the way out.”

“Of course. How far south?”

“Diego?” Mahmoud’s face lit up.

“Consider it done.”

Monday, 28 June 1999, 3:47 AM
USS Apollo, the Inner Harbor
Baltimore, Maryland



The hanging lantern swayed gently from the main support beam. Malachi, much more comfortable in his fatigues and old T-shirt than in formal attire, crouched atop the thick, wooden table and disinterestedly watched Isaac. The sheriff was, for the second night running, manacled to the floor of the cabin, a large sheet of plastic spread beneath him. After all, the prince had spent a considerable amount of money to have the nineteenth-century schooner refurbished and blood did tend to stain so.

Garlotte sat nearby in a felt-cushioned, straight-back chair, reading the previous afternoon's edition of the *Washington Post* by the light of the single lantern. Reports from the adjacent city were disturbing. The nation's capital had long been infested with a profusion of drugs, prostitution and violent crime, with much of the nefarious activity precipitated (or at least encouraged) by various undead crime lords. There had always been, however, a certain design, a comforting familiarity, to the mayhem. Not so the past two nights. There was familiarity, but it was far from comforting.

Gang warfare, occasional race riots—these were facts of life and unlife. Despite what the mortal world tended to believe, such occurrences often were not spontaneous happenings. Usually Garlotte would have received advance notice from the elements arranging such displays. The *usual*, however, had ceased to exist. The Sabbat had seen to that.

Information was filtering north in fits and starts, but from what Garlotte had gathered, the blitzkrieg had started in Atlanta less than a week ago. To most of the world, the seemingly random shootings, the attacks on the High Museum of Art and other edifices around the city, had been some astounding campaign of domestic terrorism. Violent acts elsewhere—more shootings in Savannah; devastating fires in Charleston; a marina explosion in Wilmington—had served only to heighten the mortal paranoia.

But Garlotte knew that the High Museum was a major Elysium in Atlanta, and that two of the other buildings destroyed were Prince Benison's haven and the Tremere chantry. Garlotte knew that several of the city council members shot in Savannah had been pawns, if not actual ghouls, of the Camarilla prince there, and that included among the destroyed sections of Charleston was Prince Purrel's pride and joy, the Battery. Add to that the sudden eruption of nocturnal violence in the shipbuilders' strike in Norfolk. Theo Bell had called that one correctly.

And now, as Isaac had so eloquently reported two nights ago, there was open warfare in the streets of Washington D.C. of a scale that would draw the eyes of the world, and that threatened to spread—with the Sabbat!—north into Baltimore.

Garlotte folded the newspaper and tossed it across the room. He picked up a tin cup, rattled its contents for a moment and returned the container to its resting place.

"Now, Isaac," said the prince kindly, "I'm going to ask you for the *eighth* time: How is it that you may avoid displeasing me in the future?"

The younger Ventrue drew in a steadying breath but still his voice quivered somewhat. "I should present important news to you in private, rather than before a crowd."

Garlotte smiled warmly. "Very good."

He turned to Malachi. "Make this one quick."

The Gangrel climbed down from the table and took the pair of red-handled wire cutters that had lain there next to him. Garlotte's mind immediately shifted back to the political situation. He barely noticed the screams of his childe and then the piteous whimpering. Malachi dropped the top digit of Isaac's right index finger into the tin cup with the others.

"Only two more times, and we'll be finished," the prince reminded his childe.

Garlotte had hardly recovered his paper when the knock sounded at the door. From the sound, he knew that Katrina stood on the other side. She rapped sharply, as if she would do violence to the door, not because it stood in her way, but because it *was*.

"Enter."

Katrina opened the door and stepped down into the cabin. As she glanced around the cabin, her bright blue eyes didn't even pause on Isaac and his predicament. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything." She ignored Malachi altogether.

"Nonsense," said Garlotte. He extended a hand toward her. "Come to me." She did as he beckoned. *They're always so much more obedient when one of their siblings is in the midst of discipline*, the prince observed. They weren't actually siblings, of course, not in the mortal sense. But they did share a link of blood.

She took his hand. Garlotte loved just to look at her—her eyes; her tiny, pert nose and narrow lips; her strong, wide jaw and pointed chin. Initially he'd been drawn to her by the resemblance to his own, dear Amelia, and when the girl stood silently, he could almost convince himself that he gazed upon his departed wife. If only Katrina wouldn't speak, or defy him, or feel compelled to dress like a common street punk. *My God*, Garlotte wondered, *how many thousand head of cattle have perished so that Kindred might wear leather?*

"You have a visitor," Katrina said, breaking the prince's reverie. "You better see for yourself," she responded to the unvoiced question of Garlotte's raised eyebrow.

Intrigued, Garlotte rose from his seat. "Where is Fin?"

Katrina shrugged. "Probably with his whore."

The prince sighed. *My Amelia would never have spoken so roughly*. He cupped his hand gently to Katrina's cheek. "Ah, my delicate flower, lead me to our guest."

"He's just up on deck."

Garlotte's hand grew tense against her face. His eyes caught her gaze, held it. "Very well. Then you will not have far to lead."

They stepped from the soundproofed interior of the *USS Apollo* into the pre-dawn breeze of the Inner Harbor. From Katrina's flippant manner, Garlotte expected almost anyone other than the person who actually waited for him on deck.

"Vitel." Garlotte failed to conceal his surprise.

"Greetings, Prince Garlotte," said Marcus Vitel. He bowed deeply, then rose. "I seek sanctuary in your city."

Vitel was a striking figure: tall, though not so tall as Garlotte; strong features; wisps of gray through his hair; blue eyes, but darker and harder than Katrina's. The visiting prince wore an expensive, tailored gray suit, but it was rather the worse for wear. The left shoulder was torn, and his garments were wrinkled and dusty from head to toe.

Garlotte was beyond the stairs and the handrail, so he placed a hand on Katrina's shoulder. Vitel's presence, and his purpose for seeking out Garlotte, was a dire portent.

"You are, of course, welcome in Baltimore," said Garlotte, "but please, come inside." He indicated a door other than the one through which he and Katrina had just emerged.

"Katrina..." the prince began but then hesitated. He had a mind that she should serve Vitel and himself. The girl was generally astute enough not to sass her sire in the presence of company, but depending on her manners risked embarrassment. Considering the stature of the guest, Garlotte decided that prudence was the better part of hospitality. "Send for Gainesmil, my dear." He considered ordering her to maintain secrecy, but again, why give the girl orders she would flaunt, when news of Vitel's presence would get out soon enough regardless?

Katrina frowned at the imposition but not so that Vitel could see her.

At least she didn't roll her eyes, Garlotte thought. That would have been too much, and I would have been forced to mar that beautiful face. I really shouldn't pamper her so.

"Dennis," Garlotte called, as Katrina tromped down the gangplank. A stocky, dark-haired man in a blazer and slacks stepped forward from the nearby shadows. His presence was not noticeable until he moved, yet he was one of several handfuls of security ghouls stationed about the ship and dock. "Dennis, show Prince Vitel into the sitting room."

Garlotte remained on deck for a short while, watching Katrina move off into the distance. It never failed. He could watch her for hours. The motion of her stride, the way she tossed her hair from her face, so much reminded him of Amelia, despite Katrina's continuous quest to be tougher than she was. Garlotte knew she went as far as to consort with anarchs. He knew other more disturbing facts about her, but he held those from his mind.

An important guest awaited his audience.

The prince of Baltimore considered sending for Victoria as well as Gainesmil but decided against it. One Toreador tonight was enough. Gainesmil, an architect turned city planner and undead lieutenant, had long been a partner in strategizing with the prince and should hear what Vitel had to say.

The exclusion of Victoria was not technically a snub, though it could certainly be perceived as such. Garlotte was not ready to grant legitimacy to this notion of hers that she should be instrumental in fending off the Sabbat. He would allow her a certain amount of influence, and he would savor her charms, but he would hold her in check. There was no need to consult her tonight. Besides, with Gainesmil present, Victoria would learn of what transpired soon enough. That was a Toreador consortium worth keeping an eye on, though not necessarily to be discouraged. Garlotte might yet turn to his advantage Gainesmil's familiarity with their high-profile refugee.

Monday, 28 June 1999, 4:22 AM
USS Apollo, the Inner Harbor
Baltimore, Maryland



"This is a lovely ship," Vitel remarked. "Is it seaworthy?"

"Oh yes, quite." Their conversation remained among topics of mundane interest, as Garlotte had explained that one of his trusted advisors was en route. "Though I'm afraid I don't take her out nearly often enough. I'm sure you know how it goes—work piles up; something always needs immediate attention, and then—*pfft!*—another decade is gone."

Vitel nodded his assent. "You must learn to take time for yourself."

"Ah, that I could," Garlotte bemoaned his responsibilities. "My, but aren't I being the improper host. May I provide refreshment for you, Prince Vitel?"

"Many thanks, but not at present."

"Then I hope you won't think me rude to partake," Garlotte said.

"Please."

Garlotte signaled, and Dennis brought over a decanter and a single goblet. It was such a tricky matter, Garlotte well knew, entertaining a fellow Ventrue. The host was unlikely to have on hand the guest's proper vintage—unlikely to know what it was, as that was a matter of some privacy among the clan—yet still one was expected to offer. Garlotte filled his goblet with rich, life's blood of English descent. It was a variety growing ever more difficult to keep on hand in this modern era of depressingly widespread mobility, a hardship that might eventually require a reverse migration back to the Old Country. For the time being, however, Dennis and several of the other ghouls contributed to the stock handsomely.

"That was your childe, before, on deck, Katrina?" Vitel asked.

The question surprised Garlotte somewhat. Most Kindred hoarded what knowledge they'd gathered about one another like a miser with a golden tooth. The question itself suggested that Vitel had assembled a dossier on Garlotte and his associates. Of course, Garlotte had done the same for Vitel. But the visiting prince's revelation of knowledge lacked any flamboyance, any sense of one-upmanship. Strangely enough, the query seemed to be...an innocent question.

"Yes. Katrina," said Garlotte.

Vitel simply nodded. His mood, reserved and polite, turned somber. "I had two daughters...two childer. Now...?" He shrugged, dropped his hands into his lap and stared at the floor.

Garlotte was again stymied. Did Vitel expect ...*sympathy*? The prince of Baltimore was much relieved when Gainesmil's familiar knock sounded at the door.

"Enter."

Garlotte kept the pleasantries to a minimum. He was anxious to hear from Vitel, and the time before sunrise was growing short. The Washington prince remained sullen as he told of the sporadic fighting that had rapidly metamorphosed into a full-scale invasion.

"It was no Sabbat siege, as we've seen before," he explained. "They knew where to hit, and they hit hard. They must've gathered intelligence for years."

"It sounds far too...*organized* for the Sabbat," Gainesmil said.

"I agree," Vitel said. "I suspect Benison in Atlanta would agree and Purrel in Charleston...."

"Yes, yes," Gainesmil, in his excitement and apprehension, forgot himself and waved away the prince's litany. Vitel, seemingly deflated, appeared to take no offense, but Garlotte noted the infraction so that he might bring it to Gainesmil's attention later. "There's something else at work here," the Toreador continued. "How could they...?" He considered the coordination that would have been required, the logistics, the strategy. He shook his head sternly. "Impossible. Who could have gathered so much support? Borges? Not bloody likely."

"He would be closest to Atlanta, but I agree. Perhaps Polonia," Garlotte suggested.

"I spoke with the leader," said Vitel. The host and advisor fell silent, waited expectantly. "Sarah Vykos."

"Vykos?" Garlotte repeated. Something wasn't right. "*Sascha* Vykos?"

Vitel cocked his head and then nodded. "That may be right. I had assumed her a Jewess."

"*Sascha* Vykos? I thought Vykos was a *he*," Gainesmil said.

"Depends on the night," Vitel replied sardonically.

"I didn't think she circulated beyond Europe," Garlotte added to the general confusion.

"She does now," said Vitel.

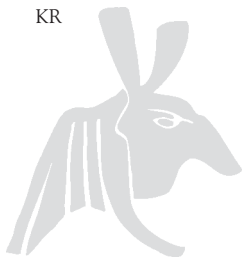
"Regardless of who heads the vanguard," Gainesmil announced, "there's a Sabbat army not fifty miles from here! We must send word to the other princes, to—"

Garlotte raised a hand and quieted his advisor. "Yes, there are further preparations that must be attended to, Robert, but our guest has not had an easy sojourn, and here we've been grilling him before he's rested. Prince Vitel, I invite you to stay on board today, and I promise to arrange more suitable accommodations for you on the morrow."

After Vitel's respectful acceptance, Garlotte snapped at Dennis. "See that Prince Vitel is comfortable."

"Yes, sir."

"Gainesmil, come with me," Garlotte said finally. "I must ask Isaac two more questions before I retire."



Monday, 28 June 1999, 9:15 AM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York

Elizabeth let herself in by the alley entrance and found Amy Rutherford waiting for her on the stairs. She held two cups of coffee and very little patience.

"Good morning, Miss Golightly. Here's your coffee." Amy waited until the younger woman had had a good gulp of the hot, black brew, and then developed a cat-and-canary smile. "Tell Mama all about it."

"About what?" Elizabeth slipped past, hugging the well-wrapped package tightly under one arm. She waggled the package at her boss. "This?"

Amy ran after her and caught the door to the offices open with a deft foot. "You scamp. You know exactly what I'm talking about. About the *date*."

Liz sat down. "Thursday night didn't go well at all. He had a business meeting beforehand, it dragged on, and he was three hours late." She shrugged. "Dinner was good, though. He and his chauffeur drove me home, and he asked if I could meet him the next night. So he came over Friday after dinner, and we talked antiques and things."

Amy's mouth fell open. "And?"

"What do you mean, 'And?'"

"Good God, Liz. Do you realize you've made fire irons sound more exciting than that? You sell a cheap Roman bracelet to one of the Miller sisters, and it's all romance and the story of how the glass went from hand to hand along the Silk Road, and the wedding it was bought for, and the...well, you go on and on, you know you do, and it sells the thing. Here you have not one, but two nights with one of the most interesting men I've ever met, and all you have to say about it is, 'He was late. Dinner was good. We drove home. He came over. We talked.'" She ran the sentences together in singsong mockery. "Do you know what I did Friday?"

"You attended an estate sale in Massachusetts." Elizabeth got up and started down the carpeted stairs to the display floor. "How did it go for us?"

"I—well, it went fine. Four good pieces of Philadelphia cabinetry, a nearly complete set of Spode china, a—damn it, you changed the subject. I spent Friday wondering what happened to you Thursday night."

"That was sweet of you, but he was quite the gentleman. Brought me home safe, sound and with my virtue unassailed."

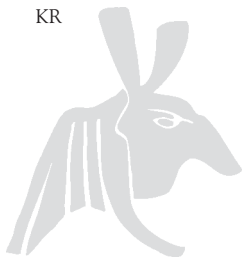
"Liz—" Amy began seriously and looked at her. An eight-day clock on the wall beside them chimed the half-hour, galvanizing her into movement. "Oh, Lord. Do you realize we open in thirty minutes? Hurry. The Totiros took the floral, but they also cleaned out all the Nouveau we had in the showroom. We've got to reorganize before ten.... Call Antonio and the boys in to help us with the heavy things, would you, Liz?"

In fifteen minutes, the front room was ready enough to start the day with. The two women tramped upstairs to brush dust from their dresses and jackets, comb Amy's flyaway hair and make themselves, as Miss Agnes would have put it, "decently presentable."

They stole a moment for more coffee and gossip, until the phone rang. Amy reached for it with one hand, but kept her eyes on Liz. "Hold that thought, dear."

"Rutherford House Antiques," she answered, in excruciatingly well-bred tones. "How may I be of assistance to you today? Yes. Yes." Her brows waggled at Elizabeth, and she mouthed 'asking for you.' "She is here with me now, as a matter of fact. Would you like to speak with her?" There was a pause. "In about five minutes. Our hours begin at ten, Mr...Yes, that is the street. Three blocks from...that is correct. Well, we will see you then, sir."

"Another gentleman caller for you, Lizzie." Amy shrugged and waved away Liz's questions. "Didn't leave his name. Didn't state his business." She glanced at her wristwatch. "Time to unlock."



Monday, 28 June 1999, 10:17 AM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York

The elegant smoked-glass-and-chromed-steel doors opened for the first customer of the day. Amy Rutherford drifted unobtrusively forward, neither putting herself in the man's way, nor giving the slightest appearance of neglect, should he be looking for assistance.

His eyes flickered over her, but he said nothing. He started a circuit of the room, examining it silently. From time to time, he would look over at the two women, but his attention seemed absorbed by the antiquities. His hair was a graying ash-blond, his face dark in a way that suggested layers of honest sunburn, not trips to a tanning bed. He wore a wrinkled, khaki button-down shirt with too many pockets and blue jeans that seemed to have come across the idea of 'threadbare' in ages past and liked it. Neither woman judged him on the clothes; enough VIPs took pride in shabby casuals that he might have been anyone.

"Mrs. Dimitros?" he began at last, addressing Amy. Up close, his carriage seemed younger than the gray hair suggested. His face was a mess of wrinkles, but beneath the lines hid the face of a young man. He could have been thirty-five, she thought...or fifty-five.

"Mrs. Rutherford—I'm Amy Rutherford." Her eyes narrowed as she checked his voice against a memory.

"Good morning, ma'am. My name is Jordan Kettridge."

"Lizzie—" Amy pulled Elizabeth across the room with the tone of her voice. She said to Kettridge, "You called us half an hour ago?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Jordan Kettridge, Elizabeth," said Amy, informatively. Liz nodded and extended her hand to shake.

"Good morning, Professor Kettridge. I...was hardly expecting to see you here in New York."

"You're Elizabeth Dimitros?" He stared hard at her, and let her hand go a moment later than was entirely comfortable or polite, cocking his head to one side as he studied her. "You don't look like you write." Elizabeth said nothing, but her gaze was as frank and open as the stranger's was blunt and suspicious. Amy glanced from one to the other and decided to stay close by.

"Well, Ms. Dimitros. The bead in my article does have striations running counterclockwise in relation to the flatter side." His eyes were gray-green and piercing, and they locked with hers. "Though I would have thought, looking at the diagram in SCAD," he said sharply and threw the words down like a challenge, "that it would be impossible to determine that from the angle at which it was drawn."

"Nevertheless," said the young woman smoothly, "I'm glad to hear that the design, at least, matches the bead I'm seeking. Can you tell me who is currently in possession of the bead, Doctor?"

"The artifact is in my private collection, Ms. Dimitros." Kettridge spoke with an inexplicable emphasis—his tone would have suited a death threat better. Elizabeth kept her shock out of her face and was glad to see Amy wearing her best Rutherford business expression as a mask.

"I see," Liz said, though she was almost certain that she didn't. "And are you willing to sell?"

"That would depend entirely on the circumstances, Ms. Dimitros." Kettridge rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Who's the buyer?"

"Rutherford House," said Elizabeth, hoping like hell that Amy's face wouldn't betray surprise and give her the lie.

Kettridge chuckled. "I'm sorry. I don't believe for one minute that you pick your antiques out of archaeological journals at random—who put you up to this?"

Amy broke in. "Doctor Kettridge," she said slowly, "when we represent a client, we do not make a habit of giving their name away to simply anyone who asks for it. Confidentiality is a watchword here. And when the buyer specifically requests us not to divulge their identity, it is a point of honor with us to respect their wishes."

He said, "Honor, is it?" and smiled. His wrinkles wrapped around his mouth and eyes readily enough; the lines had come there smiling in the first place.

Elizabeth rallied and sat on the edge of the center table. "It's far too early, at any rate, to begin discussing terms, Dr. Kettridge. We haven't any idea whether your find is the piece our client wants—we'll need to see your bead to verify that and match the data on it to the data on the item being sought. After that, we'll contact our client. It is possible, I suppose, that he or she will be willing to make an exception to their confidential status this one time, as a concession to you."

"And just how much data do you have, Ms. Dimitros, on the 'item' being sought?"

Amy cut in. "Is the bead for sale, Dr. Kettridge?"

He looked at the two women—Amy Rutherford, clad in iron-gray, her arms folded, her chin held high—Elizabeth Dimitros, perched on the table's edge, chic and trim in burgundy, following him casually with her eyes—and found his way to the door without quite turning his back on either of them. "I'll think about it," said the professor, and then he left.

Elizabeth let out a sigh, and some of the backbone dropped out of her posture. Behind her, she could hear Amy walk to the viewing table, pick up her coffee cup and finish it.

"All right," said Amy Rutherford. "What the hell was that all about?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me another one, Lizzie."

"I'll tell you the whole damned story. If it makes any more sense to you than it does to me—I'll—I'll probably die of apoplexy. Look," she said and told her boss the story of the 'puzzle' Hesha had brought with him. She dug the casts and the journal out of the tote bag she'd brought with her, and the recitation ended with Amy wearing a jeweler's loupe, scrutinizing the tiny bits of putty as if they were the crown jewels of Ruritania.

"I just don't see it," she said, trading the loupe for her bifocals.

"Good. I felt like a blasted idiot. On the other hand, I was hoping you'd know something about the statue, or Kettridge, or Ruhadze that would make that—" Elizabeth gestured toward the display floor with a wild hand "—make some sort of sense."

“And all you did was ask what collection the bead was in?”

“Yes. I signed as Rutherford House staff—you said yourself that Ruhadze was a VIP even to Agnes and your—”

“Don’t mention her, please.”

“Mrs. Rutherford,” finished the younger woman, hopelessly.

They stared at each other across the viewing table.

“So what do we do now?” asked Elizabeth.

“We wait and see if Kettridge comes back, and we wait to hear from your beau. In the meantime...I’ll make some phone calls. I always wanted to be a sleuth.”

“Everyone I know is turning into a detective, these days.”

“You mind the store, dear, and don’t worry. I can’t see how even...Mother...could possibly *blame* you for any of this. It could be a very nice deal. And if we pull it off, I’ll see that you get a cut, even if it has to come out of my share.” Amy tromped up the stairs, leaving Elizabeth alone in the shop to wonder.

She picked up the phone a few hours later.

“You have reached 202-555-7831. At the tone, please leave your name, your number, the time you called and your message.”

“Hesha? This is Liz. Look...well...all right. To start with, the article I found was in the *Southern California Archaeological Digest* for Fall 96. If you can’t get a copy, I’ll fax pages from mine. The article is by Kettridge, Jordan Kettridge; he’s a professor at Berkeley. As far as I could make out from the article, he’s got one of the missing eyes of your statue. So I e-mailed him to see if he would sell. That was Saturday. He turned up in our showroom this morning, acting as if he was about to...I don’t know, start a fight. Punch Amy in the mouth. Damn it. I don’t even know why I’m calling. He was hostile; I doubt he’ll sell. Do you want Rutherford House to pursue it? Give me a call when you can. Bye.”

Monday, 28 June 1999, 10:20 PM
Taking off from Hartsfield International Airport
Atlanta, Georgia



Delta Flight 2065 to Atlanta had led to Flight 893 to Las Vegas, which would arrive a few ticks before midnight. Chas and Victor traveled lightly, intending to stay only two nights, three at the most. Milo Rothstein expected them on the evening of Tuesday, the 29th.

They killed time with plane talk. Hunched over, Chas whispered to the ghoul.

“Frankie Gee makes me fucking cringe, Victor. Me—and I’ve done it all. You see, the thing about Frankie is that he doesn’t just do shit, he makes everything he does an exclamation point. You fuck over Frankie, and he doesn’t just hurt you, he hurts you *bad* in front of your family or your boys.

“This one time, back when I was just a ghoul sucking blood off the Giovanni family tit, Frankie had me bring in this kid who borrowed money and skipped a few points on the vig when he made his last payment. Just a fucking kid, this guy was, and something like six hundred dollars shy. Fuck it—chump change, right?

“Not to Frankie Gee. He sits the kid down, and I duct tape the dumb son of a bitch to the chair. Frankie starts talking, and the kid goes ghost white if you know what I’m saying here. Ghost fucking white. I figure he’s seen too many gangster movies, and he thinks Frankie’s gonna go *Pulp Fiction* on him. Me, I’m thinking Frankie’s gonna slap him around, take whatever money the kid has in his wallet, maybe break a thumb or two and turn the kid loose. It’s kinda funny to me, Victor. I’m laughing at how scared this kid is because I know the shit going on in his mind is way the fuck worse than anything Frankie’s gonna do. It works well like that, from where I stand. You scare the fuck out of the guy who stiffed you and you let him go—he thinks he’s just had the luckiest break in the world, and he never fucks with you again.

“Frankie, I guess, doesn’t see things the same way.

“ ‘Whattaya think I’m gonna do to you, boy?’ Frankie says to this kid. ‘You think I’m gonna break your knees? I’m gonna shoot you in the face?’ Frankie’s all smiling, and I’m laughing a little louder, because he’s really sweating this kid. ‘You owe me six Bens and you try to skip out on it? That’s not so responsible of you.’ The whole place has this weird gasoline smell about it.

“ ‘Hold his fucking eyes open, Chas,’ he tells me and I do. I have to reach around his head and kind of pinch them open. I guess he knows the shit’s about to get rough and he’s trying like all hell to close them. No good, because I work my finger there beneath his eyelid and pull back, like what’s that movie where they make that criminal kid watch those Nazi movies?

“Anyway, I got his eyes pulled open, right? And we’re in this warehouse. Frankie has this van pull in; somebody in the back opens the door and pushes out this girl. She’s in pretty good shape—they haven’t beat her or anything, but she’s tied up in phone cord or that string you pull your blinds up with, you know? Frankie picks her up and

holds her in front of the kid. It's his girlfriend or his sister—I don't know. Frankie Gee takes out this survival knife or Bowie knife or whatever and starts waving it around, like he's about to really put the hurt on the girl.

"Now, see, here's where it gets really fucked up. Me, I would have stopped by now. The kid's already shitting bricks just to have been caught up in the whole thing. Then we catch him and tie him up—he's ready to pay whatever he's got and sell his ass into slavery for the rest. *Then* his girl shows up—maximum density, you know? His mind's going a million miles an hour wondering how—not if, but how—Frankie's going to kill him and the girl. I would have collected right there and let the kid think a miracle saved his life. But Frankie was pissed at being screwed over. He wanted to get this kid but good. Make a statement, you know?"

Chas paused.

"Victor, Frankie knife-fucked that girl. Stabbed her thirteen times in the pussy. The first time, her eyes bugged almost right out of her fucking head. But that didn't do it—he got her a dozen more times.

"The kid's totally out of his mind when this commences to go down. He's jerking in his chair and crying and his cheeks are all poking out from beneath the duct tape. He tips himself over—I couldn't even watch the shit and I had to let go. I only knew about the thirteen times because I fucking *heard* that knife make that sick stabbing sound.

"Then, as soon as he's done stabbing, Frankie's through with the whole situation. He cuts the kid loose using the same knife, and me and him get in the van and the mook at the wheel drives us away. Didn't even mess with the kid—he put the whole weight of the situation right between that girl's legs.

"I'm not trying to fuck you up, Victor. I'm just wanting to let you know how this works. What you're getting into. I don't mean to get all weepy or sentimental or any of that bullshit, but I'm telling you the God's honest truth when I say that a part of you dies when you get involved in this.

"Fuck, just yesterday, I had Annie's boyfriend's fingers cut off because she talked back to me. How fucked up is that? Now, I wish I wouldn't have done it, Victor. I can feel something inside that *likes* that sort of fucked-up shit, like I'm making it happy when I do it.

"I know you're not one of us yet, Victor, but that may come up after we come back from Vegas. You need to think long and hard about this shit. The world doesn't need any more of this, but Frankie might try to put it on your shoulders. Just remember that you won't be able to stay who you are. You'll be something else altogether, and the only hope you'll have is to hang on to the memory of what you were before. And that's a hard fucking thing to do.

"I know, I know. I'm talking in circles here. I'm being—what is it?—*cryptic*. But we got secrets we have to keep. Just remember that you don't want to know those secrets, no matter how good a deal it sounds like. I promise you."

Victor swallowed, not wanting to speak. Chas waved down a flight attendant and ordered a whiskey and water for him.

Tuesday, 29 June 1999, 2:14 AM
A studio apartment in Red Hook, Brooklyn
New York City, New York



Elizabeth staggered through the door and into her apartment. It locked behind her, and she shuffled, exhausted, to the living room and threw herself on the big sofa. For ten minutes, she vegetated in absolute stillness. Only when the standing-up aches from her day at Rutherford House had been replaced by face-down-on-the-couch aches did she move.

Her hand reached out and tapped at a blinking red light, and presently it spoke to her.

“Elizabeth? Hesha. I found the article; I think you’re right. You’re very quick. Thank you for looking out for me—or at least, gnawing away at my puzzles for me. I’d love to acquire the piece, of course. Put the Rutherfords on the track. They’ll finagle it out of him if anyone can. Do look after yourself, though. I’ve met Kettridge once or twice, and he’s a touch...eccentric. The scene today sounds typical of him. I’d hesitate to use the word ‘unstable’ about such a prominent and capable scholar....” The tinny copy of Hesha’s voice slowed, and a note of concern crept into it. “Please, be careful, Elizabeth. I’ll talk to you again soon.”



Tuesday, 29 June 1999, 3:14 AM
Caesar's Palace
Las Vegas, Nevada

The plane had arrived without a hitch, delivering Chas and Victor safely to McCarran International Airport and from there to the hotel via a quick cab ride.

"I hate this city," Chas said idly, in the back of the cab.

"Why?" asked Victor.

"You'll see."

Check-in had likewise gone smoothly. Chas had decided to try his luck in the casino, maybe earning a few bucks and seeing if any disastrous turn of chance portended ill omens for him.

If the cards and dice were any indication, this trip would be a good one, Chas decided. He had won six hundred dollars at blackjack, half of which he tipped the dealer, and two hundred at craps, half of which he tipped the croupier.

"I just do it for fun," he explained, gracefully deferring their questioning gazes.

It wasn't like he really needed the money, after all. Plus, it'd be a good cover story if something big happened while they were in town and they made a few dollars on that—he could say he'd won big, and heavy tips would corroborate that.

It was still next-to-last shift at the table, and the drinks (surreptitiously switched with those of neighboring gamblers—they watched their cards and chips but never their cocktails) still flowed freely. Pretty soon, however, the Bad Time would come, after all the sport gamblers had gone to bed and the desperate gamblers crept like cockroaches into the casino. Pale, pasty-faced insurance salesmen and middle managers from Iowa, their wives dropping coins into video slot machines while they themselves tried vainly to win back next month's mortgage payment on a lucky deal or throw of the dice.

Easy pickings for the casino and easier pickings for vampires like Chas.

Not that he had to worry about feeding. The city was full of similar desperation; it was an undercurrent that ran through the whole town, touching the oil barons and the rogue drifters alike. At one moment, any of them could be Lady Luck's favorite suitor and at the next, they could be penniless and drunk on the curb out front. The only thing that separated them as individuals was where they stood on the spectrum of destiny.

Fuck. A seven. Crapped out. Chas left a twenty for the croupier and left the table. It was getting late anyway. Where was Victor?

Chas rode the elevator back to their hotel room, running his hand through his hair and looking at himself in the mirror on the wall. He sniffed, which startled an old woman in the elevator to consciousness. She exited on the nineteenth floor.

Lady, Chas thought to himself, *you just rode an elevator with the devil and you never knew the difference. You're lucky to be alive.* He smirked, a self-deprecating little twist of the mouth yet somewhat sincere, and leaned back against the rail.

Floor twenty-six.

He slid the electronic key through the lock and heard the tumbler whirl, then opened the door.

Victor shot up, naked, from the bed, his cock limp and his eyes and nose rimmed with red. Burst blood vessels. Beneath him, a girl of maybe seventeen bent on her hands and knees, rough white lines on her ass and a fine cloud of white powder that settled slowly onto her thighs and the bed. Beneath *her* lay another girl, this one on her back, flat-chested and with pupils so big Chas could see them from the doorway.

"Shit, Chas, I thought you wouldn't be back for another couple of fucking hours."

"Victor, you stupid piece of shit. What the fuck did you bring these hookers in here for?"

"Hey, mister, we're not hookers, we're *escorts*," said the one on top, standing semi-erect now, though on her knees and still straddling her partner.

"Bitch, shut the fuck up or I'll put out your fucking eyes and skullfuck you. All right, ladies, party's over. Get dressed. Come on, get dressed. Pack up. Time to go."

Chas was clapping his hands and barking at the girls, prodding them into movement. They responded sluggishly, but were obviously wound up, as the coke or crank or whatever played havoc with them and they acted impishly to see what would happen.

"I'm fucking serious here. Victor, put your fucking clothes on. Cover that thing, would you? Jesus Christ."

"What's the fucking problem, Chas? I mean come on, we're in Vegas; this shit's legal." Victor led the top girl back to the bed, bending her over, rubbing white powder from her ass into his gums with one hand and working his dick to some degree of attention with the other, readying himself to take the girl from behind. The skinny, flat-chested one—bottle blonde, for the record—giggled and leered at Chas, dry-humping her friend's leg.

"Yeah, come on, Chaaaaas..." She drew out his name, making an impossible three-syllable word out of it. "You're in Vegas."

"Shut the fuck up, slut. I've been coming to Vegas since you were a twinkle in your daddy's eye." He looked her over, noticing track marks on her arms as she squirmed beneath the other whore.

"Come on, baby. You like it rough?" She smiled, crawling out from beneath the other girl and stepping toward him. Yellow teeth. Cigarettes and heroin. Bad news. *Not this one*, Chas found himself thinking.

What? You're not serious, he said silently to himself. Still, he couldn't deny the truth—must have overlooked it in his anger. He could feel the girls' blood calling to him, hear the pulse of it through their veins. He looked out the window: desert lightning behind the neon and halogen.

Chas shook himself. "You don't know how rough, girl. Now pack up and take your sister with you and get the fuck back to the street corner."

"Victor," the skinny girl crowed, "I think your friend's a fag. Is that so, big meany?" She leaned in, taking a rude handful of Chas's crotch. "Do you like boys? I'm kind of shaped like a boy...I've even got a dildo in my bag that I could use to—"

Chas batted her away, this time fighting with the urge that could only end in trouble. Victor wasn't even paying attention—couldn't be trusted to defuse the situation. He was working his hips back and forth behind the girl on the bed, who looked at Chas lasciviously, her mouth open, pupils and irises half-circles obstructed by her eyelids.

Chas smelled the musky odor of sex, which mingled with the sharp tang of what he now figured was cocaine.

Enough. He felt the red rush rising.

His throat constricted; he had to force out words. "Victor, did these whores have a pimp?"

Victor was still stabbing away with his groin at the other girl's upended ass. "Fuck." He grunted. "What? Fucking what?"

"A pimp, you no-account motherfucker. Did you buy these whores from a pimp?" Pressure rising...losing sight...

"No. No. They were...." Grunting. "They were solo."

Good. No one to care about finding them in pieces.

"I told you, Mister Chaaas," the skinny one piped up, "we're *escorts*, not who—"

Chas snapped. He tore the phone off the nightstand, grabbing the receiver and base in one big hand. The cord to the wall went taut and pulled free in a shower of drywall dust. Chas brought the whole assembly down on top of the skinny girl's head. Again. Three times. By the fourth, her head had given in like a ripe melon, blood running from her shattered skull, spraying the carpets, tainting the wall, misting the other girl's swinging breasts as her lusty look immediately became one of horror.

Even Victor stopped his fervent rutting, eyes going white and mouth slack. He pulled out of the girl, a trail of lubricant following him briefly. "Fuck, Chas what are you—"

Chas whirled around, bringing the phone high as if he meant to stave in Victor's head, too. His eyes were wild, his face contorted, his mouth a snarl of vicious fangs. "Fuck off, Victor." He dropped the phone as the ghoul feebly brought up his arms to ward off an attack that never came.

In a flash, Chas had the other girl by her neck, lifting her from the floor to viciously impact her head against the ceiling. Out like a light she went.

Chas tore into her throat, just above where her neck met her clavicle. Skin parted and blood flowed from the wound, spilling down her naked body in torrents, washing away little rivers of the white powder that still dusted her hips and haunch. He drank deeply, in huge gulps that he knew would have reduced her to screaming fits were she still conscious. The taste overwhelmed him, its salty bite and rich consistency, almost like a metallic burgundy...

...And then he stopped. Too much would kill her, and she was already going to be a problem. He licked the messy wound carelessly, and it closed. Then he dropped her to the floor like a sack of garbage.

Victor cowered, naked and shaking in the corner. His face was pale and his mouth still slack in shock. But there was no anger. No regret either, really. Just undiluted disbelief.

Meanwhile, Chas towed off the blood that stained him. Then he changed his suit and adjusted his watch, glancing briefly at its face.

"Clean this up, Victor," Chas said as evenly as possible. "Then meet me in the casino. You have forty minutes."

Tuesday, 29 June 1999, 5:22 AM
Caesar's Palace
Las Vegas, Nevada



Chas was upset in the lobby lounge. He was almost one of the cockroach people, he could tell. Freaked out in Vegas, went a little beyond the boundary, and now had to worry about how to fix it. Even though Victor got fucked into doing the dirty work, it was still his operation. One dead, maybe two—dammit! Why? He didn't even need the blood! Just a bad situation and he lost control, wasn't it? He briefly tried to console himself by entertaining the thought that they deserved to die. They probably would have mickeyed Victor and left him in a tub full of ice, duct tape on his back and a bloody hole where his kidney used to be. Or they would have stolen the luggage and money and everything else in the room and then bought *chiva* with the profits.

But Chas knew he was grasping at straws. He knew he'd fucked up and this was just one more step on the way to hell, into the devil's carriage house. His head fell into his hands. Christ, he even *looked* like one of the cockroach people.

Through his fingers, past the bar, he saw Victor walk into the room. Down the dais, toward him Victor came, with the coke fiend's look of paranoia held in check only by the knowledge that if he flaked, things would become even more nightmarish than they already were. He looked tired, the bags under his eyes red with drugs and fatigue.

"Everything done?" Chas snarled, looking out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah. It's done. Room's clean." Sniff. "Phone's gone, towels and sheets and all that shit's on its way to Long Beach."

"And the girls?"

"I got the one being carried out on a stretcher. Told the EMTs she's in some kind of amphetamine freak-out, which a blood test should support. Oh, and she's rambling about somebody tearing somebody up, which I think they'll dismiss as drug dementia."

"You called EMTs? How the fuck did you get away from them so quickly?"

"It's fucking Vegas. I gave them a hundred dollars apiece. They think I'm just some cokehead john who wants to get away from his scummy whore with no questions asked."

"All right. And the other girl?"

"Um... If you end up at the steak house here, I wouldn't order off the menu. At least not till tomorrow. I'll make a phone call and things should clear up by the time you get up for the evening."

Chas forced a sigh and pursed his lips. Thank fucking God *that* was over with. Now to just ride it out and talk to the Rothsteins' crew tomorrow....

"This is fucking why I hate Vegas, Victor."



Tuesday, 29 June 1999, 5:36 AM
Caesar's Palace
Las Vegas, Nevada

"Oh, fuck." Chas gurgled as a torrent of blood ran backward, *up* his throat, and spewed from his nose and mouth. "Fuck. Victor. Fuck me, Jesus Christ, Victor, I don't feel so good."

Victor knew—this wasn't how things normally happened. He didn't know *what*, though: bad blood or something. "Look out! This man is sick. Stomach ulcer. I'm his attorney and he has a heart problem!" Whatever. Just to get these people the fuck out of the way.

Chas stumbled, his legs feeling like jelly. His vision narrowed to a tunnel and everything, everyone in the tunnel seemed to be staring at him. He could feel every ridge on his fingerprint, every thread of his shirt. He could feel where the blood he had vomited was thin and where it was viscous and coagulated. Fragments of the cockroach people's speech found their way into his hearing, but he remained oblivious to the larger noise around him. "Fucked up," the voices said. "Look out—what a mess." "Did they shoot him?" "...Card-counter..." "...Too much to drink..." "...Gangsters!" "...Someone should do something..." "...That man removed..." "...Don't look, Gladys..." He felt the tacks that held the soles to his shoes, the minor gradations where the carpet had been laid over an irregularity in the floor's foundation. Another gout of blood-puke found its way up and everyone looked at him. A horrified waitress dashed out of his way and two bouncers looked at him disapprovingly as they waved him and—who the fuck was holding his arm?—out of the casino and into the lobby.

Victor. It was fucking Victor. Chas peered, his eyes narrowing to slits as he focused on Victor's face. Victor shoved Chas into an elevator—puke—and two greasy-haired roach-men in cheap slacks and sport coats dodged to get out of the car.

"Jesus, Chas, what the fuck happened to you?" Every detail of Victor's face stood out as Chas stared at it, the pores, the individual minute strands of hair that would make up his beard once it grew out more, the lines at the side of his mouth and at the corners of his eyes. The still-red rims of his nostrils.

"It's the hooker's fucking crank. Or mescaline. That whore must have been tripping. Fuck, Victor, get me to the room before I—" More vomit, spraying across Victor's shirt and the mirrored wall of the elevator car. Chas grabbed Victor by the front of the shirt—wondered if he could tell the thread count by feeling the individual fibers. "The fucking room, Victor. Shit."

"Calm down, Chas." Victor pushed him back, as much to keep him from crashing into the walls as to remain on top of the situation. "I got everything under control. Victor's in charge, you hear me? Don't fight me, because I'll have to hold you back and you'll probably fucking kill me."

They burst into the hotel room, a few indignant rays of sunlight already climbing through the crease where the drapes met. Blood-sweat drenched Chas's forehead and welled through his shirt where it wasn't already stained with blood-sick.

"Fucking hell, Victor, are we—" puke "—done?"

“One minute, Chas. One fucking minute. Almost there.”

Victor kicked open the bathroom door, noting that the floor was still a bit wet from where he'd had to mop it with towels earlier. Oh, well. It would have to do. He pushed Chas into the bathroom, casting him inelegantly into the tub. As a quick afterthought, he hung the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the outside of the room's door and pulled shut the lever-lock that worked like a door chain. *Fort fucking Knox, this place is*, he grinned. Then he pulled shut the bathroom door, making sure to put the bedspread in front of the crack beneath the door.

As Chas collapsed into a fitful, twitching unconsciousness, the devil ran through his mind. The devil, lord of the cockroaches.



Tuesday, 29 June 1999, 11:56 PM
Caesar's Palace, Senate Boardroom
Las Vegas, Nevada

Milo Rothstein sat at one end of the enormous stained-oak table, flanked by his *de facto* counsel. Prince Benedic's Nosferatu flunky, Montrose, sat to his left, looking like a skinned and twisted war prisoner in designer clothes. One of the lesser Rothstein Giovanni sat to Milo's right, nervous and ill-informed: the neonate knew that, in the event things got out of hand, he was probably going to be thrown to the wolves. He was there only because he had learned the keen power of scrutinizing the auras of others. He had originally learned his "little trick," as Milo called it, to use as an edge while hunting the casinos and streets. It had proved to be a double-edged sword, however, as it made the neonate a prize commodity in the petty squabbles between the family and the *other* vampires who wanted Las Vegas to be their playground only.

At the far end of the table, Victor Sforza tapped the note pad sitting before him with his pen. Chas stood behind him, playing to their ruse of mouthpiece and enforcer.

The Giovanni neonate leaned toward Milo, whispering, "The one standing up is a vampire. I'm not sure about the one sitting at the table. He's playing his cards pretty close to his chest. I'm guessing he's either Kindred or a ghoul."

Milo nodded. "To what do we owe the honor of this visit, Mr. Sforza?"

Victor rose, smoothing his tie. "Well, Mr. Rothstein, it would seem that our employer, Francis Giovanni, has come to learn that an acquaintance of his has gone missing. Mr. Giovanni suspects that he may have taken refuge here, or that you might know where he has gone...to. Gone, I mean."

Milo smiled and looked past his steepled fingers into his lap. "And why would your employer's friend come to see me?"

"Because Mr. Giovanni knows that you have had dealings with him in the past."

"Have I?" Milo raised his eyebrows. "Such guarded speech! What exactly is my connection with Benito, anyway?"

Victor shot back before Chas could warn him with a cough. "I never said Benito. You must know what we're talking about, or the individual's name wouldn't have come to your mind, would it?" Chas tensed. The ball had always been in Milo's court, but he'd chosen to pull his initial punches, to see what his guests had to offer. Chas suspected a set-up, that bad blood between Frankie Gee and Rothstein in the past was being settled by proxy. Willing blood into his limbs, he felt the flush of undead potency course through him.

"No, Mr. Sforza, I'm afraid you don't quite see the full truth. I know precisely why you're here, and my *apparent* slip-up was intended to indicate that I know more than you believe me to. If a simple underestimation were your only error, you might have come out of this meeting ahead."

The freak, Montrose, watched Chas bristle and made to rise. Milo outstretched a hand, as if to calm him or to keep him seated. With an almost imperceptible narrowing

of the eyes, Montrose looked to Milo. Chas caught the minute display and raced to put the pieces together in his mind: Montrose wasn't happy with Rothstein. Rothstein might know where Benito was, but had some reason to keep it quiet, which might be the reason for the tension between them. The quiet fellow who hadn't been introduced was either the linchpin or a red herring. More likely the latter given his visible discomfort. But then, that could be part of—Chas halted his thoughts, choosing not to second-guess himself. Better to let everything play out than to go off half-cocked.

Victor backed down, a good move. "I mean no disrespect, Mr. Rothstein. I came at the request of my employer, who seemed to think that this matter would be easily resolved on amicable terms. Perhaps I've misjudged you, but your manner seemed defensive. I apologize for my presumptuousness." That seemed to calm Rothstein, but Montrose remained agitated. Chas relaxed a bit, cursing himself for so quickly invoking the power of his undead vitae. He knew the rush would remain there, but he tried to shrink himself visibly. The room's recessed fluorescent lights flickered briefly beneath the yellow wash of the main lamps. Montrose raised a warped eyebrow.

Victor continued. "It is Benito we're after, but only to settle a debt with my employer. I'm afraid that if you give him reason to think you might be harboring the debt, he won't take that as an act of comradeship."

Chas winced—Frankie hadn't said anything to him about a debt. Either he was keeping Chas in the dark, or Victor was making this up on the fly. He hoped this last was the case, because if Frankie had sent him out here to play back-up man to a fucking ghoul without giving him the full picture...

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sforza, but I can't help you." Milo's statement broke Chas from his reverie. "Benito Giovanni stopped here briefly more than two weeks ago but stayed for only one night before taking his leave."

"I see. Well, then I am sorry to have wasted your time. My employer will be disappointed, but perhaps your recent sighting of Benito will provide him with some new insight." Victor rose, made a show of scribbling something on his note pad, and turned to leave. "Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Rothstein. My associate and I ask for one more evening to conclude our affairs and to afford us ample time to return home without fearing the rays of the sun." *Good play*, Chas thought; *let them think you're Kindred*. Victor could certainly think on his feet.

"But of course. Where are you staying?"

Chas flashed a brief look to Victor. Either Rothstein hadn't known about the problem last night or he was trying to lull them again.

"We're staying here in Caesar's Palace. In the tower—twenty-sixth floor. A grand view of the Strip," Victor remarked casually, buttoning his suit coat in preparation to leave. *Please, please, please*, Chas thought to himself, *don't take a shot at Treasure Island*. Montrose apparently made his haven there, according to information gleaned before things had acquired their current state between the Rothsteins and Frankie Gee's faction.

But he hadn't to worry. Victor kept his mouth shut.

As they left, heading toward the elevator, Chas clapped Victor on the shoulder. "Not bad. You even had me fooled for a minute. With any luck, he's underestimated you. Or maybe even overestimated you, which will take the attention off...well, whoever it's supposed to be on."

“Damn, Chas, give me some credit,” Victor returned. “It’s possible to make a deal without cutting someone’s nose off. I just hate talking to Kindred who believe what they tell other people about themselves. Half of the conversation is flattery and the other half is trying to get them to take your bait. Kindred like Milo Rothstein talk in circles; you just have to hope they get dizzy. I made that shit up about the debt—I don’t know why Frankie’s after Benito, but I don’t want to look like some ignorant messenger boy. The better I play the game, the more opportunity I give Milo to trip up on his end.”

Chas just looked ahead with a slight, bemused smile on his face. Victor was right—sometimes the Kindred fooled themselves better than anyone else with their charades.

As the elevator climbed to the twenty-sixth floor, Chas hoped Milo hadn’t left the table thinking the same thing.

Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 12:51 AM
The Castle, The Smithsonian Institute
Washington, D.C.



Sascha Vykos sat high atop the sharply slanted roof of the Castle's sole tower. She surveyed the city below. *Her city*, she reminded herself.

The bold plan that they had devised so many months ago in Madrid had at last come to its fruition. At Monçada's urging, she had traveled to this New World. She had seized command of the Sabbat forces besieging the city of Atlanta. She had pushed forward the merciless blitzkrieg campaign, crushing all resistance along the Eastern Seaboard north to this point and driving the Camarilla before her. She had wrested control of the most powerful city on this continent from her enemies and their Antediluvian puppet masters.

And now, at last, it was a time to rest—to rejoice in their victories, to honor their slain, to shore up their strength for the trials that lay ahead.

From below, she could hear the sound of an experimental steam-driven pipe organ—one of the curiosities of the Smithsonian's extensive collection—coughing to life. Her guests were all assembled. She had watched them arrive, singly and in small clutches.

From her lofty vantage point, they looked very small and insecure, daunted by the prospect of walking openly through the streets of what most of them still thought of as an enemy stronghold. *And perhaps, in some respects, they are correct*, Vykos thought, a wicked smile spreading across her face.

Polonia and his flunky, Costello had returned from their 'reconnaissance mission'—to Buffalo, or Atlantic City, or wherever it was—where they had tested the mettle of the Camarilla defenses and, no doubt, found them wanting. There was no other explanation for the enthusiasm in Polonia's otherwise carefully guarded demeanor. This game of conquest and dominion was both contagious and addictive.

Borges and Sebastian had arrived separately, each from his own city. Vykos had no misgivings about the clandestine arrangement that had left Borges' protégé as the Bishop of Atlanta. She had even thrown Savannah into the bargain, although she believed that, at last report, Borges still reserved the prized port city for himself.

The arrangement was expedient. The fact was that she needed to ensure that these two ambitious conspirators were kept terribly occupied and well out of the picture as the campaign pressed north of Atlanta. The last thing she needed was to have to fend off the subtle manipulations and treacheries of the Lasombra while she was engaged in pitched battle with Camarilla forces.

Even the venerable Borges, whose eyes opened not upon life but only upon its shadowy subtexts, had been quick to seize upon Vykos's proffered bargain. He had gone so far as to set his signature to the contract in his own blood. Dear old Borges.

Bolon and Vallejo, of course, were already present. She seldom allowed her commanders far from her side these days. There was so much still to be done in securing the nation's capital. Perhaps in a few weeks' time she could spare one of them from the unrelenting labor of shoring up the bulwarks against the inevitable counterstrike.

The formidable Tremere chantry of Washington still stood defiantly, and the truth be told, Vykos's forces—as scattered and disorganized in victory as were the Camarilla in defeat—presently lacked the cohesion to face such opponents. In time, she hoped, cut off from Camarilla support, the chantry would wither on the vine. For the present, it was enough that the Tremere had not stood forth in defense of Vitel, their long-time rival.

She was toying with the idea of sending Bolon back south for a time, to rally the shattered Nomad Coalition. The group had drifted apart after the untimely death of Averros. Vykos smiled at the memory. If anyone could win the respect of the hard-fighting and fiercely independent roaming packs, it was formidable Bolon.

Vallejo, of course, was something of a gift from her patron the cardinal, and not one she would take for granted. They had secured so much in a mere week's time—and what was a week to one such as Monçada, a manipulator so cunning that he measured out his machinations by the century? Surely the cardinal would not now jeopardize their gains by attempting to withdraw Vallejo to Madrid.

If it did come to such a conflict of interests between herself and the cardinal, Vykos thought, she had no delusions whatsoever about which master the seasoned veteran would obey. He would follow her orders unquestioningly, even unto certain destruction, especially after Vitel's escape. Vykos had chided Vallejo only gently, yet his fierce pride had been wounded.

He would expect *her*, however, to follow the cardinal's demands with the same unhesitating enthusiasm. She hoped she never had to disabuse him of the notion that she would.

Vykos shifted uncomfortably. This lofty perch was the only place she felt she could be assured of a reasonable measure of privacy. For the third time that evening, Vykos unfolded the letter. The unusual parchment had a disconcerting ruddy tinge to it and crinkled like dried leaves in the night breeze.

My Dearest Vykos,

How can I express the intensity of my feelings toward you at this moment? At the very thought of your nearness, I am consumed with an irresistible longing. My hands tremble in anticipation of our meeting. If I could but once caress the peerless arch of your throat, my fondest desire would be fulfilled.

But it cannot be. When I think of all you have already risked for my sake, I am both humbled and shamed. It is altogether too much to bear. Perhaps you will understand me when I say that I cannot allow you to endanger yourself further on my account. I would rather go willingly to the pyre than be the cause of your bruising even your delicate heel.

You must put this rash notion from your mind. Surely there must be diversions enough in Atlanta to occupy your thoughts for the present. Await me there and I shall come to you, I swear it—in the autumn perhaps. Yes. I have heard such remarkable things about your Georgian scenery. I should very much like to see your fall.

My darling, every night we are apart consumes me like the midday sun. Why must you torment me so? You know that I have given into your keeping the keys to my dark soul. There is nothing I can deny you.

But if you must come, bringing fire and the sword into the secret places of my heart, come quickly. Better to yield to such arms as yours, than to fend them off.

“Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain...”

Neglected, the letter fluttered loosely in Vykos’s hand. Her gaze was distant, staring out over the Mall at some imaginary point in the middle distance. She hardly noticed the telltale plumes of fires still burning out of control in several parts of the city. The sound of sirens and machine-gun fire and breaking glass rose up on all sides. A police riot-control helicopter banked over the White House.

“And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.”

Vykos did not know she had spoken aloud until she heard someone discreetly cough behind her. A head poked through the tower window. Parmenides craned his neck to peer up at her.

“It is time, my lady, shall we go down to them?”

Vykos took one long last look over the silent city and rose. She descended the steep slope to the window.

Accepting Parmenides’ arm, she allowed him to help her over the sill—although he looked to be the frailer of the two. Apprehension was evident on his face as he blocked her advance toward the tower stair.

“They will try to kill you, you know.”

“I know.” She leaned toward him conspiratorially. “But they do not understand that tonight I have an insurance policy.”

Parmenides turned away sharply and would not meet her gaze.

“Oh, now you have gone and gotten your feelings hurt again. What is the matter, my young romantic, my *philosophe*?”

He turned upon her in anger. “You can ask that? What use can I be to you like...this?” He struck the cane against his crippled legs in frustration. Vykos winced, expecting him to go down in a heap, but Parmenides did not flinch.

“I think,” she said deliberately, “that you will have to do. Do not worry. You shall not fail me.”

He could not hold her gaze and his eyes fell.

“You never have.”

Vykos took his arm. Together they descended the narrow spiraling stair to where the assembled Sabbath dignitaries waited to acknowledge and proclaim Sascha Vykos as Archbishop of Washington, D.C.



Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 12:52 AM
Caesar's Palace, Room 2604
Las Vegas, Nevada

Chas and Victor returned to their room to find the message light blinking on the telephone. No doubt it was Frankie Gee with some new revelation or a request for them to stop somewhere on the way home.

Chas checked the message at the front desk: *Call Frankie back in New York. Urgent.* Something about that unsettled him—nothing ever got Frankie so worked up he needed to do something immediately. He was the kind who, if he got fucked, would sit and ruminate, letting his devious mind conjure a suitable revenge while feeding itself on cold hatred. Frankie was the sort of guy who'd come back at you six weeks after you gave him the short end of the stick. He'd make a big show of it, too—something you thought was trivial or that had passed like water under the bridge had instead been smoldering in Frankie's gut, and now you were going to be paid back in spades.

So Chas called Frankie's office immediately. "Hey, Frankie. This is Chas. What's the problem?" He idly wondered why Annie didn't answer the phone.

"This thing's bigger than I thought, Chas. Apparently, Benito owes people more important than me. I just got word from some of the old-town guineas on high that we better be extra fucking careful with this shit."

"What do you mean? What, he's in the hole across the board?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm small potatoes with some of these old motherfuckers; you know what I mean? I didn't tell them I had you out there, but if Benito's anywhere near Las Vegas, these guys are going to send a crew out your way."

"Well, what do you want me to do? Rothstein's talking like he doesn't know shit but there's someone else in the picture, I'm pretty sure. He had one of his little men there to shake us up, but he also had a freak job in there. Real piece of work, this Nosferatu. Does the name Montrose mean anything to you?" Chas scratched a hotel pen across the note pad on the nightstand. No ink.

"No, nothing to me, but it might to the goombas. Keep your eyes and ears open for someone named Isabel. She's some big shot with the old family out of Venice."

"Isabel Giovanni?"

"As far as I can tell. She'll be there, like I said, if Las Vegas is worth anything at all."

"Rothstein says Benito came and went. He was here, but then he disappeared. Nobody knows where he is."

"Well these old motherfuckers are all up in arms about it. Wherever he is, they need to just leave him there."

"You don't want us to stay any longer, do you?" Chas remembered the previous night, Victor's escapade and his own encounter with Las Vegas's unique brand of lacquered, mediocre vice.

"Well, now that you ask, I do. You stay there a couple more nights, see if any of the old crew make it out there."

“Fuck, Frankie, that’s not going to get me in trouble with them, is it? I mean—”

“Hey, you do what I tell you to do, you hear me? Don’t you fucking cry to me like a girl because I tell you to stay a few more nights. What the fuck is your problem, Chas? You going soft?”

The question sent Chas’s mind racing. *La Cosa Nostra*, particularly the Giovanni brand, wasn’t something people retired from. When you were done, you were either a pile of ash in jail, a pile of ash on the street, or a pile of ash in the oven of your own fucking haven. If Frankie thought he was going soft, the old man might have him taken out of the picture before he had a chance to fuck anything up. He shifted the focus from himself.

“No, Frankie, I’m not saying that. I’m saying that if these other guys are making it their case, they might not want us around. Family or no, their dirty laundry is still their dirty laundry, and I don’t want to put my nose in it if it’s going to fuck up their operation or ours.”

“Well, it’s good you’re thinking, Chas, but you let me take care of that end of things. You and Victor stay out there, and keep your eyes open. I got a suspicion that this is bigger than they’re wanting it to seem. They’ve already made it big by stepping in, going over my head; but it’s like you say, it’s their problem. If they can’t handle their problem, well, maybe I can find someone who can and they’ll end up owing me, *capice*?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“One more thing, Chas,” Frankie added, trying to seem off-the-cuff.

“What’s that?”

“You watch out.”

It was like the kiss of death. One simple statement, delivered with such finality and such strained irreverence. Chas knew, like as not, that he wouldn’t be coming home from this. Easy as pie had suddenly turned into something altogether different.

Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 1:10 AM
Spring Street
Laurel, Maryland



Fin parked three blocks away and made his way silently through the suburban neighborhood. Normally, he was careful—how embarrassing to be spotted by some half-assed, mortal neighborhood watch—but tonight he was even more so. The Sabbath was in Washington. No Kindred could have failed to have heard the stories. The monsters could be heading north any night. All of Baltimore was in a panic—all the undead, anyway. Even some of the mortals seemed to sense the unrest, although their nervousness was probably in response to the overt bloodshed in the capital, rather than to the jitters of the covert bloodsuckers in their midst. But Fin still wondered if the mortals picked up the scent of fear, through osmosis or whatever. Just like a jumpy cowboy might cause his herd to scatter....

The prince had told Fin not to come here at all, not to go south of Baltimore. If the Sabbath did come north, this would be the main corridor of attack. But that was why Fin *had* to come.

A greater danger to the young Ventrue was probably the roaming bands of Brujah who'd taken up patrolling between the two cities—the Kindred version of a half-assed neighborhood watch.

But this neighborhood seemed genuinely quiet, and Fin continued unhindered to his destination. He slipped past the house without setting off the motion-sensor light—he'd discovered that little gem on his first visit—and stealthily scaled the outside of the garage to the open window of the apartment above. He slipped inside without so much as disturbing the lace curtain and noted with satisfaction that he had not scuffed his shiny leather jacket.

The young woman sat with her back to him, a book open on the table before her, headphones pumping out music loud enough that Fin could hear it across the room. He had no worry of his light tread giving him away. He moved closer, reached out a hand to her delicate neck.

The instant his icy finger touched her skin, she jumped and whirled with a piercing shriek. Her book flew into the kitchenette. The cord of the headphones somehow got wrapped around her wrist, so that the headset slung around and smacked her in the face.

Fin cringed and tried to shush her: "*Morena ... Morena...*"

The flurry of motion ended. She stood wide-eyed and panting; she clutched a hand to her chest. "Jiminy creepers!"

Fin gave her a few moments to collect her wits and tried not to laugh at what, with her, passed as harsh language. Laughing would only rile her further.

"You *know*," Morena said, as she extracted herself from the headphones and cord, "there is a door."

"Your parents might see me."

"So?" She retrieved her book and hunted for her place. "I'm twenty-four years old. They don't keep me under lock and key." She stuck a bookmark in the book then set it

roughly on the table. "Of course, I haven't mentioned to them that my boyfriend is a carnivorous spawn of Satan."

"Not carnivorous."

"Oh, that's right. You're on a liquid diet. Mom, Dad—Fin is coming over for dinner. Just wring out that raw steak and he'll be fine."

He was on her before she knew he'd moved. Fin drove her backward and onto the bed, landed on top of her, held down her outstretched arms. Morena finally managed a surprised squeak, but her giggles died in her throat as she saw the look in his eyes—burning, glowing red, hungry.

"It isn't all fun and games," he said.

She took a deep breath, found herself unable to look away from him. "I didn't think *any* of it was fun and games."

"Let me make you like I am. You can be with me forever." His words were a low growl, menacing, but she could hear the entreaty just beneath the surface.

"I can't.... I can't just leave all...I have responsibilities...my parents...my job...my gerbils."

"Your *gerbils*? Holy shit! You're going to give eternal life a pass so you can be with your fucking gerbils!"

"I need more time."

Fin lowered himself onto her, buried his face in the crook of her neck and lay there for a long, silent moment. "I can't stay long," he said at last. He ran his tongue along the path of her jugular. "I can do it, you know. Whether you want it or not."

Morena pushed him off—he let her—and sat up. "You can. But you won't."

Fin rolled over onto his back and lay next to her. Nearby, her gerbils scuttled around in their plastic cage. "You don't want to be with me," he said. Morena stared at her feet but didn't answer him. "What do you have to lose?"

"My whole life?"

He sighed. She was right. Just like she was right that he wouldn't drag her into the unlife of Kindred existence against her will. Not yet. But his resolve was growing weaker.

"You'd have all eternity...with me," Fin said.

"Then there'll be plenty of time for that later, if I decide."

Or if I decide, he thought.

"I think you'd better leave," Morena said.

Fin ran his finger across her back, traced the vertical path of her bra strap to her shoulder. He gently pulled her back down to him. Her head lolled back as he again nuzzled her tender, bare neck.

"Soon," he said, as she gave herself to him. "Soon."



Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 1:12 AM
Caesar's Palace, Room 2604
Las Vegas, Nevada

The phone rang.

Victor had wandered down to the casino, wanting to avoid going stir crazy, and taken out a twelve-thousand-dollar marker on the room, which made Chas a bit suspicious. After his conversation with Frankie he wasn't very interested in trusting his own family, let alone a cokehead ghoul who was probably fucking cocktail waitresses at the blackjack table right this very moment.

Second ring.

Chas got up quickly and went to the window, looking down from the guest tower to the parking lot. No sirens, no Crown Vics or government Chevys, no ambulances, and only one white limousine, which he was sure he'd seen earlier. No telltale shadows just under the doorjamb. Just some Bruce Willis movie on TV, in which everything was blowing up or getting punched.

Third ring.

Chas sniffed at the air. A faint whiff of—almonds?—but nothing otherwise. Not that he could be poisoned, at least not by conventional means. He had gone through these paranoid drills a million times before, finally convincing himself, perhaps fatalistically, that if someone really wanted him dead—finally dead—he'd be dead, and there was nothing he could do about it. Whether they were subtle enough to use one of the Kindred contract killers, traditional enough to riddle him with bullets in the street, or brazen enough to set his hotel room on fire, they'd get him. No, the true secret to immortality, or even long mortal life, was to evade attention. Prince Benedic of Las Vegas did it—he kept a quiet, tasteful estate outside the city limit. Frankie Gee did it, hiding behind ranks of *capos* and *caporegimes*, looking every bit the part of a low-class thug and not one bit like a hundred-and-twenty-year-old don who had sailed into Ellis Island half a century ago. Sometimes the invisible people got hurt, but nobody ever set out to do it. Just keep quiet and let someone else take the bullet.

Fourth ring.

Enough with the paranoid bullshit, Chas reasoned, and picked up the phone.

"This is Chas."

"Good evening, Chas. This is your Aunt Isabel. Do you have time to come down for a quick cup of coffee with your favorite aunt?"

Once again, Chas's mind shifted into high gear. She relied on him to know her by name, which means she probably figured Frankie (or someone else) had tipped him off that something was going down. She'd asked him to meet her, however, and in a public place, which was either to cover herself because she'd dealt with Frankie's boys before or to reassure *him*. He flattered himself and decided upon the former, even though he knew otherwise. She didn't ask about Victor, though, so he'd keep that part quiet and see what played out.

“Sure. I’ll be right down.”

“Marvelous. I’ll be waiting.”

She sounded sweet, Aunt Isabel did. So sweet, Chas decided to play it safe. He checked the clip and chamber of his big automatic—hopefully it would at least buy him some time if conversation became too tense—and left the room, closing the door deliberately behind him.

Yeah, the room had smelled like almonds.



Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 1:19 AM
Caesar's Palace, Nero's Restaurant
Las Vegas, Nevada

Isabel had been waiting for only a few minutes when Chas arrived. He looked pleasant enough, in that sort of big-boned, rough-hewn American way. He wore a simple, clean-lined black suit, but no tie, and his collar was open. How mortal! And didn't these coarse gangster-types ever get over their black suits? *When someone sees a man in a black suit*, thought Isabel, *they know he's either with the government or quite against it.*

No matter, Isabel figured. Las Vegas was lousy with high rollers and their would-be emulators, and nothing about Chas aroused immediate suspicion. In the end he was just a resource, and once she was done she would probably never see him again.

Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 1:19 AM
Caesar's Palace, Nero's Restaurant
Las Vegas, Nevada



Chas figured he'd play the part of the flustered underling for pathos. He had left his shirt open and his hair somewhat tousled. After taking the elevator downstairs, he thought he'd make a quick pass through the casino before joining Isabel in the steak house. Better see what Victor was up to with twelve large riding on the boss's name.

But Victor was nowhere in sight. *Worry about that later*, Chas told himself.

And so, somewhat preoccupied, he wandered into Nero's, telling the host he'd come to meet his aunt, who was to be waiting for him.

"Aunt?" the host had asked.

"By marriage," Chas replied. What the fuck did that mean?

He soon found out. Isabel looked far too young to be his aunt in any conventional sense, in her late twenties or perhaps early thirties. She looked very continental, with faintly olive skin (*so that's what undead Europeans look like*), brown hair almost black and lithesome arms crossed before her. She hadn't noticed him yet, and her head was turned in repose, giving him a plain view of her classical beauty made all the more interesting by minor curiosities of feature that only generations of quiet inbreeding could bestow. *Slightly weak chin*, he observed, *and dangerously high cheekbones*. He also noticed the youthful curve of her small breasts and the arch of her shoulders, from which a silk dress hung in a manner best described as salaciously. A green bottle of Pellegrino sat in front of her, on the table, open but not sampled.

Shit, thought, Chas, almost aloud. *I want my aunt.*

He sat down; her head turning at his arrival, she favored him with a slight smile.

"Don't gentlemen ask before they take a lady's company?"

"Erm..." Chas relied wittily. "They told me that you were waiting." *Oaf.*

"Well it is a pleasure to meet so handsome a cousin. Or nephew. Or whatever you might be. I can't keep the relationships straight, myself," she said through a laugh.

Chas noticed her scent.

"House of Givenchy," she spoke.

"I'm sorry?"

"Givenchy. My perfume."

"I'm familiar with Givenchy, but I didn't know—"

"Your nose moved. I saw it. I notice the little things."

"You must think I'm a clown. I'm not usually so taken aback, but tonight's been full of revelations."

"I'm sure it has." *Good*, thought Isabel, *Get right down to business. A wise choice, and one that allows you an early lead. My move.* "And what revelations were those?"

"Well, I got a call from my boss who said you might be on your way out here, and that I should be aware that hospitality might be in order." Chas smiled. "It would seem that we're both looking for a mutual acquaintance."

"So your boss knows you're out here?"

"I'm sorry?" Chas repeated. *Damn, she's ahead of me by too many steps. What's she talking about?*

"I wasn't told that your branch of the family had anyone here."

"Well, then, why did you know you could find me?"

"Because, Chas, our family is full of liars. Omission is no less a lie than any other alteration of the truth."

"I suppose you can look at it that way. But Frankie's got me mobile looking for Benito. I figured this was a good place to start. Vegas pretty much springs to mind when you think of the Ma—my family's business, and Benito didn't strike me as the super-creative, I'll-break-the-mold type. At least from what I'd been told."

"I see. Mmm. Yes, well, 'acquaintance' is a bit of a strong way of describing him. Benito is a commodity to those above him. He and his type are common enough among our ranks."

Chas found himself put off by this. He didn't know what to make of Isabel's statement. Apparently, she occupied some other position in the family than Benito did, but she was simultaneously more and less than he? Her words indicated that she was not "above him," but that he was somehow less valuable than she.

"I'm afraid you've lost me, my dear aunt." Chas hoped she took that in the spirit with which it was intended. "Could you maybe give me a bit more to go on? I can't help you unless I know what I'm supposed to be doing."

"Oh, that's quite the contrary, Charles." My *full name*, Chas reasoned, *turnabout is fair play*. "If you simply do what you're told, you're far more efficient and valuable. The world has two types of people: those who lead and those who should follow. It's all right—there's no shame in being one of the followers. It's simply the role to which you're best suited. I myself am a follower, having long since lost my special gift of insight. It's part of the family curse, if you know what I mean."

Chas did, indeed. She was talking about the Embrace. While becoming a vampire offered many gifts, it more than made up for them in drawbacks. For someone like Chas, many of them didn't matter: He didn't care if he never saw the sun again. Of late, he'd even become somewhat enamored of the idea of the Giovanni Kiss—Kindred of his clan caused great pain when they fed from vessels, as opposed to other Kindred, whose bite caused ecstasy once the vessel yielded to it. In the end, however, no matter how any individual looked at it, the Embrace was damnation, plain and simple. Even if the Kindred was able to take some small solace in the potency of his undead, immortal form, that was nothing more than God's ironic and spiteful sense of humor. As the legends told it, the Curse of Caine was levied upon the first vampire, slayer of his brother Abel, during the days of Adam, Eve and a garden full of snakes. As far as Chas was concerned, that meant only one thing—the God of the Old Testament created vampires, back when He was one angry, badass motherfucker. The Old Testament was full of demonstrations of God's wrath. He was always smiting or cursing some group of people for the licentiousness or greed of some other group of people. It was only after the advent of the New Testament that God calmed down a little. You wouldn't find any great Biblical curses like vampires or rains of blood or turning people into pillars of salt in the modern nights, no sir. And that's probably why the world was going to hell in a

hand basket. God didn't care anymore. Go ahead and fuck it up all you want, He seemed to have said. I have given you creation and you want to use it to destroy yourselves. Well, have a good time, Chas imagined Him saying before He turned his back and went away to work on something worthwhile.

Chas shook his head. Where had all *that* come from?

He looked across the table to see Isabel smiling at him.

"Did you do that?" he asked.

"Do what?" came her coy response.

"That thing that just happened. Did you fill my head with all those weird thoughts? I mean, I've never considered myself a religious man, but I just had a very...um...righteous stream of consciousness pour through my mind. Of course, now that I think about it, they were pretty much in the same vein as most of my thoughts, but why would I all of a sudden start thinking about God?"

"Chas, you heathen, I have no idea. Maybe it would do you some good to think about God once in a while. I know it's helped me."

"That's bullshit, Isabel. I mean, I guess I still believe in God—kinda stupid to believe in Kindred without Him—but it's not a big part of my...um...life."

"No one said it had to be, Chas. But do you honestly believe that the maverick act you and your part of the family put on is the be-all and end-all of life and unlife?" Isabel looked around, making sure to lower her voice so that if anyone were listening they wouldn't hear her say such curious things. Unlife, indeed. "Do you think a curse so great as the one that our family has taken upon its shoulders exists so that you can play *The Godfather* and shoot other vampires in the face for eternity? Are you so vain? Or so simple?"

"Hey, calm down, Isabel. Jesus Christ, this shit's getting strange. I came down here to talk to you about the Benito thing and the next thing I know I've got fucking Genesis 3:16 running through my head. It *was* you, wasn't it?"

Isabel made a grand show of sighing. "My boy, if I wanted to agitate you, I'd do it in some way that helped me. Sending you into a fervent rapture of self-indulgence doesn't really work for me, you know? If you simply *must* know, I can tell you what happened to you, but it's probably not going to make you very happy."

Chas stared expectantly.

"Ghosts."

"Ghosts," repeated Chas sardonically.

"That's right. Ghosts."

"Flip answer, Isabel. Very funny. Ghosts. Now, if you'll excuse me," Chas stood halfway before meeting Isabel's gaze. He stopped. "You're fucking serious."

"Watch your mouth, and yes, I'm serious."

At that moment, the table's waiter stopped by. "Have you decided what you would like for dinner? Or perhaps a cocktail to begin? Another Pellegrino?" Chas looked as if he were about to drive the waiter away, but Isabel put her hand on his. No sense in upsetting the staff and having them know you're up to something.

"I'm, sorry. We've just been catching up. It's been a long time since we've seen each other. I think we'll need another few minutes to decide on dinner. In the meantime, I'll have a negroni."

Chas looked over at Isabel almost accusingly, as if thinking *this is what happens when you meet at a restaurant*. Then he looked to the waiter and quickly asked for a bourbon and water. The waiter smiled and nodded, taking his leave to fetch their drinks.

Isabel looked impishly at Chas. “What are you having for dinner?” she teased.

“I would never eat here,” Chas replied, calming a bit. “I’ve heard terrible things about their meat locker.”

“Well, then we should probably leave pretty quickly after our drinks get here. I don’t know that they’ll want us taking up their tables if we’re not planning to eat.”

“Yeah, because they’re slammed at one thirty in the morning.” Chas made a sweeping gesture with his arm, emphasizing the largely empty room.

“You’re wasting time,” Isabel remarked, “and we should wrap up this conversation and get you on your way. You still have a lot to do tonight.”

Eyeing her inquisitively, Chas wondered what Isabel was talking about.

“But first,” she continued, “ghosts. I know I don’t need to preface this with too much, but if you’re prepared to believe in vampires, you should be prepared to believe in ghosts.”

Chas smiled dryly, crookedly, as if the whole thing were a very clever trick.

“I’m serious. I’m sure you’re the first to admit that there are things you just don’t know about the Giovanni. You like it that way—I can see it in you. As long as nothing bothers you individually, you’re more than content to let Clan Giovanni do whatever it wants. That’s how most Giovanni like it, Chas, and it’s why you’re still among the Kindred rather than a heap of ashes at the foot of some elder’s chair. You do your part and you don’t ask questions. But the truth of the matter is going to be unpleasant, even for a rough character like yourself.”

Chas’s smile had slowly vanished from his face. Over the course of her few words, he had begun to watch her as a deer eyes a wolf, not as an enemy, but as a creature that knows it exists only at the whim of another. The wolf doesn’t kill deer for sport, but out of necessity. The deer had only to fear the hungry wolf. But was Isabel hungry in whatever context or metaphorical sense the word implied?

“That’s okay. I’m a big boy. I can take it.”

“Yes, that’s true. But as far as those ghosts go, Chas, that’s something to which the Giovanni have inextricably tied themselves...ourselves. You know very well that death goes hand-in-hand with much of our business and personal affairs. Well, I’m telling you that for many, death is not the end. The spirits—souls—of the dead continue to serve us even after they have left the physical world. It’s one of the family’s secrets from centuries ago. The Renaissance and even before. We make the dead do our bidding.

“But something’s happened recently. Something that’s made our power over the restless dead...I don’t know what it is, actually. Our mastery of the spirits hasn’t begun to wane, but there seem to be fewer spirits around, and even these aren’t in the places we’ve come to associate with them.

“Without boring you with all the petty details, I think that’s what just happened to you—a ghost was having his way with you, Chas. They can see into our world and they know things about us, which is why they’re so valuable to us. But that’s a double-bladed sword. They know, for instance, that you’re a Giovanni, and they hate you for it. It’s

not necessarily anything you've said or done, though it might be the ghost of one of your victims or vessels. They resent the fact that you're Giovanni because the Giovanni can use the restless souls whenever they choose."

Chas looked positively incredulous. "You're telling me that ghosts are prejudiced against me. That's what you're telling me. That not only can the Giovanni family perform voodoo, but that the little demons don't like us for it and so they sometimes pick on us."

"Well, Chas, that's a bit of an irreverent way of saying it, but I suppose that's correct in its own fashion. I understand that it's a bit much to take at face value, but you'd do well to take it quite seriously. The dead do, after all."

Chas leaned back in his chair, his palms on the edge of the table and fingers atop it, as if he were about to push himself back in disgust. Their drinks arrived and Isabel begged another few minutes of the waiter, who was all too happy to return to the kitchen and resume gossiping with the other staff about the weird couple at table seventeen.

"What's a negroni, anyway?" Chas asked, thankful for the change in subject from the decidedly bizarre direction the conversation had just taken. He had to admit it made a twisted sort of sense—if the Kindred still walked the earth, well, why the fuck couldn't ghosts? The very thought brought to mind some of the tales told by other Kindred he'd met in passing. Stories about the *things* with which the undead shared the night, whether knowingly or otherwise; other monsters and things even less definable. Chas felt a sharpening of his mind, a sudden epiphany that other forces were at work in the world. And, accompanied by a single, cold drop of blood-sweat between his shoulder blades, he realized that he feared them. He didn't know them, didn't know what any other creatures of the night—even one as vital to him as Frankie Gee—really had going on in their minds. Mortals were easy. They didn't even suspect that the monsters from their collective unconscious walked among them. But to be one of those monsters—and to know that others...

Chas didn't want to think about it anymore. Best to get back to the issue at hand and deal with the things he *could* affect. Let the world keep spinning. "What is it? Is that cranberry juice? You didn't have them fix you up a little blood cocktail back there, did you?" Even before he finished, Chas realized that she might well have. It might be another example of the far-reaching influence the supernal beings of the world possessed. He realized that maybe he didn't want to know, after all.

"It's just gin, vermouth and Campari."

Somehow, Chas found the mundanity of it calming. He shook his head.

"This place is bugging me," Chas complained. "Can we get out of here?"

"Of course."

"Good. Let's go to the casino. Nobody's going to lean on us to order dinner there, and if we don't gamble, they won't hassle us to take their free drinks, either."

Chas left a pair of twenties on the table as they walked out.



Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 2:12 AM
Caesar's Palace Casino
Las Vegas, Nevada

"Let's not beat around the bush here, Isabel. I need to get moving on this Benito thing," Chas said quietly. Even amid the racket and ping of the slot machines—the ones they hadn't replaced with that video-game shit—one had to be careful how loudly one spoke. Vegas casinos were wired to the last inch with video cameras, and some had microphones to boot.

"Have you met a Kindred named Montrose?" Isabel asked, looking at Chas directly. She still didn't know him well enough to trust him, and she kept her sharp senses on the lookout for any "tells" he might drop that would tip her off that he was hiding something. Damn this family.

"That twisted fuck? What's it got to do with him? I thought he was Rothstein's bully-boy." Chas touched his nose briefly, as if to ward away an itch.

A tell.

"What made you think that?"

"He was all muscle and ready to dust knuckles once Victor started playing haughty. He didn't look too smart, either, like he wanted any excuse to come over and toss some Giovanni salad."

"Well, that's...colorful. Could you do me a favor? Could you take it easy on the street idioms? I don't mind the cursing, to be honest, but English isn't my first language and I'd rather not spend time deciphering from English to English. And 'tossing salad' as slang means something entirely different in other situations, which I'm sure you don't mean, but which conjures amusing images nonetheless," Isabel responded, looking around the room over Chas's shoulder.

"You're talking about that prison fag shit. Yeah, I've heard all that before. Now if you want to make an accusation—"

"Oh, calm down. Let's get back to Montrose. He's got more at stake in Benito's disappearance than Rothstein does. Rothstein's a front Montrose is using. Of course, Rothstein thinks that he's using you as a favor to Montrose. Yes, I know, it's convoluted. Bear with me. Milo Rothstein represents a significant amount of Giovanni influence in Las Vegas, which he thinks will protect him. It won't: Milo's made too many enemies by skimming off the top of what's already being skimmed off the top. It's actually costing the Giovanni to keep him here, but Las Vegas is still profitable, given the amount of money other Giovanni interests in town generate. You know, other Rothsteins. Their family's just as complicated as ours, only a bit smaller.

"Anyway, Rothstein knows that Montrose is in on Benito's kidnapping, so he thinks he's putting the Nosferatu in debt by leading you on. The bottom line is that Milo probably doesn't know the first thing about Benito, but he's not going to tell Montrose that or Montrose will know that Milo's fooling him and deserves nothing in return.

"The problem is that Montrose already knows Milo's a patsy and is, in turn, keeping *that* a secret from Milo. Montrose is playing you through Milo and Milo through you."

Chas, squinting one eye a bit, cut in. "That doesn't make any sense."

"No, it doesn't. Which is why he's doing it. To keep you pointed at each other, when he's the real problem to both of you."

"How's he a problem to Milo?"

"Think it through, Chas. Milo has other Giovanni coming into his town to investigate the Benito affair. You're not the only one. The Scots have someone here, too. Since Milo's skimming too much, having any outside Giovanni here puts him in the position of having that maybe found out."

"But how do you know that?"

"Well, Jesus, Chas, you think I'm not as clever as Montrose, at least? I play this game, too. You'd better learn if you have any intentions of staying involved very long."

Chas raised his eyebrows. "Okay, but one more thing."

"Yes, my darling nephew?" Isabel made a crooked smile with one half of her mouth.

"How do you know it's Montrose who's behind the whole thing? Or at least behind the part he's, um, behind...of. You know what I mean."

"Because he's sloppy. The night Benito was kidnapped, security at his building reported a delivery attempt by Trans-State Expeditors and that the delivery vehicle returned after about five minutes but didn't attempt to drop off its shipment. Trans-State Expeditors is a subsidiary of The Architects' Group, which is a venture-capital consortium here in Las Vegas. Sitting on its board is one Theodore Benedict, an alias maintained by Las Vegas's Kindred prince, Benedic."

"So? Is Montrose also the prince? No, wait, it's another alias."

"No," Isabel smiled smugly, "Benedic doesn't have anything to do with it. Benito crossed Montrose a few years back on an art deal or something that went sour. I think Benito had offered Montrose an investment opportunity on a cache of hidden originals that his ghouls had found in Nice, France. Apparently, someone had hidden them to keep them from falling into the state's hands during the French Revolution. There's a Millet among them, I think, and maybe a David. It doesn't matter. Benito edged Montrose out of the deal before it became final, so Montrose has a grudge. Also, Montrose had recently been found out for putting one of his spies in the prince's haven, so he's obviously got a grudge against Benedic, too, or he at least wants to even the score. In light of that, my guess is that Montrose was either setting Benedic up to catch some of the flak in the Benito affair—possibly making Giovanni matters here very touchy—or he was just setting up another layer of blinds between himself and the game's pawns."

Chas stood, staring at Isabel.

"You've got to be kidding me..." he said, trailing off at the end to indicate that surely she *was* kidding.

Isabel just rolled her eyes coyly.

Isabel said earnestly, "It's not so difficult once you put a few of the pieces in place. Then you start to see the big picture."

Chas shook his head. "Yeah, but that's some series of guesses you've turned into pieces. Even hearing all that, I don't know if you've put together a big picture, or just a stack of little pieces that's part of one even larger piece, or whether it's all just a stack of shit that doesn't mean a damn thing except that it's easy to tell a good story with a handful of speculation."

Isabel smiled. “Well, nephew,” she chimed, kissing her hand and planting it on his forehead, “I suppose we’ll just have to see.”

With that, she waved, turned, and walked into the Las Vegas crowd, leaving Chas to wonder if this was a second kiss of death this night.

Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 2:47 AM
Caesar's Palace, Room 2604
Las Vegas, Nevada



"Frankie, how do I get a hold of Milo Rothstein?" Chas knew he had only a few minutes before the sun came up and Frankie had to hide himself from its deadly rays. Time zones were a vampire's greatest enemy when it came down to business.

"Jesus, Chas, you know what time it is here?"

"Of course I know what time it is, but it's an emergency. Remember what you told me about those Giovanni up the ladder? Well, they're out here, or Isabel is, and Milo's in the way. Our man Benito's mixed up in something that stretches pretty far, and Milo's running cover for whoever's got his number."

"What the fuck are you talking about, Chas?"

"Come on, Frankie, I'm trying to help you out here. Isabel thinks that playing hardball with these motherfuckers will flush them out and let us know where we stand. I agree with her. I mean, fuck, it's not like we have anything to lose. Milo and his crew are already on the outs, you said, and I got lucky finding out this little bit. It's going to let me do what you told me."

Chas knew Frankie wasn't one to fall for the false jingo ruse, but it was all he had. He'd pick up the pieces later and sort this all out once they made it back to New York. Right now his concern was keeping a step ahead of the game, because he knew Milo wasn't about to let Frankie Gee's bloodhounds leave town with Benito's trail on their minds.

"Chas, this is fucked up. I'm going to give you the number, and I'm going to pray you know what you're doing. You do know what you're doing, right? This shit just can't wait until tomorrow night?"

"No, Frankie. We still got three, four hours before dawn here, and I don't want to give those fucking Rothsteins the benefit of first move. Even if nothing happened tonight, their people are all over this town, you know? They'll have a good sixteen hours on us before we can even step up to bat. Victor's good in the clutch, but we don't know this town and nobody's in our pocket."

"Why don't you guys back off the situation then and let it cool down?"

Chas stopped for a moment. Frankie wasn't one to change gears if a golden opportunity presented itself. What was this hesitancy all about?

Frankie didn't have any love for the Rothsteins—it was old-world greaseball shit between the Giovanni Italians and the Rothstein Jews. Even though the Rothsteins were part of the Giovanni *clan*, they weren't family. What was good for the pocketbook wasn't necessarily good for the table conversation, as Frankie used to say. The Giovanni turned good money from the Rothstein connection, just like they turned good money from the Mafia guys, just like they presumably turned good money from their other interests. It all came down to that.

So what was Frankie's beef? He'd already said that Chas might need to take Milo out of the picture—what was the cause for reversal? The whole situation had changed

in so few hours. What was supposed to be a quick and forgettable bit of pressure had turned into a crisis in just a few hours, with those few hours marking a total reversal on Frankie's position.

"Come on, Frankie, you're leaving me out like half a fag over here. You told me that Milo can go if he needs to and he does. What's the problem?" Chas knew he was overstepping his bounds a bit, but he relied on Frankie's lack of time and hopefully confusion over the situation to give him something to go on.

Chas heard a few clicks from the other end of the phone and then a quick inhalation.

"All right, Chas, listen and listen good." Frankie's voice had become husky, like he was leaning over and whispering and tucking the phone in toward his body so someone else wouldn't be able to hear. "I can only tell you this once. You talk to Milo and you make it perfectly clear to him that if he doesn't give you the straight dope on Benito's situation, you're going to do him. If he doesn't tell you where Benito is, you do just that—you put a big, long hurt on him; tell him it's for me—then you make sure he don't see no more moonrises, *capice*? And then, even if he tells you where Benito fucking Giovanni is, you kill him anyway. Here's his number." And Frankie whispered the ten digits (or actually seven, as the area code was a unique secret—***—held by Giovanni Kindred, who needed secure lines).

Blinking twice, Chas hung up with no parting good-bye. He had written down the number, though only half was visible. Cheap fucking hotel pens. But he had indented the paper enough to have everything that mattered. He tore off that sheet, ran the sink and threw the rest of the tablet in the water. Nobody else needed that number. Or they wouldn't after tonight.

Frankie Gee had never told Chas to kill anyone before. It had always been a matter of opportunity or survival. If some idiots got in the way and Chas couldn't work around them, *then* maybe they got hit hard enough to never get up again. But this time was different. This time it was a mandate. Frankie had killers. Chas was more of a menacing mouthpiece. But Chas was the only one there, and Frankie wasn't about to have Victor do the deed. Victor wasn't even full family—some Giovanni somewhere had married his sister twelve, thirteen years ago. No, Frankie trusted Chas to do this all by himself. What was going on back at Frankie's that made everything so delicate?

Fuck it. Answer that later. Right now, Milo awaits.

"Let's go," Chas called to Victor, who had watched the whole thing but had obligingly tuned out what he wasn't supposed to hear. Good boy. "Grab the bag."

Victor's eyes widened. The bag meant trouble. "What's up, boss man?"

"We're going down to the lobby to make a phone call and to wait on our fella Milo Rothstein. Then we're going to go somewhere good and discuss the matter like gentlemen." Chas cocked an eyebrow.

The pair took the elevator to the lobby. A bank of telephones stood just outside the public restrooms. Chas took the one farthest from the facilities, turned away from the doorway and dialed the number Frankie had given him.

"Milo."

"Yeah, Mr. Rothstein, this is Earl. I'm Mr. Sforza's attendant, from the conference room earlier?"

"Yes, Earl. I'm curious how you came across this number."

“Well, Mr. Rothstein, it’s Mr. Sforza. He’s got some kind of problem with, um, the home office and he said it would be best to call you and arrange for some other accommodations.”

“He did? That’s very strange. It would seem that our Mr. Sforza has had a change of heart.”

“That’s not for me to say, sir.” *Come on, shitbag. Drop the niceties and send a fucking limo.*

“Well, I’d like to hear what has Mr. Sforza so worked up at...three in the morning. I’ll send a car that will be there shortly. Have your things and be waiting in the lobby. You said Caesar’s Palace, correct?”

Shithead. How stupid do you think I am? “I didn’t, sir. Mr. Sforza said that in your meeting this evening.”

“Ah, yes. In any event, wait in the lobby. My man will be there soon.”

“Thank you, sir. We’ll be waiting.”



Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 3:50 AM
Stardust Hotel, Room 2901
Las Vegas, Nevada

A white stretch Lincoln Continental picked up Chas and Victor from the lobby of Caesar's Palace. Neither thought that Milo would be so foolish as to have them brought to his haven, and Chas wasn't sure a car would be readily accessible at their rendezvous, so he had told Victor to bring the bag.

The bag meant that Chas intended to exact vengeance, and it was full of all manner of unpleasant implements. Duct tape, phone wire and silk cord all served the same purpose: to tie down whoever needed to be restrained. A supply of cutting instruments from the crude to the exquisite could be used to get anyone to talk about anything, as could the claw hammer, the blackjack and the "plumber's snake," which left one hellacious welt anywhere it struck naked flesh. The bag normally would have contained a lighter, but Chas figured that the hotels would have plenty of matchbooks on hand. None of it was very necessary in the end, anyway, after the binding material. Any time Chas needed to make anyone talk, tying them up and menacing them with the contents of the bag usually served the purpose. It wasn't like Chas was a master torturer, anyway. He usually let brute force and raw pain do the work. No, he was certainly no artist, but he got the job done when it needed to be. The whole ugly toolkit had been wrapped in stolen hotel towels, so the bag looked like an overnight duffel full of clothes, instead of a satchel of implements used for hurting people.

Exactly what Chas's vengeance was *for*, he hadn't figured out yet. Benito Giovanni fit somewhere into the picture, but as to his role, neither Chas nor Victor was sure. Both of their minds scrambled to make sense of the few pieces of the puzzle they had been given, but nothing clicked. Chas kept his mouth shut, making sure to continue the charade he and Victor had put on earlier, just in case the driver was privy to the situation. He pretended to be Victor's valet and bodyguard, letting the smaller man appear as the one in charge.

Both Giovanni were surprised to be let off at the front of the Stardust Hotel and Casino. They'd figured that Rothstein surely had a hidey-hole somewhere outside of town and that he'd keep them there as a form of insurance to himself. The fact that he had delivered them to such a public place reassured them, however.

"Room 2901," the driver told them as he let them out. Chas quickly checked the license plate as the Continental drove away: Legitimate tag (at least to the naked eye), no rental stickers. That boded well, too.

They took the elevator to the twenty-ninth floor. As they exited, Chas made a quick reconnaissance of the floor. No uninvited guests lurked in the vending vestibules—just a humming Coke machine. The stairwell was empty, at least on this floor, the one above and the one below.

Chas knocked at door 2901.

Milo answered the door, which Chas pushed open and motioned for Victor to step inside. Rothstein looked up at Chas. "A bit presumptuous, perhaps?" but he shrugged it

off. The room was not altogether unlike the one they kept at Caesar's. The forgettable Rothstein from the meeting was also in the room, relaxing somewhat in an overstuffed chair, but the twisted Nosferatu, Montrose, was nowhere to be seen. On the television, the same Bruce Willis movie Chas had seen earlier played. He was going to make idle conversation about it to set the room at ease, but then he remembered that he was "backup," at least at present.

"I trust this room will do for you?" asked Milo. That must have meant that Rothstein planned to let Victor stay here, probably as a favor, as he thought Victor had turned against Frankie Gee. That is, with any luck, he thought Victor had switched sides. It was impossible to tell among the Kindred exactly who knew how much, even when they told you.

"It's fine, thank you," replied Victor. He put the bag down by the side of the bed and sat down.

"Oh, don't do that. These bedspreads are filthy," Milo said, pulling the spread from the bed and shoving it in the closet. "They never wash the things, and I'm sure you know what sorts of filth and excess go on in these suites." He smiled. *Did he know? Fuck it.*

"Well, if it's anything like what happens in every other hotel room everywhere in the world, I'm sure you're right," said Victor. *Good. Keep up the chatter. We're all friends here, you lying fucks,* thought Chas. *Wait a moment. Lying about what? Calm down, cowboy. No need to go off half-cocked again.*

"Very true. I'm afraid I have to ask, though. To what do we owe this sudden shift in allegiance? Your man," Milo motioned to Chas (or Earl, as he hopefully knew him), "said that you had an unpleasant telephone conversation?"

"More or less," Victor shrugged. The nameless Rothstein turned off the TV and rose from the chair. "I'm sorry, I missed your name at our last meeting."

"Benjamin. Or Ben, rather. Ben Rothstein."

"Pleasure to meet you, Ben, but I have to say I wish it were under other circumstances." Victor looked to Milo. "My plans seem to have fallen apart, but I hope I can repay your last-minute and largely undeserved hospitality. If you'll pardon my gross tongue, I thought I was all but fucked about an hour ago."

Milo laughed. Ben took the cue once it was obviously okay to do so and gave a nervous smile of his own. How this dumb little freak ever got Embraced into the clan—if he was a vampire at all—was beyond Chas.

"Well, it's never too late to play the game, I always say," Milo mused.

I'll bet you do, Chas thought.

"But to get back to the matter at hand, I'm still curious why. I don't need the full story—you can tell me the rest of the details tomorrow night. Well, I suppose it's actually tonight, but you know what I'm saying." Milo paced absently at the foot of the bed.

"Long story short, Frankie wanted me to lean on you guys hard about this Benito character. I said that you obviously hadn't seen him after a few weeks ago, and that you were already one up on us and why we were here. Any hardball on our part was just going to piss you guys off—again, I'm sorry for the coarse talk, but I'm a little tired—and we're basically in your back yard. I know the Rothsteins and Frankie have some bad blood in the background, but that's not because of me, and it's not my job to fix it. I think you guys should just kiss and make up, but whatever this is came before me, and I

know how this business makes people carry grudges. But Frankie, he's insistent, and I told him outright that I'm not willing to be the guy who starts a war. Benito's going to turn up sooner or later, and even if he doesn't, *someone's* going to see him and that's not worth opening old wounds for, you know? So then Frankie gets all bent out of shape, and I figured it would just be good to keep my options open. It's not like I'm walking out on Frankie—you know that it doesn't work like that in our line of business—but I'm not going to burn any bridges if I don't need to, right?"

"Very sound reasoning, Mr. Sforza. And I admire your loyalty. It seems that such things become rarer and rarer in these modern nights."

Chas smiled inwardly. A good enough story, assuming Milo wasn't one of the paranoid-just-below-the-surface types. If he was, he was a fucking Oscar-quality actor, because he didn't have any of the tells, any of the pantomimes that subtly betrayed a lie as it was told or motioned. Victor could be good when he wasn't blown and fucking hookers.

"I trust you'll give us a call when you wake, Mr. Sforza? It's getting late and we'll leave this evening without asking any more of your time. Benjamin, would you go ahead and bring the car around?"

Bang. Just like that. Milo Rothstein's vanity signed his death warrant. He was so intent on looking like a big shot in front of his rival's men he didn't bother to keep Ben in the room to keep the score even.

Ben left to have the valet fetch the car. Chas took off his jacket as the door shut behind the exiting Rothstein, noting the mechanical buzz of the electric lock doing its work. He hung his jacket and unbuttoned his cuffs, beginning to roll them upward. Milo noted him with the faintest hint of apprehension.

That's right, fucko. Time to die.

"I'll take my leave, Mr. Sforza. Feel free to enjoy the casino for the rest of the evening. I've arranged a small marker to make your stay more convenient and comfort—"

"Wrong, cocksucker," Chas sneered. "You're going to fucking answer a few questions before you go home." Victor moved like an old pro. He had the bag open and the phone cord out before Milo turned to look back at him. Chas favored the phone cord, he had told Victor on the flight. It's tough as all hell to break, and even if someone did manage to burst the strong plastic sheath, it was full of copper wire that cut flesh to ribbons if you tried to force your way through it. The only way to avoid shredding yourself with it was to hope that it burst when and if you managed to break the plastic skin, too.

Chas took a swing that clipped Milo on the chin, knocking his mouth open and sending him tripping backward. Victor took advantage, looping the wire over Milo's head and around his arms, pinning them to his sides. This he pulled tight, then looped it twice again around Milo's body. Victor knew he had to be careful—the Rothsteins were Giovanni after all, and Giovanni Kindred were able to call on inhuman strength. Not that he'd ever seen it before, but if Milo was a hidden powerhouse, he might be able to snap the cord and break Victor's neck before Chas could subdue him.

But that wasn't the case. Victor completed five more loops by the time Chas had dragged the chair from the desk over to where Milo was still standing, bound as he was.

"Victor, tie him up. Milo, you talk to me and give it to me straight so I don't have to break anything I don't need to." He admired his handiwork. The punch—augmented by Chas's own appreciable Giovanni strength—had broken Milo's jaw and a jagged piece of

bone jutted through the skin of his chin. Before his eyes, however, the bone submerged beneath the skin and the gaping laceration closed as Milo defiantly healed himself.

"You might want to save that precious vitae, kike. If you keep acting like that you're going to need it."

"If I do say so myself, *Earl*, this is a completely obnoxious way to behave in someone else's domain." Milo suddenly didn't seem the type to give up so easily. Think and keep talking was Chas's best course of action. If he let Milo fluster him, that would make the whole exercise a waste of time.

"Okay, Milo. Here's the rules. Rule one: Unless I ask something of you, you shut the fuck up. You break rule one, you get one of these." Once again, Chas hammered Milo with his fist. This time, he caught Milo to the side of his left eye, breaking the bone and blowing his pupil. Milo chose not to heal it immediately and winced, his eyes looking wild as the one pupil first shrank and then rapidly grew many times the size of the other.

"Rule number two: When I'm talking, no interrupting. You break rule number two, you get one of these." Chas delivered a matching blow to the other side of Milo's head. This time, however, he didn't crack the skull, but Milo's other eye reacted in the same manner.

"Rule three is I'm the fucking boss. And you don't fuck with the fucking boss, understood? Break rule three, and you get one of these." Once more Chas bludgeoned the bound Milo with his fist, this time straight in the face, breaking Rothstein's nose and showering an explosion of blood down the front of his shirt and jacket.

"That's the rules. You got it?" Milo didn't move.

"That counts as yes. Good. I like that." Chas bent down to lick some of the blood from the front of Milo's ruined face: Kindred vitae—much stronger than the thinner blood of mortals. But Chas reined himself in. He needed to hear what Milo had to say, and if he lost control now, he'd fuck up the whole plan.

Somewhere in the back of Chas's mind it occurred to him that he said that to himself a lot lately. He had to talk to the devil to keep it in check, just like he had to keep Milo quiet until it was necessary for him to speak. Or so he figured.

"So, down to brass tacks. Where's Benito?"

"I don't know," Milo sneered, eyes moving groggily over Chas's form.

"Wrong answer." Chas slapped him this time, shaking loose a trickle of blood-spit and spraying blood from Milo's running nose across the room. "Take two. Where the fuck is Benito?"

"I told you, I don't know." Milo looked blearily up at Chas. He almost looked like he was challenging Chas or perhaps enticing him to ask something more. But Chas wasn't interested in playing to the crowd. This was his own private hellshow. He was in charge; he called the shots.

"Not what I wanted to hear, Milo." Another slap dislodged a coagulating goblet from under Milo's nose, which landed on the carpet like a slug dissolving in salt.

"It occurs to me, *Earl*, that if you want a specific answer, you should ask the question that leads to it. One does not find the Seven Cities of Gold by asking directions to Detroit."

Detroit? What the fuck did Detroit have to do with anything? Probably nothing. Still, it reinforced the point that Milo wasn't going to give anything up without making Chas work for it. In his bound state, this was all the Kindred had left.

Chas looked at his watch. Eight minutes had passed. He figured he had twenty before Ben got curious and mustered the courage to call the room. "You're right, Milo. But talking out of turn means breaking rule number one. Time to pay the piper." Once more, Chas rained a blow down upon Milo's head, this time impacting the top of his skull. Nothing gave, though; Chas still needed to hear what Milo had to say so he didn't hit him too hard.

"Jesus fucking Christ, you simpleton! Isn't it obvious I don't know? Why don't you ask Montrose?"

"Don't take the name of the Lord in vain," Chas smiled maliciously, running his left palm over the knuckles of his right hand. "It's a sin, I think. In fact, I'm sure it's a sin when a Jew does it. And I already know about Montrose, but we don't know how to talk to him. We had your phone number. Lucky you. Oh, and stop breaking rule number one and I'll stop hitting you." Another massive blow to the face crushed the left side of Milo's head like a jack-o-lantern. His eye sagged out, his skull bulged alarmingly in a shape that foretold massive trauma, and a well of black head-blood rushed out of his face where Chas's knuckles had lacerated his skin through sheer force. As much as was possible, Milo bit his lip to remain silent.

"Say! That's good! You're learning. Okay. We'll take a different tack now. You've already given us Montrose, but we knew that, so we need something else. Where's Montrose?"

"Fuck you."

Wham.

"Who's Montrose working for?"

"Fuck you."

Wham.

"How do you make a Manhattan?"

"Three parts bourbon, one part sweet vermouth, maraschino cherry."

"Not bad, but too much vermouth." *Wham.*

"You don't understand, Milo. I'm not going to stop until you're dead or I've got something I can take home, you see? Who the fuck are *you* working for? What's the secret that's so fucking sacred that you're going to let me beat you inch by inch by fucking inch until I've killed you with my bare hands? What's the fucking story, morning fucking glory?" Chas leaned over to grin in Milo's face, pressing his forehead to the bound Kindred's. "What's the answer to the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question?"

"You really want to know?"

"No, shithead, I'm just fucking around over here."

"No, I mean you *really* have to want to know."

"What the fuck, Milo, I just told you I'm willing to punch you until you die, didn't I? You know how serious a motherfucker has to be to punch someone to death? You know how tired I'm going to be tomorrow night when I get up if I have to punch you for three fucking hours? I'm fucking serious as cancer over here."

"Okay, come here, then."

"What?"

"You heard me. Come here. Lean close so I can whisper it to you."

"You're out of your fucking gourd if you think I'm going to lean down there and let you bite my fucking ear off."

"I'm not going to bite your ear. Then you'd beat the shit out of me even after you killed me." *You're right*, Chas thought privately. "Bend down here so I can tell you."

"Milo, I swear to God, if you fucking bite me..."

"I'm not going to bite you. No, closer."

Chas put his ear up to Milo's mouth, almost hoping that the fool would dare to nip him so he could pummel the Rothstein into sticky paste. This close, Milo wasn't a Kindred anymore but a reeking, sumptuous, humid cloud of pulpy blood. *Tell me quick, motherfucker, before I bite you.*

"The secret is..."

"Yeah, spit it out."

"The secret is...go fuck yourself."

Motherfucker! Milo had him—took him for a ride. "All right, shitbag, you just cashed your fucking check. Goddammit! Fuck! Victor, you keep an eye on this son of a bitch!" As if he was going to get up and go somewhere. "Keep him right fucking where he is." Chas stormed about the room, pacing angrily and shaking his head violently with every turn for a few seconds. He turned on the TV: same Bruce Willis movie, still going strong; gunshots and exploding helicopters or something; the cockroach people love that shit. He turned up the volume so that it was maybe twice as loud as a conversation would have been. After that, Chas stalked into the bathroom and purposefully washed his hands and forehead, looking down the front of him to make sure he didn't have blood splattered all over his shirt.

"You fucking wait here, Milo," and Chas stormed out the door.

Milo looked at Victor. Victor looked at Milo and shrugged, as if he hadn't a care in the world. They heard a heavy, staccato scraping sound. And then another. Then a quick *bang*. And then a prolonged shudder, as if something immense were being dragged over carpeted floor.

"Mr. Sforza, what is your companion do—"

Chas kicked open the door, a sheen of blood-sweat across his forehead, something large blocking the light from the hallway from entering the room. "Yeah, that's right, Milo Tough-Guy. You're so fucking...so fucking tough, I'm going to show you what this is all about. Now you're in the big leagues."

As Chas ranted, he pushed the Coca-Cola vending machine into the room from the hall. It didn't quite fit, catching on the hollow metal doorjamb—so Chas pushed until the jamb pulled away from the sheetrock, sprinkling him and the machine with a veil of white dust.

Victor sniffed.

"You can't be serious," Milo stammered, his ruined eyes wide and his mouth agape.

"You fucking bet I can, cocksucker. I'm the most serious motherfucker you know right now." The doorjamb twisted away and Chas managed to force the big machine entirely into the room. He kept pushing, stopping only briefly to shove the bed to one side with his thigh before continuing to shoulder the machine over toward the window.

"Earl, this is patently absurd."

“Goddammit, would you shut the fuck up? I’m trying to work here. The sooner I can get this where it—needs—to—be—There!—the sooner we can wrap this up. Victor, get the tape.”

Victor rummaged through the bag while Chas single-handedly lifted Milo and the chair and slung them unceremoniously in front of the machine’s dimmed façade.

Finding a virgin roll of duct tape—still in the plastic wrapping—Victor tossed it to Chas. “Is this a good idea, Chas?”

“Shut up, Victor. I’m Earl. I know what I’m doing. Earl’s your own little angel of death, Milo.”

Milo had nothing to say about the situation, instead goggling around in incredulity. Seven big loops of tape later, Milo found himself attached to the machine, inseparably, it seemed.

“Okay. Milo. One last time. Montrose. Benito. Gone. Make it make sense to me, eh? For fuck’s sake, at least give me Montrose’s phone number.”

“Look, Earl, I’ve already told you—”

“All right. You’re done. Victor, set this prick on fire.”

Victor fumbled through his own pockets and turned up a silver lighter. He went to the wet bar as Chas ran quickly from the room to grab a fire extinguisher from the wall. As he pulled off the plastic sheath, a mild *beep beep beep* went off and a tiny red light blinked.

In the room, Victor had sprinkled Milo liberally with high-proof rum.

“You’re going to set me on fire and put me out?” asked Milo, not knowing what to believe or even what to guess.

“No, you fucking stiff!” Chas yelled at him and hurled the fire extinguisher through the wide glass window. Glass showered downward, accompanied by the extinguisher, which surely made a clash and tinkle as it hit the ground twenty-nine floors below. “You’re going out the fucking window.”

Victor struck the lighter and Chas heaved upward from the base of the vending machine. Milo’s eyes bugged amazingly as the duct tape held him to the machine, and his clothes and blood-damped hair went up in a fiery rush.

With an assertive, final *heave*, Chas pushed the machine up and out the window, sending Milo Rothstein tumbling toward the ground in a flaming, spiraling death-dive.

Chas and Victor bolted from the room, the latter grabbing the bag and hurling his flaming lighter to the floor to burn away the blood-evidence, and sprinted down the hallway toward the stairs. They took three flights in as many bounds, and Victor kept going, intending to call an elevator a few floors below. Chas yanked the fire alarm on floor twenty-six and then dashed down the stairs to join Victor at the elevator. Chas counted himself lucky that he didn’t have to breathe or he’d be panting hugely—and suspiciously.

And then nonchalantly, amid the confusion and the fire department trucks and the ambulances and screaming vacationers, they made their way across the street to catch a cab back to their hotel. With any luck at all, Milo was old enough to be dust by now, and this would look like some rock-star publicity stunt or the work of hooligans. No one had any reason to suspect murder at all. No one except Montrose and the Las Vegas Rothsteins, of course, but that could be dealt with later.

Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 11:58 AM
Victor's Authentic Mediterranean Café, Upper West Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York



Elizabeth sat in a tiny booth of her favorite, very small restaurant, reading a heavy volume on the prehistory of Persia. From time to time, she remembered the salad in front of her and took a few bites. She turned a page. Without warning, a man slid into the seat facing her. She looked up, ready to scream bloody murder—she was enough of a regular that, even in New York, one of the waitstaff would care—and closed her hand over her key ring on the seat beside her. The tube of pepper spray provided an iota of confidence.

Jordan Kettridge greeted her with an apologetic grimace. “Hi.”

She said nothing, but kept her hand on the keys.

“I just wanted to say, I’m sorry about the scene at the gallery yesterday.”

Elizabeth, stony-faced, waited.

“I’d just flown in from Turkey, I was jetlagged, I confess to a terrible temper, and I have been having the weirdest time with this damn bead. There have been some really...strange things happening in connection with it.” He smiled ruefully, and the lopsided effect was actually very appealing. Liz still said nothing, but the hand with the pepper relaxed the slightest bit.

“I had a second offer for it, yesterday. Sight unseen,” he said, stressing the two words as if they were unspeakable possibilities. “I don’t have the faintest idea why.” He leaned forward, hands open as though begging her. “Can’t you tell me anything about it?”

“Professor Kettridge, I haven’t seen the bead,” said Elizabeth wearily. “So far as I know, you have a rock with a hole through it.”

He nodded. “That’s exactly what it looks like. It’s not a work of art; it’s of no particular archaeological significance; it’s not even *made* of anything intrinsically valuable.” He searched her face in some desperation. “So why am I being offered ridiculous sums of money to part with it?”

“How ridiculous?” He told her. She put down her book and stared at him. “Now can you see why I’m worried?”

Elizabeth frowned. “I can see why you’re worried today. That’s a frightening amount of money for one bead. I still don’t understand the scene you caused at Rutherford House, Professor.”

“Please, call me Jordan.”

“No.” She shook her head vigorously. “Why the hell should I?”

“Damn it!” he snarled. “Look I came here—”

“You *followed* me here—it’s called stalking, Professor.”

“To tell you,” he shouted her down, “that I’m willing to consider your client’s offer.”

Elizabeth waited, and slowly the attention of the staff and other lunchers drifted away from the spectacle.

"I can't say whether he'd be willing to pay such an extravagant price for a lump of rock with a hole through it, Professor."

"The money doesn't matter."

Elizabeth raised both eyebrows, and he relented. His gray-green eyes locked with hers, and he continued levelly.

"The money doesn't matter that much, Ms. Dimitros. But I want to know who I'm dealing with. I don't dig for or sell to thieves, to collectors who deal with thieves, to idiots who want to 'invest' in things they're incapable of appreciating, or to blood-sucking corporate art-buyers." Kettridge was good at reading faces, and he watched the woman across from him carefully as he said each word. On 'blood-sucking,' her expression didn't change in the least.

"Well," said Elizabeth. "I suppose I can thank you for your apology about the scene you made in front of my boss. And I'll remember that you hold a certain code in your dealings; we'll note it in the company's file on the item. If I were you, though, I'd be less concerned about dealing with Rutherford House—which if you know anything about the market, you know is as clean as it gets—than about dealing with someone willing to pay so much, blindly, for your find. Most of our clients are connoisseurs. Sometimes we work for families trying to recover their heritage or build one. As for corporations...well, museums incorporate these days, and corporations build museums. I hope you don't consider building the Getty a sin? We certainly don't deal on the black market. I can't say we check to see whether our clients do; it would be an invasion of privacy."

Kettridge listened. "Ms. Dimitros, I believe in your sincerity. But I'm not sure whether you really know who you're fronting for. Be careful. Be damn careful. There are *dangerous* people mixed up in this business."

"In antiques?"

"No!" He struck the table with a closed fist. "Sorry." He whispered, "In *this*—wrapped up in the bead and whatever goes with it.

"Look." Kettridge stared at the speckled Formica tabletop as if for answers, leaned his head on his hands, and spoke softly. "You read the article. The bead was found in a grave. I excavated that grave from the natural surface down to the cemetery level. As I dug, I found broken pieces of clay with amulet-signs baked into them. They were scattered around in stratum after stratum. The placement suggested that the people of Sur-Amech put one or two a decade onto the grave for *generations* after the body was interred. The writing degenerates after a century or two, but the symbol stays the same.

"When I reached the original surface of the grave, I found the same sign scratched onto a large flat rock, facing downward. When I found the body, it was surrounded by the same kind of stone, with the same rough drawing of the amulet sign—again, facing toward the body. Literally surrounded, Ms. Dimitros—lying on a bed of them, walled in by them, and covered with them. The body was in the worst preservation of any found in the area. We pull desiccated, brittle bones from the sand there. This was just the dusty outline of a skeleton.

"There's no other grave like it in Sur-Amech.

"And the most interesting thing, Ms. Dimitros, is that the symbol carved into the rocks in that grave is still in use as a protective sign among the nomads who live in the area." He whipped out a pen, took a napkin from the dispenser, and drew a little glyph on the flimsy paper. "It's a ward against the Evil Eye, Ms. Dimitros."

Elizabeth caught the eye of her waitress and signaled for the check. "Thank you for the lecture, Professor. What's your point?"

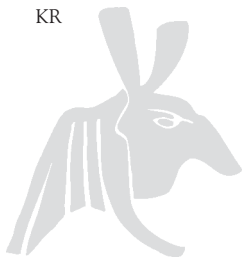
"The people of Sur-Amech wouldn't bury this corpse with their own dead. They hauled the body and the stones into virtual wilderness to get rid of it, and they protected themselves against the power of that corpse as well as they could, for as long as they could. They were afraid, Ms. Dimitros. And so am I."

"You believe in curses, Professor?" Elizabeth asked, incredulously. "Is the Smithsonian going to wrack and ruin because the Hope diamond is on display there? Did the Carter expedition really die because they violated Tutankhamen's tomb?" She paid her bill and stood to leave.

"I wanted to warn you. But I can see that you're blind to it all, Ms. Dimitros. I'm terribly sorry. I hope you'll be all right."

"Thank you." Liz picked up her book and turned toward the door. Kettridge didn't rise. She had to speak to the back of his head. "And the bead?"

"I'll be in touch," said Kettridge.



Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 12:53 PM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York

Amy found Liz in the bindery. The younger woman was pale, but her eyes weren't red. As she worked, very slowly, but with her usual care and precision, she brushed her hair away from her face, and the hand that moved trembled, just the faintest bit. Amy pushed the door open. "Lizzie?" she asked softly. "What's wrong?"

Elizabeth jumped in her chair. "Sorry, Amy. You scared me."

Amy shut the door behind her. "You were fine two hours ago. Now you're spookier than a cat with its head in a bag. Are you sleeping all right? You aren't walking again?" Starkly suspicious, she asked, "Did your mother call and upset you?" The girl shook her head, and Amy insisted: "Tell me what's happened, dear heart."

"Kettridge...came after me."

"Oh, Lord. What do you mean?"

"I was eating lunch at Victor's, and he sat down at my table. He was trying to...warn me, or threaten me, or something. There's something terribly wrong with this bead, I think..."

In bits and pieces, Amy gleaned the whole story from her friend.

"First thing we do," said Amy seriously, "is insulate you from this whole affair. If Kettridge shows up again, you tell him you're not at liberty to discuss Rutherford business. Tell him to contact the partners. Then you leave as fast as you can, okay?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"Second, I'm calling your Mr. Ruhadze and telling him to do his own negotiations. We'll ask for a finder's fee, but if there's trouble, it's his. Not ours, and certainly not yours, Liz.

"Third, we're going to pin down the mysterious Professor Kettridge. He comes in and out of here without so much as a contact number, fine and dandy. I've been asking after him around our mutual associates already—I'll find out where he's staying, or I'll find him through Berkeley, and I'll get him off your back."

Elizabeth smiled uncertainly.

Amy smiled back. "I'm sure there's a reason for all this. Damned if I can say it'll be a logical one, though. Everyone I talked to Monday said Kettridge was 'a nice guy'—which means nothing, of course—neither 'nice' nor 'good' mean anything nowadays. Kettridge is not supposed to be off his rocker. He can get a little insistent over his favorite theory, but I've never known a scientist who didn't, at least a little. We'll deal with this." She got up and opened the door. "You stick to the diary, Lizzie, and I'll go tackle the madmen."

Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 7:37 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Near Columbia, Maryland



Hesha stirred in his sleep.

"Sir?"

Hesha forced his eyes open. He tasted the cool air of the tomb, dusky with the scent of his pets. He was alone...as his mind cleared, he knew the voice. "Janet?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry to disturb you so early, but there's been a development I think you should know about."

"Give me a moment." Hesha stood and found his way to the door unerringly. In Vogel's chamber, he let the lights come up. The stone door swung silently shut behind him. "All right."

"We had a call today from Rutherford House...through ordinary channels, but undeniably concerned with your projects there. It seems that Kettridge has seized on Miss Dimitros as a potential source of information. Mrs. Rutherford didn't put it like that, of course."

"Which Mrs. Rutherford?"

"Amaryllis. She expressed concern that you had exposed Miss Dimitros to some sort of danger...and frankly, laid down an ultimatum; if there is trouble between you and the professor, Miss Dimitros must be kept out of it." Janet paused and speculated, "I got the impression, sir, that she thinks your statue is a stolen item, and that there are black-market forces beneath the mystery."

"That's harmless enough. Don't encourage it, however." Hesha pulled the loose, white eye out of his robes. Ever since the night Elizabeth had discovered how to remove it, he'd kept it on a thong around his neck. He scrutinized it as if for the first time and made a decision.

"Janet, we're going to take Miss Dimitros out of the professor's way. Start making arrangements for an appropriate Friday flight."



Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 10:15 PM
The Sunken Cathedral
Cranberry Bogs, Massachusetts

Benito Giovanni lay still on the hard wooden pallet that was the only furnishing in his cell. His shirt was open at the collar, tie loosened, his shoes placed tidily together on the bare stone floor. His eyes were closed.

Emmett peered through the spy hole. He had learned much about his captive and his mannerisms over a week of observation. He wished he'd kept count of how many times Benito had tried to glance at the watch that had been removed from his wrist. *That was exactly the obsessive sort of detail*, Emmett thought, *that Calebros would have noted*. He would have charted the exact routes of Benito's pacing during his waking hours. Then Calebros would have discerned some pattern, real or imaginary, and spent weeks—or *months*—pouring through some musty tome, convinced that the prisoner's wanderings were part of an elaborate necromantic ritual and searching for a way to counteract the infernal spell.

Not Emmett. For all of Calebros's strengths, the elder of the two broodmates lacked a sense of perspective, of *relevance*. Benito's reflexive habit of glancing at his wristwatch was merely a curiosity. Other facts were more telling. The Giovanni had been snatched from his Boston office nine nights ago and kept in isolation since. Even over that short period, Emmett had noticed Benito beginning to rise later in the evening. The difference was gradual, only a matter of minutes at this point. It was a physiological response, an attempt on the part of Benito's body, rather than a conscious decision on his part, to conserve energy—or blood. Benito had not been seriously injured during his capture, but he had not been allowed to feed since, and even the most minimal activity, over time, would exhaust whatever blood resided within his undead body.

The reduced activity might also be a psychological response, a coping mechanism. Captives, especially those kept in solitary confinement for extended periods, often developed sleeping disorders, losing the ability to rest altogether or, as in Benito's case, resting for increasingly prolonged amounts of time. The gradual nature of the increase in Benito's hour of rising, however, suggested that he had not yet suffered severe psychological trauma.

With time, of course, that would change.

Emmett had a certain amount of experience with observing prisoners and with interrogation. He would know when the time was right for Benito to answer questions. With the proper amount of blood deprivation, it was generally not necessary to torture a Kindred extensively, and Benito did not strike Emmett as the type to possess any great loyalty to his conspirators. The Giovanni would talk.

Silently, Emmett slid the cover back over the spy hole.

"Are you ready?" Abbot Pierce asked in a near-whisper.

"What?" Emmett asked in return. He had heard perfectly well, but after a week, he'd grown irritated with the abbot's soft-spoken yet thinly veiled impatience.

“Are you ready to question him?”

Pierce wore a heavy robe, so heavy on his slight frame, in fact, that Emmett constantly expected him to collapse under the weight of the fabric. Judging by the abbot’s few visible features—skeletal wrists and hands protruding from the loose sleeves, gaunt face set deep within the overhanging hood—Emmett imagined his clanmate to be little more than a walking coat-rack beneath the robe.

“Not yet,” Emmett said, stepping past his host and beginning down the corridor.

Pierce fell in step behind him. “You must take him away from here. He endangers the cathedral.”

Emmett gestured dismissively. “Moving him while things are so hot would endanger you more.”

“Clan Giovanni is the power to be reckoned with this close to Boston—not your Camarilla.”

“You mean...*our* Camarilla, of course,” Emmett said meaningfully, then continued, “and the Giovanni would have found us out already if they were going to.”

“Then you *weren’t* certain that no one was following you when you brought him here.” Pierce’s insistent whisper struck a peevish tone with Emmett.

“Nobody was in a hotrod on our tails shooting at us, if that’s what you mean, but the Giovanni have their ways—I don’t know what they are, but they have them. Did I want to get old Benito a little farther from the city just to be on the safe side? Hell yes. I’m sorry if that inconveniences your little cult—”

“We are *not* a cult,” Pierce snapped. “We are a spiritual collective, like-minded individuals gathered together to—”

“Yeah, yeah. Yadda, yadda, yadda. Save it for the promotional video.” Emmett quickened his pace and drew ahead of the abbot. Pierce and the other “monks” grated on Emmett’s nerves. Sure there was a chance that by bringing Benito here someone might find out about the collection of stone-lined tunnels and chambers they’d built beneath the bogs and then pumped out, and which they now somewhat grandiosely referred to as a “cathedral.” But sometimes risks were unavoidable. Sometimes, especially in a matter as important as this, one had to be willing to take one for the clan. Besides that, Emmett was put off by the religious posturing that Pierce and his followers affected—like their spiritual whacking-off was all that mattered, and everybody else could—or would—go to hell.

“You know,” Emmett said over his shoulder, “a *real* cathedral wouldn’t have an abbot. A cathedral is the seat of a bishopric. You should be a bishop. There. I just gave you a promotion. That should make up for your trouble.”

“Calebros will hear of your obstreperousness,” Pierce said, actually raising his voice a decibel or two.

“I bet he will. He hears about everything sooner or later,” Emmett said. “And, oh, he’ll be real surprised too.”



Wednesday, 30 June 1999, 10:57 PM
Caesar's Palace, Room 2604
Las Vegas, Nevada

When Chas had risen for the night, he found Victor still in bed.
Dead.

The television was on, running through a collection of previews that would soon show and on which channels they would appear. An overturned mug of coffee sat on the nightstand. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* and the *Wall Street Journal* lay open on the bed and stained by coffee on the floor, respectively. The smell of almonds permeated the room.

Someone had infused the coffee with cyanide.

"I told you I hate this city," Chas said to Victor's still-stiff corpse. By the time anyone found him, Victor would be turning green-red and purple as the blood pooled downward.

But that wasn't Chas's problem. He had a cargo-class flight to catch back to Boston. A quick call to Frankie Gee from the dispatch office at the airport should have whoever was in charge of such things make sure no one matching Chas's description came up in any of the police reports.

"Goodbye, cockroaches."

Poor, stupid Victor. A victim of ambition, both his own and others'. It never even occurred to Chas to question why they'd thought to poison Victor's coffee but not to stake the Kindred sleeping in the bathroom. And even if he had thought about it, he'd just guess he had a charmed unlife.

Thursday, 1 July 1999, 11:20 AM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York



Agnes Rutherford strode stiffly through the front doors of her establishment, and her sharp eyes took in every inch of the display floor with no sign whatever of approval. She looked down at her nephew James's wife—they were nearly the same height, but Agnes could look down at people who were head and shoulders taller than herself without straining.

"Good morning, Aunt Agnes," said Amy. She leaned forward and exchanged dry pecks on the cheek with her elderly relative. "How was your flight?"

"No worse than usual, for this time of year. I look forward to the end of the tourist season, however." The senior partner took a few steps farther into the shop and looked down at Amy from even greater heights than before. "Have we any important appointments scheduled for today? No? A pity, but it will at least leave us time to review the figures for the last week."

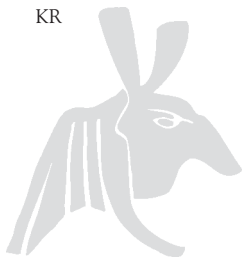
Agnes took a moment to view the display again. Her glance came to Elizabeth—and if the old lady's eyes dwarfed Amy, Elizabeth was less than an ant. "Miss Dimitros."

"Welcome back, Miss Rutherford."

"Carry on down here." Agnes started for the stairs to the offices and turned back halfway. "You attended to Mr. Ruhadze last Wednesday? Were you able to sell the collar to him?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Agnes said nothing, but continued up the stairs.



Thursday, 1 July 1999, 8:45 PM
Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York

Thompson brought the sedan to a perfect, parallel halt at the curbside. The walls of both tires grazed cement. Between his master's door and the doors of Rutherford House there could be no shorter distance, but he worried anyway. "Careful, sir."

"Relax a little, Thompson," Hesha said. "It really is too much to hope that the professor would have staked out the store."

"And if he did?"

"Then you are here, the Asp is...waiting in the wings, and I am not entirely without defenses of my own." Hesha slipped into his suit coat, picked up a shining black alligator briefcase and a brass-topped cane, and stepped out of the car.

Amy Rutherford welcomed him inside. "Good evening, Mr. Ruhadze." He looked at her through earnest eyes and shook her hand. Her manner was as polished as ever, but beneath the gloss, she was not pleased with him. "Aunt Agnes is waiting for you in her office. Shall we?" She led him through the dim and empty display floor to the office stairs. The workroom was dark. At the end of the corridor, she stopped, knocked once and ushered him into the throne room, as she thought of it.

"Mr. Ruhadze, Aunt Agnes."

"Punctual as ever, Hesha." Agnes Rutherford looked neither down on him, nor up, but gave Hesha Ruhadze the gaze of an equal and half-rose to greet him.

"I would never willingly waste your time, Miss Agnes," he said courteously. "It would be an insult to keep a lady waiting, particularly one with such demanding responsibilities."

Agnes half-smiled. "Sit down, Hesha, and tell us how we can be of assistance to you today."

Amy drew the door shut behind them and sat respectfully in a corner chair to watch the giants meet. Her aunt—Jim's aunt, she reminded herself, grateful that her own family was less...everything—sat behind a stately, massive desk. Her thin, frail body dwindled in the equally impressive, red leather-upholstered chair.

Ruhadze, on the other hand, fitted the matching seat as if it had been built around him. He was a vision in monochrome—the red leather, in shadow, was the warm, brown-black color of his skin. His suit—of an outdated cut, she realized suddenly, almost contemporary with Agnes's father's days—was the color of coal. The old fabric devoured the light, but his shoes, his bag, the ebon cane he held across his knees, and his bright eyes shone with it.

"I have an unusual request, Miss Agnes." He hesitated and seemed to pick his words carefully. "I'm afraid that I have inadvertently endangered one of your employees."

Agnes lifted her fine gray brows. "Miss Dimitros," she said quietly. He nodded. "Please explain yourself, Hesha."

"I own a particular item—"

"A statue?" interjected Amy.

"Yes." Heshu half-turned in his chair to include her in the conversation. "It is not, I assure you, 'hot' or 'black market' or anything of the kind. On the other hand, as with many antiquities, the country of its origin disapproves of any entity other than itself possessing the piece. Just as the Greeks want the treasures of Athens returned from England, a certain nation wants my little treasure returned to native soil. I have no more intention of giving it to them than I have of handing the collar I bought last week over to Cairo—less, in fact. Egypt and Greece at least have democracies, museums and relative peace. They bring their heritage back through treaties, special funds, the United Nations...diplomatic means.

"The government in question, however, has abandoned diplomacy in almost every matter and is a known haven for terrorists. The ruling party has made it clear that they will hide and back even the most radical of organizations, provided their demands are met and policies adhered to...one of which is the recovery of 'cultural artifacts' that, in fact, they have little claim to.

"I showed Miss Dimitros the statue as a challenge—I wanted to test her skills. Unfortunately for all of us, she was more clever than I could have hoped. Not only did she find some details previous experts had missed, she recognized a piece of the statue in a diagram in a professional publication and contacted the author."

"Professor Kettridge," murmured Agnes.

"Yes. And Kettridge came to New York to find her."

Amy clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth and said, "I've looked into Jordan Kettridge's background. He's a fine scholar and no more a terrorist than I am."

"I don't mean to suggest that he is. I suspect that the terrorists recognized the bead and tried to steal it. They were obviously unsuccessful. From his point of view, I suppose, Elizabeth's message was just another tactic of the thieves. When that failed, there came the extreme bid for the piece..."

"I don't know what they may try next, but Kettridge has had two contacts with Elizabeth, and the terrorists are likely to think that she knows more than she does or can lead them to the professor. For her own safety, I want to take her out of New York and away from Kettridge, the terrorists and Rutherford House."

Agnes's eyes narrowed. Her thin, pale lips twisted into a speculative frown. "And that's why you asked me to keep her here tonight. Well, Ruhadze, what do you intend to do with our Miss Dimitros?"

Heshu stroked the harsh line of his cheekbone. "My own collection," he began, "is in need of some restoration. From what I've seen of her work, Elizabeth would be the ideal candidate to work on it." He lifted his briefcase to his lap, opened it and slid a small sheaf of paper across the desk to Agnes. "I would make up your losses, of course, and supplement Miss Dimitros's salary while she was contracted out to me." He waited while the old lady examined the numbers. "These are figured on a week-by-week basis. I doubt that her absence would be prolonged...though there is certainly work enough in Baltimore to keep her busy for months, if need be."

Amy watched her aunt's ice-blue eyes scan the bottom line and knew what Agnes's answer would be. "Mr. Ruhadze," asked Amy, "Isn't this a matter for the police? Or," she continued sharply, "if all you're suggesting is true, a matter for the CIA *and* the FBI *and* Interpol?"

"It is," said Hesha. "And I have gone to them," he lied. "That's how I came by what information I know. We could arrange to have them take care of her. But Amy," he said, trying to meet her gaze in the shadowy corner, "do you know what the phrase 'protective custody' actually means? It means jail and isolation and little hotel rooms with no one to speak to but police officers and nothing to do but wait. I'd rather not inflict that on Elizabeth. She'll be safe in Baltimore, and she will be working at what she likes best. Unless one of *us* tells her about the danger, she won't even need to know it exists until after it's already passed." He looked away again, down at the thick Persian carpet. "I'd offer the same protection to Kettridge, if I could find him."

"Hesha," said Miss Agnes. "I concur with your appraisal of Miss Dimitros's value to us as a shop assistant, but I believe you are underestimating the restoration costs we will be subject to in her absence..."

And Amy listened in vague disbelief as Jim's aunt proceeded to dicker over Elizabeth Dimitros as though she were a French Provincial chair or a Ming vase. Mr. Ruhadze, at least, had the grace to be embarrassed—their eyes met once, as Agnes pulled a rate list of out-of-house fabric workers from the files. He put up very little fight; he seemed genuinely more interested in the merchandise than in the price. At least Lizzie was going where she was...highly valued. Amy stood up, suddenly unable to take any more of the haggling, and Agnes's piercing voice split through the growing headache.

"Amy, where are you going?"

"I need an aspirin, Aunt Agnes. Excuse me."

Amy fled into her own office, downed the aspirin and sank into her big, overstuffed sofa. She tried to think straight. Terrorists and fugitives and contacts...it sounded like a spy movie and a poorly constructed one. Ruhadze had explained everything, but...there had to be simpler ways to protect Lizzie. Was he going to all this trouble to protect her because the danger was real and he cared for her? Or was he trying to entice her away for nefarious purposes? *Oh Lord*, she thought, *Lizzie's well over the age of consent....* She argued herself into circles and corners for another half hour or so, until she heard the door open to Agnes's room. Speech spilled into the hallway.

"I'd like to speak with her myself, of course." Hesha's baritone came clearly through the walls.

"Of course," answered Agnes. "She's in the bindery...the third door on your left, Hesha."

Amy left the couch for the door and opened it just as Ruhadze approached. "Mr. Ruhadze? I have some more questions for you."

He came in and sat.

"Why doesn't Kettridge go to the police? Why shouldn't we simply transfer Elizabeth to our London offices for a month, or a year, or however long this takes? What gives you the idea that there will be an end to it, if terrorists are the enemy? You're moving Elizabeth to Baltimore at a great deal of trouble and expense. Now, if you weren't telling the truth to Aunt Agnes, I doubt you'll tell it to me. Please let me make one thing clear to you. I want you to take good care of Lizzie."

Hesha smiled. He stood up, took her by the hand and looked her straight in the eyes. "Trust me," he told her, overwhelmingly serious and compassionate and sure. He waited for the command to sink in. Satisfied that she believed, he released her.

She sighed. "I'm sorry to have gone on like that...but I'm all she has, and I can't just let her disappear. Oh, Lord, do you realize Lizzie's been here since nine this morning? Let's go talk to her and send her packing. Promise me you'll keep the poor child working only eight-hour days. She'll think it's Christmas. Agnes is just a slave-driver, really."

"I've noticed," said Hesha, as he picked up his things.

She smiled and led him down the hall to the bindery.

Elizabeth looked up as she came in. "The diary's finished, Amy. If I never read another word about Elizabethan shipping businesses, it will be too soon." She flicked a hand toward the worktable with contempt. "I went ahead and started the blasted papyrus—" Hesha followed Amy into the room, and Elizabeth stopped short.

Amy took up her favorite chair and watched as their visitor came around the table to examine Lizzie's work.

"A tourist piece," he said, and the same contempt filled his voice. "Nineteenth-century souvenir." He leant over the beginnings of the repair work and nodded approval. "But you know how to restore papyri properly. Good."

"Lizzie, Mr. Ruhadze has asked Rutherford House to lend him one of our most prized assets. How would you like to go to Baltimore and do restoration work on his private collection?"

Elizabeth sat quietly, her hands folded on the desk in front of her. She tried to catch Hesha's gaze, and did, but there was nothing there for her to read. She stared at a beaming Amy, and though the smile was luminous, the eyes were tight and worried. Slowly, the rays of confidence faded in that smile, and the older woman's anxieties revealed themselves in the lines around her mouth, too.

"You don't have to go, of course," said Amy. "And it isn't a permanent post. Your job here will be secure; we'll look after the loft for you. But Mr. Ruhadze needs someone to do the work, and Aunt Agnes is simply putty in his hands. It's all arranged—if you want it."

Elizabeth's glance appealed to Hesha again—and though there was still no sign on his face, his hand grasped her shoulder reassuringly.

"When?"

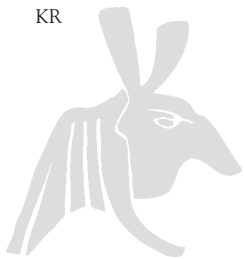
"Tomorrow afternoon?" he suggested. "You can settle in over the weekend and start work on Monday."

"That's fast."

"I know."

Elizabeth covered the crude cartouche in its protective wrappings. After the papyrus, there would be another diary, perhaps, or deed papers with 'New Amsterdam' at the top instead of 'New York,' or a Renaissance floral with no merit besides age. Hesha's collection would be different. And Hesha himself...but she cut the thought off there.

"I'll go."



Thursday, 1 July 1999, 9:50 PM
Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge from Manhattan
New York City, New York

Inside the black sedan, it was unsettlingly quiet.

Elizabeth sat with her tote bag at her feet. The tickets to Baltimore were tucked into her sketchbook. She watched the lights of the city speed by, tinted blue-purple by the windows.

Introductions had been made between herself and Ronald Thompson, but Thompson wasn't one to chatter. There were streets to watch and other cars ever to be suspected of holding the Enemy in one form or another. Hesha sensed, too, that Thompson was unsettled by the 'collection' of Miss Dimitros.

Hesha held his tongue. A kind word to Elizabeth would have soothed her fears and apprehension...but Thompson wasn't ready to hear his master whisper sweet nothings to a 'nice' girl. A curt, businesslike discussion with the girl would have put her in her place as a curator, and nothing more, and satisfied Thompson entirely...but Hesha wasn't ready to relinquish the hold that a feigned romance might have over Elizabeth and wasn't sure that she would let herself be railroaded to Baltimore with that enticement taken away. He would take a moment with each, separately, soon. If the drive to her apartment were as silent as the grave, so much the better for his concentration.

They dropped her off at the old warehouse. She wished them good night and faded into the darkness of the front door. A loitering figure signaled to Thompson, and the driver confirmed the watchmen's orders. The sedan pulled back onto the main roads, and Thompson looked for Hesha's eye in the rearview mirror.

"Sir..."

"Not now, Thompson. Take us back to Rutherford House. Kettridge has been there recently, and I know now how to find him."

Thursday, 1 July 1999, 10:54 PM
Outside Rutherford House, Upper East Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York



“How well do you know New York?” Hesha asked, unexpectedly.

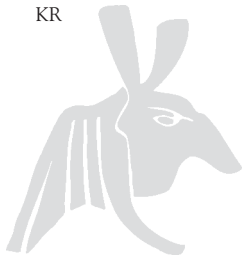
Thompson considered. “The main roads, the places *you* go, some of those neighborhoods in depth and a little more, maybe.”

“We’re going to follow Kettridge with this,” said Hesha, dangling the milk-white bead from its cord. “Its power is very low, and I will have to shut out as much of the world as I can while I use it. I will close my eyes and direct you as well as possible. Take turns to follow my line whenever the roads allow. Remember exactly where we are each time I speak to you; if we lose the trail you will have to drive back to that spot as quickly as possible, and we will try again. Do you understand?”

“No,” admitted the driver, “but I think I can follow the orders.”

Hesha lay down on the back seat, holding the little eye between both hands.

“North from here,” he said. Thompson checked for cops, made an illegal U-turn and drove slowly up the street.



Thursday, 1 July 1999, 11:30 PM
Park Avenue, Midtown Manhattan
New York City, New York

“Stop.”

Thompson eased the sedan into place next to a fire hydrant and waited for the still form in the back seat to speak further.

“He spent a long time here...but he isn’t here now. Are we near a hotel?”

Thompson blinked in surprise. “We’re on the doorstep of a big one.”

Hesha felt for the trail through the bead. “Southwest,” he said. The car rolled on, and within half a block, he knew the traces were colder than those he’d followed. “Back again. East from the hotel.” Again, there was a trail, but a stale one. “Stop. Back again.”

“Sir?”

“What is it?” asked Hesha, wearily.

“Let me drive around the block a few times. When you find a good lead, tell me. His ‘footprints’ are going to be a hell of a mess right in front of where he’s staying.”

“Do it.”

Friday, 2 July 1999, 12:07 AM
Forty-Second Street, Midtown Manhattan
New York City, New York



“Stop.” Hesha opened his eyes. “He’s here.”

Thompson looked into the back seat. “Sir, I think maybe you’d better hurry.”

Hesha stepped onto the curb and understood.

They had pulled up outside Grand Central Station.

Hesha very nearly ran to the entrance. He hurtled into the crowds on the main floor, his quick senses devouring the faces of the travelers he brushed past. He scanned the forms of the passengers and pick-ups waiting in the long rows of seats as his footsteps took him instinctively to the walls.

Kettridge was not, now, buying a ticket at the counters or eating at any of the stalls open for the late-night passenger’s convenience, but he had been to both. He had not, though Hesha’s search was taking time, left the building. The Setite drew slowly to a halt. It ill befitted him to run around the platforms and into the subways. He sought the solitude of an empty bank of phones and pulled his own sleek model from his coat.

Behind him, one of the pay machines rang. He ignored it and began dialing for Thompson, but it rang and rang until he grabbed it, checked the receiver reflexively, and put it to his ear.

“Hello, Ruhadze. How’s death treating you?”

“Professor Kettridge,” acknowledged Hesha.

“It’s been a long time since Syria, hasn’t it?”

“For you.”

“Yes,” said Kettridge, “for me. You haven’t changed, a bit, of course. No scars from that last firefight at Baalbek, I notice. I imagine *I* look like hell, though.”

“I couldn’t say.”

“I don’t intend for you to be able to.” The mortal’s voice held a sharper edge than before, and he continued, “You’re getting sloppy in your old age. Using a girl you were seen with so publicly to make the contact—hardly your usual finesse, is it?” Hesha said nothing. “Or were you behind the burglary attempt?”

“That might be a better guess.”

“I’ll give you credit, though, you weren’t behind the high bid.”

“I’d double it, if I thought you were interested.”

“We both know I’m not.... How about a trade, instead?” Kettridge inquired, thoughtfully.

“What would you take for the bead?”

“I’m not bartering beads today,” said the professor. “I’ll trade you information.”

Hesha considered. “I’m listening.”

“I’ll tell you where the high bid came from, if you’ll tell me why every dead man in the world seems interested in my little lucky charm.”

“Not good enough. There are probably five or more intermediaries between you and the bidder.”

“No, not this time. Someone was in an awful hurry.”

Temptation brushed by Hesha, and she was smiling. “Tell me where the high bid came from, and I’ll answer three questions about your bead. Specific questions. How helpful the answers are will depend, of course, on how intelligently you put your questions.”

For nearly a full minute—which Hesha spent in efforts to pinpoint Kettridge and his ‘lucky charm’—the line gave up nothing but static.

“Harlem. What is the bead?”

“It’s the eye of a statue.”

Kettridge named a street. “Why does it pull me toward Atlanta?”

“It’s a subsidiary item to a more powerful artifact. Your eye can locate the main artifact. The main artifact is or was in Atlanta.”

“2417A. Basement entrance. How did you find me here tonight?”

“I have another eye of the statue. It can locate your eye. I can follow you anywhere you go, Kettridge,” said Hesha, and the mortal could hear the smile in the creature’s voice.

The professor, from his own booth deep within the maze of the station, felt a chill run down his spine. He hefted a duffel bag onto his shoulder and felt the comforting metal lumps of his weapons within. “I wouldn’t recommend that, Ruhadze,” he said evenly. “I’ve learned a lot since Baalbek.”

“Good. Let me offer you some advice.” Hesha whispered into the phone. “Get out of New York as fast as you can. I won’t come after you—yet—but if the address you gave me is correct, you have half the hounds of hell on your tail.”

“I know. I’ve singed some. Your kind don’t like crowds or fire, do they?”

“Don’t assume anything. Don’t call *them* my kind,” hissed Hesha. “And if you want to rely on crowds for protection, don’t go to Atlanta or the other riot zones.”

Kettridge looked down at his tickets: Amtrak to Atlanta—through D.C. and Raleigh. He was suddenly afraid. “Damn it, Hesha—your telling me not to is a good reason to go! Why should I trust you? Why warn me? Why all these mind games? God, I can’t believe we’re having this conversation—give me a reason why I should believe a single fucking thing you’ve said, from start to finish?”

“I would rather that you kept the bead, Jordan, than have it fall into the hands of the high bidder. In the riot zones, they won’t care about witnesses. Understand?” He waited. “Jordan?”

The line was dead, and though Hesha quickly found a phone still warm from his rival’s hand, he felt the red eye speeding away south. In ten minutes, he could no longer sense it at all.

Friday, 2 July 1999, 1:22 AM
Below Forty-Third Street, Midtown Manhattan
New York City, New York



The cage descended into the darkness of the service shaft. Wittgenstein steeled himself for the interminable journey. As many times as he had made this trip, it never got any easier.

He tried to occupy his thoughts by polishing the elaborate brass scissors-gates. The service elevator to the “dragon’s lair” was a genuine relic. It had somehow managed to evade every attempt at remodeling and modernization since the ’20s. Wittgenstein knew that no one else would ever see, much less appreciate, the results of his handiwork, but he applied the rag with an affection usually reserved for vintage automobiles.

Three miles the shaft descended, straight into the belly of the Beast. The printing presses of the *Times* were one of the marvels of modern engineering. The thundering machines were so massive that their incidental vibrations reached near-seismic proportions. Firing up the presses would have instantly torn down not only any building they were housed in, but the surrounding buildings as well.

In the end, the presses had had to be sunk into the very bedrock of the island. The same unshakable foundation that made the city uniquely suited for its unceasing clamor skyward also concealed wonders in its deepest recesses.

Wittgenstein knew the elevator was nearing the bottom of the shaft by the onset of a sudden panicked feeling of vertigo. All at once, the narrow confines of the shaft had fallen away—receding *upward* into the dim distance. As many times as he had experienced this alarming sensation, it never failed to produce in him the feeling that his brass cage was hurtling unchecked toward the unforgiving bedrock.

Wittgenstein forced his eyes back open, cursing himself for a fool. Squinting into the darkness, he could make out the shadowy presence of the slumbering dragons below. They seemed to fill the vast open space. Wisps of steam rose from their bodies and coiled upwards in the chill, damp air.

Already he could tell that something was wrong. In the uncertain light of his lamp, the presses seemed to glisten wetly. Thick, slimy strands of what looked to be seaweed choked the titanic rollers. But that was impossible. Those presses would easily have ground a strong man’s arms to pulp before anyone could even shut the machines down—assuming someone would be so incautious as to fail to accord the giants a respectful distance.

But to bring the presses grinding to a halt, those clinging strands must be as thick around as trees.

The service elevator splashed down and then continued its descent at a more leisurely pace. The rising water shorted out the electric lamp as Wittgenstein clawed at the latch to the scissors-gates. Already, the lower reaches of the lattice were laced with clinging greenery, preventing their operation.

In time, the cage vanished beneath the murky surface.

Soon, even the echoes of his struggle receded, meandering back and forth between the walls of the narrow service tunnel as if trying to find their way.

Below, that which had stirred at the incessant buzzing of the presses returned to its contemplations.





Appendices to volume one

A glossary of the undead
prominent characters
About the Authors
About the compilation





A glossary of the undead



The Kindred have their own dialect of specialized words and phrases. Vampires have a tremendous capacity for double-talk; what they say often means something other than its literal interpretation, or something in addition to its simple meaning. Certain words have evolved new connotations among the Damned, while others are unique to vampires and their society. The Kindred, set in their ways as they are, are loath to adopt new manners of speech or slang, and one can often determine a rough estimation of a vampire's age by listening to the individual words she chooses.

Alamut: The hidden fortress that is the traditional heart of the Children of Haqim (Clan Assamite). Thought to be in the mountains of Eastern Turkey.

anarch: A Kindred rebel who opposes the tyranny of elders. Anarchs wish to redistribute the wealth and resources of a city equitably among the vampires therein. Anarchs generally operate in Camarilla cities as a rough opposition, although as of the mid 1990s, they have crude domain over Los Angeles.

Antediluvian: A member of the dreaded Third Generation, one of the eldest Kindred in existence. Antediluvians are said to have sired all thirteen clans, to be the hidden masters behind the Jyhad, and to be in a semi-slumber from which they will rise during Gehenna.

antitribu: Literally “anti-tribe,” the name for those members of a clan who reject the sectarian allegiance of most members of the clan. The Sabbat includes members tied by blood to most of the Camarilla and independent clans and to distinguish them from their “loyal” brethren, they are called *antitribu*. There are also a few Lasombra and Tzimisce *antitribu* who actively oppose the Sabbat.

archbishop: The Sabbat vampire who has domain over a large area, usually a city. Equivalent to the Camarilla term prince.

archon: A vampire in the retinue of a justicar. Archons enforce the traditions of the Camarilla.

Assamite: A member of the Children of Haqim, one of the four so-called independent clans of vampires, or that clan as a whole. Assamites have a reputation as assassins, but are also skilled sorcerers and schemers. Their center of authority is Alamut.

Beast, the: The inchoate drives and urges that threaten to turn a vampire into a mindless, ravening monster.

blood bond: A mystical power over another individual engendered by partaking of a particular vampire’s blood thrice; accepting blood from a vampire is an acknowledgment of her mastery.

Blood Curse, the: A wasting disease of supernatural origin that claimed the unlives of many Kindred in the middle of the 1990s.

blood hunt: An official death sentence pronounced on one Kindred by the prince or archbishop of the city. Traditionally, the convicted vampire is given the chance to flee, and the one who brings him down gains substantial prestige.

Book of Nod, The: A loose collection of Kindred legendry and history. *The Book of Nod* chronicles the origin of the Kindred, though it has never been published in its entirety. Fragments of the document and its many partial transcriptions circulate among certain strata of Kindred society. A scholar of these texts and the ancient times they purportedly chronicle is generally called a Noddist.

Brujah: One of the seven clans of the Camarilla. The Brujah are feared for their explosive tempers and great physical might.

Caine: The biblical elder child of Adam and Eve and murderer of his brother Abel. According to *The Book of Nod* and assorted Kindred legendry, God’s curse upon him was the origin of vampirism, and all Kindred descend from him through the Embrace.

Cainite: A vampire; a member of the race of Caine. The Sabbat use this term in lieu of Kindred.

Caitiff: A vampire of unknown clan, or of no clan at all. Caitiff are typically of high generation, where Caine's blood dilutes too greatly to pass any consistent characteristics.

Camarilla, the: A sect of vampires devoted primarily to maintaining the Traditions, particularly that of the Masquerade. It opposes the Sabbat and the anarchs. As of the mid-1990s, the Camarilla claims domain over most cities of the eastern United States and Europe, including Atlanta, Washington, Baltimore, Chicago, Hartford and Buffalo.

cardinal: A powerful elder in the Sabbat, roughly equivalent to a Camarilla justicar.

chantry: The local sanctum and domain of a city's Tremere blood-sorcerers, home to their library and thaumaturgic resources. The head of a chantry is called the regent.

childe (pl. childer): A vampire created through the Embrace—the childe is the progeny of her sire. This term is often used derogatorily, indicating inexperience.

Children of Haqim: Clan Assamite.

clan: A group of vampires who share common characteristics passed on from sire to childe. There are thirteen known clans, all of which were reputedly founded by Antediluvians.

diablerie: The consumption of another Kindred's blood, to the point of the victim's Final Death. Vampires can gain significant power in this way and it is considered a capital crime among the Kindred of the Camarilla.

Elysium: A place where vampires may gather and discourse without fear of harm. Elysium is commonly established in opera houses, theaters, museums and other locations of culture.

Embrace, the: The act of transforming a mortal into a vampire. The Embrace requires the vampire to drain her victim and then replace that victim's blood with a bit of her own.

fire dance: A ritual and rough celebration in which Sabbat vampires prove their loyalty and bravery by jumping through raging fires. Many Sabbat war efforts and other events begin with fire dances.

Followers of Set: Clan Setite.

Gangrel: One of the seven clans of the Camarilla. The Gangrel are said to be masters of the wilds and some can assume animal forms, including those of bats and wolves.

Gehenna: The supposedly imminent Armageddon when the Antediluvians will rise from their torpor and devour the race of Kindred and the world.

generation: The number of “steps” between a vampire and the mythical Caine; how far descended from the first vampire a given vampire is.

ghoul: A minion created by giving a bit of vampiric vitae to a mortal without draining her of blood first (which would create a vampire instead). Ghouls are fanatically loyal.

Giovanni: One of the four so-called independent clans of vampires, the Giovanni draw many of its members from the descendants of a Venetian trading family of the same name. They are reputed to be necromancers, able to commune with ghosts, and to have made themselves vampires in a way similar to the Tremere. Giovanni in North America have domain over the city of Boston.

Goratrix: One of the original fellows of Tremere (the sorcerer who founded the clan of the same name). Goratrix later rebelled and joined the Sabbat, forming the Tremere *antitribu*, more formally called House Goratrix.

justicar: A vampire appointed by the secretive inner council of the Camarilla to act as enforcer, arbiter and executioner of the sect. There is only one justicar per Camarilla clan (so seven in total) and this select group can act with virtual impunity to defend the sect. Justicars are assisted by their hand-picked archons.

Jyhad, the: The secret, self-destructive war waged between the generations. Elder vampires manipulate their lessers, using them as pawns in a terrible game whose rules defy comprehension. The Antediluvians are said to pull the strings of the Jyhad.

Kindred: The race of vampires as a whole, or a single vampire. Sabbat vampires scorn the term.

kine: A term for mortals, largely contemptuous. The phrase “Kindred and kine” refers to the world at large; everything.

koldun: One of the rare (and feared) blood sorcerers of Clan Tzimisce.

Lasombra: One of the two founding clans of the Sabbat. The Lasombra are political schemers extraordinaire and feared for their characteristic powers to summon up darkness—both immaterial and fatally solid—and even to enter a realm of shadow called the Abyss. The Lasombra are said to have killed their Antediluvian as part of the founding of the Sabbat.

Malkavian: One of the seven clans of the Camarilla. Malkavians are said to all be mad, but are also known as seers and prophets.

Masquerade, the: The tradition of hiding the existence of vampires from mortals. Designed to protect the Kindred from destruction at the hands of mankind, the Masquerade was adopted after the Inquisition claimed many Kindred unives. The Camarilla enforces the Masquerade on penalty of destruction.

Methuselah: A vampire who has existed for a millennium or more; an elder who no longer exists among the greater whole of Kindred society. Methuselahs are rumored to hail from the Fourth and Fifth Generations and are nearly as feared as the Antediluvians.

necromancy: The blood sorcery practiced by members of Clan Giovanni, it concerns itself with binding ghosts and other unhealthy spirits. Properly called *nigromancy*.

neonate: A young vampire, recently Embraced.

Nod: The mythical land east of Eden into the wilds of which Caine was cast by Adam and God after the murder of Abel, and where he later built Enoch, the First City. A vampiric scholar of those hoary times is termed a Noddist.

nomad: A Sabbat vampire who (along with her pack) travels constantly in her duties to the sect.

Nosferatu: One of the seven clans of the Camarilla. The Nosferatu are cursed with terrible ugliness that manifests immediately after the Embrace. They are known as hoarders of information and for their ability to vanish from sight.

primogen: The vampire leaders in a Camarilla city; its ruling body of elders, typically composed of one member from each clan present in a city.

prince: A vampire who has claimed a given expanse of domain as her own, particularly a city, and supports that claim against all others. The term can refer to a Kindred of either sex and is mostly used by the Camarilla. The Sabbat uses the term archbishop.

Ravnos: One of the four so-called independent clans of vampires, the Ravnos hail from India and often feed from Gypsies and other wanderers. They are thought of as thieves by other Kindred and are said to be able to summon up illusions.

Sabbat, the: A sect of vampires that rejects humanity, embracing their monstrous natures. The Sabbat is often bestial and violent, preferring to lord over mortals rather than hide from them, and is founded on opposing the machinations of the Antediluvians. As of the mid-1990s, the Sabbat has domain over the cities of Miami, New York, Detroit and Montreal.

SchreckNET: The private computer network certain members of Clan Nosferatu use to communicate with one another.

sect: A group of Kindred arguably united under a common philosophy. The two most widely known sects currently populating the night are the Camarilla and the Sabbat. The anarch movement is not organized enough to form a sect, per se.

Setite: A member of the Followers of Set, one of the four so-called independent clans of vampires, or that clan as a whole. Setites reject the Caine story and claim descent from the Egyptian god whose name they take. They worship him with religious fervor and are mistrusted by most Kindred.

sheriff: In Camarilla cities, a vampire empowered by the prince to enforce the traditions and edicts of the sect—often to the point of destroying offenders.

shilmulo: A term used among vampires of Clan Ravnos to refer to themselves. Used interchangeably with undead, Kindred and vampire.

sire: A vampire's "parent"; the Kindred who created her.

templar: A Sabbat vampire assigned to enforce the will of an archbishop or cardinal. Equivalent to a Camarilla archon.

thaumaturgy: Literally, "the making of miracles"; the form of blood sorcery practiced by Clan Tremere. It is widely recognized as the most systematic and effective form of vampiric magic, thus accounting for Clan Tremere's power among the undead.

Toreador: One of the seven clans of the Camarilla. The Toreador are sophisticated and depraved, often patrons of the arts. They are known for their inhuman beauty and refinement.

Tremere: One of the seven clans of the Camarilla. The Tremere are dreaded as blood sorcerers and organize themselves into chantries, answering to the father house of their clan in Vienna. The Tremere were once mortal sorcerers and became undead through the ritual consumption of vampires of Clan Tzimisce and the now-vanished Clan Salubri. The Tzimisce hate them still.

Tzimisce: One of the two founding clans of the Sabbat. The Tzimisce are perhaps the most feared of all vampires for their utter rejection of humanity and their dreaded ability to mold living and undead flesh like others would clay. Like the Lasombra, the Tzimisce are said to have killed their Antediluvian as part of the founding of the Sabbat.

Vaulderie: The ritual bond between members of a Sabbat pack that makes them immune to the blood bond of elders.

Ventruë: One of the seven clans of the Camarilla. The Ventruë are the traditional rulers of the sect, and are feared for their powers of the mind.



characters of note



The **Clan Novel Saga** covers a great deal of ground and includes a large cast of characters. Following are some of those who make notable appearances in volume one.

Anatole: Clan Malkavian. Known as the Prophet of Gehenna, Anatole is a feared and respected member of his clan. Almost a thousand years old, he has served as a priest and prophet at different times across the centuries. He is obsessed with uncovering the Antediluvians.

Ash, Victoria: Clan Toreador. A dilettante, socialite, schemer and dabbler in the music scene, Victoria Ash has a reputation as a skilled member of her clan. The newest member of the primogen of Atlanta, she has a long history, including a liaison with Prince Alexander Garlotte of Baltimore.

Bell, Theo: Clan Brujah. An archon working under Justicar Jaroslav Pascek.

Benison Hodge, J.: Clan Malkavian. The Camarilla Prince of Atlanta, Benison imposed a harsh rule on the city in the wake of the Blood Curse, taking desperate measures to repress the anarch movement. Benison affects the manner of the Antebellum South.

Borges: Clan Lasombra. The Archbishop of Miami, Borges is one of the most preeminent Sabbat in the United States. He is one of the driving forces behind the Sabbat assault on Camarilla assets.

Calebros: Clan Nosferatu. A well-respected member of his clan, Calebros sits at the center of a large network of clanmates, informants and allies. He is a careful plotter who—among his other schemes—wishes to extract vengeance on whomever was responsible for the destruction in 1997 of the justicar of his clan, Petrodon.

Dimitros, Elizabeth: Mortal. A restorer and historian of art, Elizabeth Dimitros lives in New York City and works for Rutherford House Antiquities, whose client list includes Hessa Ruhadze.

Garlotte, Alexander: Clan Ventrue. Longstanding Prince of Baltimore, Maryland. Garlotte has had a liaison with Victoria Ash of Clan Toreador and still has strong feelings for the undead beauty.

The General: Clan Malkavian. Hailing from the Antebellum South, the General recently rose from long slumber beneath the earth and has become a *de facto* member of the primogen of Atlanta.

Giovanni, Benito: Clan Giovanni. A high-ranking member of his clan in the New World, Benito has substantial influence in Boston and has overseen relations with high-ranking Camarilla vampires.

Giovanni, Chas Tello: Clan Giovanni. A *capo* in the parts of the New York City Mafia under the influence of the Giovanni. Hardly a mover and shaker in Kindred affairs on a global scale, nevertheless known for getting things done.

Giovanni, Isabel: Clan Giovanni. An elder of the clan, she originated in its traditional Venetian homeland and is a feared necromancer who acts at the behest of her eldest cousins.

Hannah: Clan Tremere. The regent of the Atlanta chantry of Clan Tremere and their representative on the city's council of primogen.

Hazimel: Clan Ravnos. One of the ancient Methuselahs of the clan, Hazimel's existence is more myth than confirmed reality. He is said to have (at some point) lost one of his eyes, which has since become a potent artifact of some sort.

Kettridge, Jordan: Mortal. An archeologist and adventurer, Kettridge has gained some inkling into the existence of the undead and has crossed swords with Hesha Ruhadze and Erich Vogel.

Leopold: Clan Toreador. A neonate among the Kindred of Atlanta.

Monçada, Ambrosio Luis: Clan Lasombra. The Cardinal of Madrid and one of the most prominent Sabbat the world over, the cardinal has sent his ally Sascha Vykos to represent his interests in the campaign against Camarilla assets in the eastern United States. Monçada, who affects the style of a catholic prelate, is the sire of the *antitribu* Lucita, for whom he is said to have an unhealthy lust.

Nickolai: Tremere *antitribu*. A thaumaturge and member of the Sabbat, Nickolai is a long-standing schemer, notably using the vampire Benito Giovanni in his schemes. The *antitribu* has recently suffered serious setbacks and Nickolai fears for his existence.

Parmenides: Clan Assamite. A loyal Child of Haqim, Parmenides has received the unsavory task of serving as a delegate of Alamut to the Sabbat in general and Sascha Vykos in particular.

de Polonia, Francisco Domingo: Clan Lasombra. The Archbishop of New York, Polonia is considered the most preeminent Sabbat in the United States. He leads the effort to spread Sabbat domain on the East Coast along with Archbishop Borges of Miami and Priscus Sascha Vykos (who represents Cardinal Monçada).

Ravana, Khalil: Clan Ravnos. An Indian vampire considered by most to be of little import. Thought of as thief and guttersnipe among the undead.

Rolph: Clan Nosferatu. An agent of Calebros operating in Atlanta.

Ruhadze, Hesha: Clan Setite. A respected Follower of Set, Hesha is a specialist in the acquisition of ancient artifacts and has a substantial network in such circles. He is assisted by a cadre of ghouls and clanmates, including Erich Vogel.

Sturbridge, Aisling: Clan Tremere. The regent of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs in New York City, Sturbridge has the unhappy task of leading a group of vampires aligned with the Camarilla in a city under Sabbat influence.

Thelonious: Clan Brujah. A member of the primogen of Atlanta, Thelonious is the sponsor of much of the anarch activity in the city. He is known to despise Prince Benison.

Vogel, Erich: Clan Setite. The principle second of Hesha Ruhadze, Vogel has contacts among the Nosferatu, including Rolph, who bring him leads regarding the artifact called the Eye of Hazimel.

Vitel, Marcus: Clan Ventrue. The Prince of Washington, DC.

Vykos, Sascha: Clan Tzimisce. A feared elder of the Sabbat, Vykos has changed appearance (and gender) many times over the course of her (or its) millennial existence. She is thought to be tied to Cardinal Monçada and has served as a Priscus, an advisor to the Regent of the Sabbat herself.

Walinsky, Stephen: Mortal. A consultant and researcher in Santa Barbara, California, Walinsky was drawn into Kindred affairs in the early to mid-1990s.





About the Authors



Each chapter of the **Clan Novel Saga** begins with a small two-letter code in the outside top margin of the first page. This code indicates who wrote that individual chapter, allowing us to give proper credit in a compilation that includes the work of almost a dozen writers.

Justin Achilli (JA)

Justin Achilli is the Intellectual Property Manager for **Vampire: The Masquerade**, and the past developer of **Vampire: The Dark Ages** and **Werewolf: The Wild West**. His writing has appeared in many White Wolf game lines. He is the author of **Clan Novel: Giovanni**.

Bruce Baugh (BB)

Bruce Baugh is a freelance writer and game designer whose work has appeared across much of White Wolf's product line and in the catalogs of several other game publishers. His novels include the three volumes of the **Clan Lasombra Trilogy**—**Shards**, **Shadows**, and **Sacrifices**—and an upcoming novel based on **Mage: The Ascension**.

Philippe Boulle (PB)

The past developer of **Dark Ages: Vampire**, Philippe Boulle is the Managing Editor of White Wolf Fiction. He compiled the volumes of the **Clan Novel Saga** and is the author of the novels in the **Victorian Age Vampire Trilogy**, namely **A Morbid Initiation**, **The Madness of Priests**, and **The Wounded King**.

Sam Chupp (SC)

Sam Chupp was the author of several key products in the development of **Vampire: The Masquerade** and other White Wolf game lines. He was the principle author of **The Book of Nod**, a section of which appears in this volume of the **Clan Novel Saga**.

Gherbod Fleming (GF)

Gherbod Fleming is the pen name of freelance writer John H. Steele. The author of five of the thirteen Clan Novels and one of the original series editors, Steele is the most prolific member of the White Wolf Fiction stable. His other novels include the **Trilogy of the Blood Curse**, four of the six **Predator & Prey** novels and **Dark Ages: Nosferatu**, the first of the **Dark Ages Clan Novels** (a medieval equivalent to this series).

Andrew Greenberg (AG)

The original line developer of **Vampire: The Masquerade**, Andrew Greenberg was also co-author of **The Book of Nod**, sections of which appear in this volume.

eric griffin (EG)

The author of **Clan Novel: Tzimisce** and **Clan Novel: Tremere**, freelance author Eric Griffin served as part of the editorial team of the Clan Novel Series, as well as that of the subsequent Tribe Novel Series, based on **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**. Penning three novellas for that latter series, he is also the author of the **Clan Tremere Trilogy**, namely **Widow's Walk**, **Widow's Weeds** and **Widow's Might**.

kathleen ryan (KR)

Onetime graphic designer at White Wolf (in which capacity she designed the original Clan Novel layout), writer Kathleen Ryan is the fan-favorite author of **Clan Novel: Setite**, **Clan Novel: Ravnos** and **Dark Ages: Setite**.

cynthia summers (CS)

Onetime developer of the **Mind's Eye Theatre** line of live-action roleplaying products, Cynthia Summers has also been an editor and writer at White Wolf. In that last capacity she wrote the history chapter of **Vampire: The Masquerade (Revised Edition)**, some of which appears in this volume.

stewart wieck (SW)

Publisher and co-founder of White Wolf Publishing and co-creator of the World of Darkness, Stewart Wieck was the editor of the Clan Novel Series and the near totality of the elements grouped together into the **Clan Novel Saga** volumes. He is the author of **Clan Novel: Toreador** and **Clan Novel: Malkavian**.



About the compilation



Wednesday, 26 March 2003; 10:50 AM
Offices of White Wolf Publishing
Stone Mountain, Georgia

The **Clan Novel Saga** is a gathering and reorganization of the chapters of the thirteen original Clan Novels and the thirteen short stories that appear in the **Clan Novel Anthology**, along with some additional material culled from other products related to the overall story of the novels or the protagonists. In this first volume, that includes additional chapters from **Clan Novel: Tzimisce** and **Clan Novel: Setite** (originally published online as web-exclusive extras) and an all-new chapter (by yours truly) featuring Victoria Ash and Anatole. For those keeping track, this volume includes the totality of **Clan Novel: Toreador** and **Clan Novel: Tzimisce**, substantial portions of **Clan Novel: Setite**, **Clan Novel: Ventrue** and **Clan Novel: Giovanni**, and bits and pieces from the **Clan Novel Anthology**, **Clan Novel: Nosferatu**, **Clan Novel: Malkavian**, **Clan Novel: Tremere**, **The Book of Nod** and **Vampire: The Masquerade (Revised Edition)**.

To create this compilation, every chapter of every clan novel has been arranged in strict chronological order so that the story unfolds night by night (and occasionally minute by minute). In some cases, individual chapters that covered a long span of time have been further subdivided to create breaks where it seemed reasonable. This was especially the case with the short stories from the **Clan Novel Anthology**, which did not follow the “time stamp” format as strictly. In a very few cases two chapters that showed the same scene from similar perspectives have been integrated into a single chapter. The division of this and subsequent volumes into titled parts is nothing more than an effort to divide what is a great deal of text into logical and digestible chunks.

Bruce Baugh’s “Turning the Face” from the **Clan Novel Anthology** and several chapters of Stewart Wieck’s **Clan Novel: Malkavian** appear in this volume and were changed from the present tense and first person to the third-person, past-tense style of the rest of the novels. This was done exclusively for the sake of readability.

The only true deviations from chronological organization are the excerpts from *The Book of Nod*, Aisling Sturbridge’s “History of the Kindred,” and Sascha Vykos’ comments thereupon, all of which appear in the Prologues section. These bits were added to provide some historical background to the conflicts portrayed in the rest of the compilation and appear where most appropriate.

Finally, a note on the clan symbols. The **Clan Novel Saga** has added appropriate clan symbols to the beginnings of each chapter in an effort to help readers keep track of the multiple narratives running through its pages. You should not assume, however, that a chapter tagged with a particular symbol is drawn from the *novel* of that clan. It simply means that the main protagonist of that chapter (or the circumstances portrayed) are of that clan.

Until next time,
—Philippe Boulle



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